



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*  
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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 8 Feabhra 2022*

*Tuesday, 8 February 2022*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Visit of French Delegation

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I ask Members to extend a very warm céad míle fáilte to our very good friend, the Ambassador of France, H.E. Vincent Guérend, who is in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. *Vive la France.*

## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** *Merci beaucoup.* For more than a year, households have been hammered by a cost-of-living crisis that is out of control. Workers and families do all they can to keep up with sky-high bills and runaway price increases, but people still cannot catch a break or catch a breath. They are crucified by the extortionate costs of housing, energy, fuel, groceries and insurance and everything going up and nothing coming down. Last night, a Minister of State offered people advice on dealing with this cost-of-living crisis. His big idea was for people to stop complaining and to shop around. Those were callous and indifferent remarks from a Minister of State who is paid €140,000. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has form in blocking legislation that would force big insurance companies to stop fleecing their customers. His words reflect the attitude of a Government that is utterly out of touch with the struggles of ordinary people.

Many households are deciding whether it is best to pay their massive gas bills or to put food on their tables. It took the Taoiseach's Government a year to wake up to this crisis. For months, we have asked that VAT be removed from energy bills, but the Government did nothing. No work was done with the European Commission. There was no effort at all. The Government has now spent another four months talking about possible actions. Indeed, in the time it has taken the Government to give people a one-off payment of €100, it has managed to give one top

civil servant two pay hikes worth €6,000. There was no dithering or delay there; it was done with the snap of your fingers. When it comes to workers and families, however, the response from the Government is slack. There is no urgency and no determination to get the job done.

Many things can be done to tackle this cost-of-living crisis. Sinn Féin has proposed these measures: cutting rents, banning rent increases, cutting childcare costs and expanding eligibility for the fuel allowance payment. We have also called on the Government to scrap its planned carbon tax hike. This hike will increase gas bills and push home heating oil costs up substantially at a time when people are struggling. Carbon tax hikes add to the cost of everything, particularly food, due to increased transport costs. Farmers have been telling the Government this for a long time but it has not listened. Is ualach trom é an ghéarchéim costais mhaireachála. Tá daoine faoi bhrú ollmhór ag íoc billí fuinnimh móra. Ba cheart don Rialtas fáil réidh leis na harduithe cánach carbóin atá molta. Ní dhéanfaidh sé ach an saol níos deacra.

Hiking carbon taxes is the wrong call at the wrong time. The Government's €100 credit is far too little for far too many families. March is very far away for people who cannot afford their energy bills today. That payment must be increased and delivered quickly. I call on the Taoiseach to scrap the carbon tax hike and set out how he will support struggling families in a meaningful way. Workers and families now need a bailout. We need a package of measures for those on low and middle incomes.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. Since this Government came into office in the midst of a global pandemic, a one-in-100-year event, the Government has intervened to an extraordinary degree to underpin incomes and support lower income workers, to keep people in jobs and to support enterprises. That has been an effective and successful intervention in underpinning our economic activity. There is no question about that. We supported workers from the get-go of the formation of this Government.

This time last year, a barrel of oil on the international markets traded at \$61; today it is at \$91 a barrel. That was not caused by carbon tax. It is a global phenomenon. Let us not try to misrepresent the issue for the public out there who are watching. The cost of a litre of petrol has risen by 28% over the same period. Gas prices on international markets have nearly quadrupled over the past year. The average annual gas bill has risen by €700. The vast majority of that has very little to do with carbon tax. That has to be said.

On proposals to reduce VAT, we have been over this before. I know the Czech Republic example has been cited by the Deputy in the past. Before the Czech general election, which was just before Christmas, the Czech Government reduced it to zero. There is a new Government in the Czech Republic now and it has gone back up to its standard rate of 21%. Ireland already has a derogation on our VAT rate. If we were to do a temporary reduction, we would lose the derogation and could end up back at 23%, a much higher cost of VAT, which we do not want to do, obviously. We want to keep it at the current rate of 13.5%. That has all been explained.

The United Kingdom and the US are looking at multi-decade highs in terms of inflation. The euro area inflation rate is now at 5.1%, an all-time high. The US rate is even higher again. We understand that people are under significant pressure arising out of this inflationary cycle. As a result of that, in the budget we allocated well over €1 billion to a number of measures to increase disposable income for the people, both in terms of tax income relief of about €525 million and also significant proposals around social protection in terms of the fuel allowance. For example, since coming into office the Government has raised fuel allowance from €630 to

€914. Coupled with the €113.50 electricity payment, Government supports for those on low incomes have increased by 63% to €1,027. We are going to do more on that front.

The challenge for us is that we cannot chase inflation. From a macroeconomic point of view, that has been tried in previous decades and it did not work. We have got to cushion the blow of this inflationary cycle for those most in hardship and those most at risk. We have got to target the measures the Government is currently examining to do just that. That is what we intend to do and to alleviate people more generally in terms of these pressures. The Government has a number of measures under consideration to help people over and above what we have done already in terms of the budget. That will be the basis for our actions later this week. Aontaím go bhfuil brú faoi leith ar dhaoine faoi láthair. Níl aon amhras faoi sin. Tá pacáiste le teacht ón Rialtas chun cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do chosmhuintir na tíre seo.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What people who are living this struggle have had is delay, dithering and lack of clarity from the Government bar the one Minister of State who was very clear and told people to stop complaining and shop around. I take it from the Taoiseach that that is not the official advice from the Government. The Government should stop dithering and should intervene in a way that is proportionate to the real struggles facing people. At the time of the budget, the Government fell short on social welfare adult payments and in terms of the fuel allowance, the season itself and extending eligibility for it. The Government has fallen short for months while Sinn Féin has called on it for a discretionary fund and to package and tailor initiatives, particularly for low- and middle-income families. What do we get? *Mañana mañana*, dither and delay. That is simply not good enough now.

As an important first action and signal, albeit one that would not be the be-all and end-all, I want the Taoiseach to state categorically that the Government will not proceed with the carbon tax hike in May at a time when people are struggling to afford a fill of home oil. Will he make that clear, please?

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** Could I first of all say that budget 2022 increased the weekly rate of the fuel allowance by €5? We increased the qualified child payment, the living alone allowance and the income threshold for the working family payment. The total cost of that was about €146 million. Where is that revenue coming from? It is coming from the revenue raised by the carbon tax.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** Today, the Minister for energy will announce a very significant and comprehensive retrofit programme. The objective of that retrofit programme is to reduce the cost of living on an ongoing basis in terms of home heating and in terms of making homes cheaper to heat and more comfortable and healthier over time. Some €200 million odd this year alone will come from the carbon tax towards that measure. The carbon tax is going back to the people. In terms of better environmental farming practices, it will go to farmers, particularly low-income farmers. It will go to people in terms of retrofitting their houses so that they are more efficient energy-wise and ultimately reduce costs.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** People cannot pay their bills today, this week or this month.

**The Taoiseach:** It will also go towards fuel poverty. That is why we allocated it towards fuel poverty in the budget. The problem is this: we are putting it out transparently and honestly and we are saying to people that the revenue that is raised - all of it - goes back to the people in schemes that over time will be both-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** That is actually nonsense. It is not right.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach without interruption.

**The Taoiseach:** -----effective and better for the country in terms of capacity to retrofit but also fuel poverty and to protect people much better than was done in previous times because of the revenue that is going to accrue.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** It is 13 days since the Government voted down a comprehensive Labour Party motion on the cost of living, 13 more days lost as the bills piled up. We have tabled a range of comprehensive proposals on energy taxes, VAT, social welfare and wages. Bills are up more than 30% for fuel, electricity and gas. Prices for other utilities and food are rising sharply.

The Taoiseach knows that the rate of home ownership has fallen significantly among young people. More and more are stuck renting at unaffordable prices. For years, we have been calling for a rent freeze. Those calls have been ignored. For those young people who are trying to save for a deposit, their dreams are getting more and more out of reach as their everyday bills rise. Good GDP figures and strong tax returns mean very little if this country is not working for them.

The poverty of imagination on the part of the Government is baffling. So far, the only tangible practical proposal from the Government has been a tokenistic €113 off the payment for electricity bills. Of course that may be increased - we do not know yet - but it is a drop in the ocean compared to the rising costs that people face.

Yesterday's great idea from a Minister of State in the Department of Finance was that people should stop complaining and shop around. Changing your electricity or gas supplier will not help when prices have soared by so much. It is too late to shop around when you hit the check-out and do not have enough money to pay the cashier.

The big news from the Government today is a new retrofit scheme. From what we know about the scheme, it is likely to be unaffordable to many. From the Minister of State's remarks yesterday, it is clear the Government is already well and truly insulated from the reality of life for so many families.

The Taoiseach has ruled out a mini-budget, which tells me his plans will simply not go far enough. Without a commitment to a finance or social welfare Bill, we get just a small number of tweaks, changes and token measures here and there that will not cut it. For those on low and fixed incomes, the only action that will really help is an increase in wages. Ireland has a problem with low pay; Ireland needs a pay rise. We need to understand why working people are struggling to get by to pay for the basics. Over 20% of Irish workers are low paid. We spend billions every year subsidising low pay to lift people out of wage poverty. It is absolutely bizarre that, two weeks ago, the Taoiseach set his face against wage rises. Wage rises for low- and middle-income workers do not have the inflationary impact he thinks, yet he has advised workers not to seek inflation-beating pay rises. We do not see any direction from him to companies to hold back on price rises. Therefore, profits can be protected but not wages. Is

that the case? If so, it is not on. Will the Taoiseach heed SIPTU's calls for pay rises? Will the Government lead on this by asking the Low Pay Commission to convert the minimum wage to a living wage? Can the Taoiseach tell the House whether he is completely ruling out the prospect of a mini-budget?

**The Taoiseach:** It is only a number of weeks since we lifted restrictions. We are emerging from a pandemic that has dominated this country and the rest of the globe in respect of economics, public health and so forth. The intervention by the Government was imaginative, unprecedented and effective in terms of underpinning jobs and incomes to the best degree possible given the extraordinary situation we faced. That cannot be wished away and forgotten about as if it did not happen.

With regard to the global situation, because the world is opening up there has been an imbalance between supply and demand, as the Deputy well knows. The bounceback of the economies has created supply chain issues, which is adding to inflation. We have the exponential increase in oil and gas prices, which is a factor, and issues with transportation. All of these combined are giving us what some economists in the European Central Bank have called a pandemic cycle of inflation. It remains to be seen how long it will continue for. There are different schools of thought on that.

What I am saying to the Deputy is that wages have increased in the private sector. We have never said that wages cannot increase. The good news so far is that those wages have increased in line with productivity gains within that sector and certain other sectors of the economy. It is good, fine and important that this happens, but we should be aware of what we must not do. Most stakeholders agree with this. In this regard, we had a very good, constructive meeting last week with the social partners in the context of the Labour Employer Economic Forum. We need to navigate our way through this intelligently, the priority being to protect those who are hardest hit by this inflationary cycle. Having regard to people's weekly bills, we need to take measures that can help to cushion the blow of this inflation. That is the Government's agenda.

Deputy Nash may call the electricity payment a gimmick. It is a €200 million provision. Two hundred million euro, on any day, is not a gimmick; it is a serious, substantive allocation, but we have to do more, particularly to help people in need and to have measures to target people in need. Also needed are measures that over the medium term will be sustainable in some instances and in line with medium-term Government policy. That is the approach we are taking to this.

During inflationary cycles in the past, there were many policies that people felt would be impactful against inflation in the short term, but they turned out not to be. We do not want to fall into repeating mistakes, particularly those of the 1970s. It is a long time ago. It is when we last had a really serious issue in terms of inflationary spiral.

We are going to continue to focus on the minimum wage. We have the second highest minimum wage in the European Union. It is the sixth highest if purchasing power is factored in. As I said, we are going to work with the partners to see how best we can navigate our way through this.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** The Taoiseach will be aware the cost of living in Ireland, and the fact that practically everything is more expensive than in comparable countries, reduces the value of our minimum wage. For some time now, since 2016, the previous Government, which the



Taoiseach supported from the Opposition benches, missed its minimum wage targets. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to move to a living wage. I ask the Taoiseach to change the legislation governing the Low Pay Commission to instruct the commission to move towards a roadmap for the introduction of a living wage in this country. We have an epidemic of low pay in Ireland. That is the reason those who are merely existing on low and middle incomes are finding it so difficult to absorb the additional costs they are burdened with at the moment. They cannot survive. We have a low pay epidemic. One third of all Irish workers earn less than what might be considered the living wage of €12.90 per hour. I ask the Taoiseach to listen back to what David McWilliams said to Pat Kenny on Newstalk this morning. He could not have been clearer. He said the only solution for low-paid workers is to have wage increases. A high-wage economy is a good thing. It adds value, boosts retention and makes people much more secure. I ask the Taoiseach to reflect on that in the context of the crisis we are experiencing now and in terms of our future economic and social development.

**The Taoiseach:** Average wages in Ireland are higher than the European average, as I think the Deputy will acknowledge. There have been increases linked to productivity, which is good. That would be a priority. Again, even if purchasing power is factored in, our minimum wage is the sixth highest in the 27 EU member states. That is factoring in the cost of living, and so on. We will work with the social partners in respect of this current inflationary cycle and in terms of national agreements and so forth. However, critically, in the next number of days, Government will take measures that will help to alleviate the impact of the current inflationary cycle on people, particularly those on low incomes who are feeling the brunt of the rise in the cost of fuel. As I outlined earlier, internationally, the price of oil and gas has risen exponentially. We need to cushion that blow. It is seeping into the other aspects of the economy in terms of price rises as well. We are determined to take measures that will help people deal with this situation.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Inflation is currently at a 21-year high in Ireland. The country is now contending with the cost-of-living crisis on multiple fronts. It is causing widescale financial pain for every citizen. It is due in no small part to the Government's climate action policies. The carbon tax is the key contributing factor, with the cost of motor fuels up more than 22.6% and the cost of home heating oil up a staggering 70% in the last year alone, not to mention road diesel and agricultural diesel. For example, soaring petrol and diesel prices have been caused in large part by the Government's disjointed climate action policies, which are taxing consumers and leaning heavily on them. They are disproportionately affecting people in rural Ireland, but everybody in the country as well. The people in rural Ireland have very limited access to public transport or alternative fuel sources. Through the Government's taxation on fuel, a motorist is now paying approximately €1.70 per litre for petrol, of which a staggering €1, or 60%, goes directly into the Government coffers. That is mainly due to excise duty, VAT and carbon tax. The Government-imposed carbon tax, which is now at €41 per tonne of carbon after last October's budget, is clearly having a bruising impact on the cost of home heating oil, electricity, petrol and diesel. It is now the leading cause of inflation in Ireland. Why has the Government completely ignored the toolbox of measures developed by the European Commission, which encourages member states to cut taxes and levies on motor fuels, home heating oil and electricity bills? The Spanish Government, for example, has used this policy and brought energy prices back to 2018 levels. This is being done by cutting taxes and capping costs. Other EU states such as Sweden have also implemented tax cutting measures.

The energy crisis brings major repercussions for every household, small business and farmer. It is financially crippling. Everyone talking about it in this House knows that. It requires

meaningful and tangible State intervention. Even the unelected EU bureaucrats recognise that and have recommended that this Government and other member states take action. Why has the Taoiseach completely ignored the European Commission? Normally when the Commission says, “Jump”, the Taoiseach asks, “How high?” If it told him to up taxes, they would be increased the day after, but in this case he is just ignoring the Commission. Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party in government have totally ignored this. High energy prices have deeply profound economic consequences and, therefore, an immediate and meaningful State intervention is required, not the paltry €100 off electricity bills. The Taoiseach needs to act immediately on the European Commission’s DIY toolkit aimed at mitigating the impact of higher energy prices by slashing taxes and offering help to impacted households, motorists, the agriculture sector and all other sectors in the economy. It is needed to reverse the decision to increase the carbon tax in budget 2022 and beyond until further impact and cost-benefit analyses are carried out. The Taoiseach needs to stop talking about it and immediately take those actions. Talk is cheap.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, I have to restate what I said earlier. At this time last year, a barrel of oil on international markets traded at \$61. Today, it is \$91 a barrel. That is not because of the carbon tax. It is very dishonest to say the carbon tax is the key contributor to fuel inflation.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is not dishonest; it is a fact.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not the key contributor in any shape or form and we need to be honest with the public because I know there will be attempts made to misrepresent-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach should tell the truth so.

**The Taoiseach:** -----what has been a global situation in terms of the price of oil and the price of gas. We only hope that conflict does not break out in relation to Russia and Ukraine, which could even exacerbate it further, which is something we do not want at all.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** That would suit the Government fine.

**The Taoiseach:** Gas prices on international markets, as I said, have quadrupled in the past year. That is not because of the carbon tax. On the other side of the coin, we do want to release unprecedented funding to people through grants to enable them to retrofit their homes to make them more energy efficient and cheaper to run in the future.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Give them back their own money.

**The Taoiseach:** That is what we want to do. We want to prioritise that area. It makes sense to insulate homes and we will give good grants to people to enable them to do that. In terms of looking after low-income families and the fuel allowance and so on, we were able to take measures in the last budget on the social welfare package because of the revenue that has been generated from the carbon tax itself and likewise in terms of the farming environmental schemes that are important to create new income streams for farming. In no way, however, does it contribute to the enormity of the increase in the cost of oil and gas that has happened because of global factors.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Of course it does.



**The Taoiseach:** The other factor is, of course, to take cars as an example, there has been a shortage in terms of microchip manufacturing. There have been fewer cars manufactured. As economies have bounced back across the world, the demand for cars has not equalled the supply of cars. That is causing inflation. That is just one product. That can be mirrored in product after product since economies have reopened after Covid-19. That, along with the oil and gas price increases, is fuelling this inflationary cycle. It is a challenge. That is why some economists, such as the ECB, are saying it is short term but others disagree. There are two schools of thought as to how long this cycle will last, but the hope is that the imbalance at the moment between supply and demand will correct itself over time and help to reduce inflationary pressures.

In the meantime, we have some very significant key objectives of Government. Those are housing - to get supply up in housing and build as many houses as we can; to get a strong climate change agenda once and for all and not keep putting it on the long finger and avoiding action; and also dealing with health reforms and using what we learned in the pandemic to embed reforms in the health service for the long term. We are not going to be distracted from those key focus points of Government and our agenda in terms of doing what is right by the people not just now, but right into the future.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Taoiseach, it is you that is being dishonest with the people and they know it. When was the last time he pulled up at a filling station and filled his own car? He has a driver. He had one when he was leader of Fianna Fáil and he has State drivers now and everything else. He is out of touch completely. I asked the Taoiseach to do an immediate reversal of the carbon tax as well as an impact analysis, and he is flatly refusing to do that. I am also asking, given that there are such inflationary policies here, that we need nothing short of a mini-budget. If we need legislation to do that, we in the Rural Independent Group will bring it forward. The Taoiseach can then vote against it, which he probably will. He does not want to help people but wants to let them perish and die in the ditches, which is what they will do. That seems to be the Taoiseach's *raison d'être* in politics, which is to hell with the people. Once I am all right Jack, I am fine.

The Taoiseach accuses me of being dishonest when I tell him the naked truth. Every dog in the street knows that it is the Government's policies that are causing the inflation. There are international factors, definitely, but we have a perfect storm here, which suits the Government.

The Government wants people to have no cars and to have no services in rural Ireland and to herd all the people into the cities. It brings the housing crisis into it then. The Government is talking about this for years. If talk could build houses, we would be covered in houses. Talk is cheap; what we need is action. We need a mini-budget to be brought forward here to relieve the stress and pain and to deal with the mental health issues that this stress, pain and the shortage of money is causing all families.

**The Taoiseach:** From the outset the Government has been committed to first supporting workers and people on the ground. No Government wants people to perish or die in the ditches. For God's sake, let us have some common sense and some sense of perspective. The bottom line is that the Government is considering measures right now, over and above what we have already undertaken in the budget, which provided more than €1 billion in tax and social welfare packages. We are now looking at further measures to cushion the blow-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is basic support and not a cushion they want.

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**The Taoiseach:** -----that this inflationary cycle is imposing on people. There is no question but that this is a global phenomenon. Nobody is arguing about that.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is obvious to everybody, Pontius Pilate.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputies.

**The Taoiseach:** We need to take measures now that can ease the pressure on people's everyday weekly outgoings on a number of fronts and that is what we are examining. Before the end of the week, we will have proposals to add to the decisions that we have already taken in this regard. We fully understand the pressures that people are under and we are going to deal with them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Connolly to speak on behalf of the Independent Group.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. Baineann mo cheist inniu leis an tuarascáil seo dar teideal: Córas Cinedheighilte ag Iosrael i gcoinne na bPalaistíneach agus tá súil agam go bhfuil sé léite aige. Is í mo cheist shonrach ná an bhfuil sí léite aige, an n-aontaíonn sé leis na conclúidí tromchúiseacha atá inti agus, go háirithe, go bhfuil córas cinedheighilte i gceist ag Iosrael i coinne na bPalaistíneach? Cén beartas atá ag an Rialtas maidir leis na moltaí? It is worth focusing on this report on Israel's apartheid against Palestinians published last week. It is a damning indictment of what Israel is doing to the Palestinian people, whether they are living in Israel, the occupied territories, on the Gaza Strip or in East Jerusalem.

It is a 278-page report with seven chapters, an executive summary and conclusions and recommendations. I have read almost every single word. I speak from knowledge of having read the report. The evidence and the research set out is based on over four years of research. It is gathered together and it is built on the work of B'Tselem and the previous reports from Human Rights Watch: A Threshold Crossed.

The evidence and the research is clearly set out. It is a balanced and moderate report. It finds that Israel's system of institutionalised segregation and discrimination against Palestinians as a racial group in all areas under its control amounts to a system of apartheid and a serious violation of Israel's human rights obligations.

Perhaps the Taoiseach has not had time to read this report because I am sure that it is not possible with his busy schedule given it took me hours to do so. I am sure, however, that the conclusions and the recommendations have been drawn to his attention. Does he agree with the conclusion that an apartheid system is in operation? Will he raise it at EU and UN level? Does he agree that the International Criminal Court should consider the crime of apartheid in its current investigation in respect of the occupied territories, Israel and what it has done? Will he commit to ceasing the purchase or acquisition of Defence Forces equipment from Israel as called for in this report? Will the Government use its seat on the UN Security Council, first, to highlight the recommendations of the report and, second, to ensure they are implemented, including imposing targeted sanctions such as asset freezes against Israeli officials most implicated in the crime of apartheid and a comprehensive arms embargo on Israel?

I will conclude by saying that I do not want to hear about antisemitism and how we must be careful. We will take that as a given. I am over time, so I will stop with that. I ask the Taoiseach

to use his three minutes appropriately and not with regard to antisemitism.

**The Taoiseach:** Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Teachta as an cheist phráinneach agus tábhachtach seo a ardú. Níl an tuarascáil léite agam ach tá a fhios agam faoin idirdheighilt sin agus na deacrachtaí atá ag na Palaistínigh, go háirithe ag teacht ó pholasaithe an rialtais atá ann faoi láthair.

I fully acknowledge that there are serious issues in how Israel treats Palestinians and how it is dealing with the Palestinian question and, in my view, the right of the Palestinians to their homeland and their own state. It is depressing that this litany of measures continues each year. I believe it was 2009 when I visited Gaza after one terrible conflict. Not much has changed in terms of segregation and the routes Palestinians have to take in the occupied territories as opposed to others. What is happening in East Jerusalem is not satisfactory by any yardstick. It is injustice after injustice. There is a better way of doing this. We have appealed to the Israeli Government to work towards a two-state solution. The Minister for Foreign Affairs was in Israel between 1 and 5 November and he set out our continued support for the two-state solution.

We have raised this at the UN Security Council. Indeed, the Secretary-General of the UN last year thanked me for Ireland's constructive contribution on this issue at the Security Council and for raising it consistently. We want to get a settlement and a resolution of these issues. The settlements and the demolitions are unacceptable, as is the way people are treated. In addition, civil society must be respected and supported. Ireland has supported various civil society organisations that raise human rights and we believe Israel should facilitate their unfettered access to people. They should also be allowed to continue their work in an uninhibited way on human rights within Palestine.

Is that report the Amnesty International report?

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Yes.

**The Taoiseach:** That is currently being examined by the Department of Foreign Affairs. I have not read it yet, but I will get through it as quickly as I can. From our perspective, through the European Union we have a clear policy position in this regard. We believe that Israeli policy is counterproductive to the emergence and triumph of moderate opinion within Palestine, in both the West Bank and Gaza. In many ways that policy has allowed extremists to get the upper hand, in my view. We have pointed this out time and again. Sometimes Israel does not take too kindly to Ireland's contributions and position on this, but we will continue to make our views known.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I appreciate that the Department is looking at it. It was only published last week. However, there is no escaping the conclusion - níl aon éalú ó nta conclúidí - that Israel is operating an apartheid system in respect of the Palestinians. Does the Taoiseach accept that conclusion, among other conclusions? What steps will he take with regard to the very practical recommendations? He said very little has changed; I am afraid quite a lot has changed. The apartheid regime has become entrenched. It is no longer just statements from various politicians. It has become entrenched in legislation, policy and practice, while the suffering of the Palestinian people has intensified.

The report was condemned by various spokespeople in Israel, including the foreign minister, before it was even published.

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A respected former Deputy states:

Amnesty International used to be a globally respected international defender ... Today it distorts history, propagates the big lie that Israel is an apartheid state...

And so on. That is a respected former Deputy from Fine Gael setting out his response to this report. It does us no favours to equate questioning and criticism of Israeli policy with antisemitism. It does not serve the Jewish people or democracy and it is extremely dangerous.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** We need to respond to this report in a practical manner as a proud, independent, neutral State with a voice that is still respected in the world.

**The Taoiseach:** I agree that one can oppose Israeli Government policy and should not be labelled as antisemitic for doing it. It is important, given our strength despite being a small country, that our voice on this matter has been seen as objective and honourable, although not by everybody. Generally speaking, our interest is genuine and we have been one of the strong supporters of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, particularly during the difficult years when former US President Trump took away American funding from UNRWA. Ireland has been a very strong supporter of education, especially in the West Bank and Gaza, through the UNRWA organisation.

We fund civil society organisations and have continued to fund civil society and human rights organisations that Israel has labelled as terrorist or whatever. We do not accept that labelling and we are pushing our European colleagues to continue to support these organisations. I will not use the term “apartheid” because I am not sure it will add anything right now.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Amnesty International uses it.

**The Taoiseach:** I am on the pragmatic side. I know what works. When I say “works”, we must help people and children to get an education. We should seek, at a European level and with our American partners, to expand UNRWA and its support for the vast majority of people.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** We either respect Amnesty International or we do not.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We have never sanctioned Israel.

**The Taoiseach:** I respect all parties but we are entitled to have our own opinion as well.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** It is what I am trying to find out.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, please.

**The Taoiseach:** We are entitled to read reports, analyse them and form our own opinions. There is a great novel by Colum McCann, *Apeirogon*, and the Deputy should read it. I have read it. That in a far more impactful way, I think, illustrates the reality of life involving two people-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach is comparing a novel to a human rights report.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are way over time.

**The Taoiseach:** -----on different sides. The Deputy should read it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach might read the Amnesty International report.

**The Taoiseach:** Go read it. I rest my case.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Read the report.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That approach has not worked so far.

**The Taoiseach:** I rest my case.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will not have a free-for-all.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The report of the Business Committee has been circulated and can be taken as read. Are the proposed arrangements for this week agreed to?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** They are not agreed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Do not all run at the one time.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** We have another report from the Police Ombudsman in the North and it makes for devastating reading. It details how eight RUC special branch agents were involved with 27 murders and attempted murders, and this follows so close on the report on Operation Greenwich, which also dealt with an elected representative from Donegal. The findings there are devastating. There is plenty of time in the schedule this week so could we have a dedicated debate in this Chamber on those two ombudsman reports? Could we have a substantive response this time from the Taoiseach to the two devastating reports we have had in recent weeks?

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am calling for an open and frank debate in this House on the treatment of children with spina bifida and scoliosis. Every night on the television news we see these children crying. Parents, meanwhile, are demented with worry. These operations can be done in the UK if there is money for them.

The Taoiseach said he gave €5 million to someone last week when he was questioned by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald. Who did he give it to? Where is it? The Taoiseach said that and we want accountability for these poor little children, whose bodies are deteriorating daily. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Health are here in the Chamber and they are responsible for those little children, poor little creatures who deserve to live as well as anybody else. They deserve treatment like everybody else. The Taoiseach is being ambivalent. The Taoiseach is covering for someone or for some people.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** We need to have a debate here.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up.



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**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** There is nothing as important, a Cheann Comhairle, as those little children.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I know, but your time is up.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** If we are worth our salt working in here, then we must raise it and we have to get answers. This has been going on for two or three years now and it has gone on long enough.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The motion on the carbon budgets is going through without debate. There should be a debate on that. The entire discussion about the recommendations was conducted in private and there was no opportunity for the committee to input into the body of that report. We were not given an opportunity to do so, which I believe is wrong. There was no time for a minority report to be developed by committee members if they so wished. There are concerns that the actual body of the report does not reflect the very stark evidence-----

**A Deputy:** That is a whitewash.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** -----given by the independent scientists around the carbon budgets. I ask that this motion be debated in the Dáil this week.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The discussion on carbon budgets, and ultimately the decisions that will be made, will be some of the most important decisions made by this Dáil. The Government, however, proposes to ram through the committee report on carbon budgets with no opportunity whatsoever to debate it here in the House. The truth for that is because what is contained within the committee report is a cop-out. The programme for Government promised 7% annual reductions, but contained in the report is a recommendation for a 4.8% reduction for the time of this Government. Even extending out to the end of the decade, Professor Barry McMullin has pointed out that it amounts to an average 6% average reduction. It breaks the programme for Government, it breaks the Paris climate agreement, it breaks EU emissions targets and, most important, it breaks the actual science in terms of what needs to be done. It relies on unproven and non-existent carbon capture and storage technologies in the future, and it ignores the impact of aviation and shipping emissions. At the very least we must have a debate on it, and we actually have time in the Dáil schedule to have that debate. I would appeal to the Taoiseach to accept that.

**The Taoiseach:** On the reports from the Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland, the most recent report is indeed very significant and deeply concerning and is the second such report in a matter of weeks. It examined eight loyalist paramilitary attacks in south Belfast between 1990 and 1998, which resulted in 11 murders and one attempted murder. The report has found strong evidence of investigative and intelligence failures, collusive behaviours by the RUC, including the continued unjustified use of informants involved in serious criminality and murder, and the return of weapons to loyalist paramilitaries. The report is, quite simply, appalling.

Last week I met with a number of victims and survivors groups from across the community in Northern Ireland. I met with Mark Sykes, who is a survivor of the Sean Graham bookmakers massacre attack. I was very grateful to him for taking the time to talk to me on the 30th anniversary of that shooting. It was very emotional for Mr. Sykes, and it was as was clear to him 30 years on as it was on the day it happened.

I do not have an issue with the House debating these issues in a structured way. It will not

be possible this week. We have the Business Committee and it was anticipated this report was coming. There are now three Private Members' motion opportunities for the Opposition every week. I remember a couple of years ago back in 2015 there was only one opportunity. Now there are three opportunities per week. We are also a legislative Chamber and we do need to get legislation through. We need to balance it. While it will not be possible this week to do it, I have no issue with the Whips arranging at some future date to discuss this issue in a structured way.

On Children's Health Ireland, the €5 million went from the Health Service Executive to Children's Health Ireland for expenditure in the paediatric hospitals and in Cappagh hospital for further measures on top of other measures already taken to get waiting lists down for those children with spina bifida, scoliosis and a range of orthopaedic-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** It is not working.

**The Taoiseach:** It was only sent-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** They have the beds but they do not have the money. There is an issue. They are not getting the money. Some of these are waiting two years or more.

**The Taoiseach:** The money has been allocated. It is not a money issue.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Who did the Government give it to?

**The Taoiseach:** Could I also say-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** We want it made public as to who got the money.

**The Taoiseach:** Children's Health Ireland got the money. The Deputy can contact it or seek to meet with it through the Oireachtas Committee on Health, or by whatever means. The Deputy can meet it. It will go through all of that with the Deputy. There is no issue.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** That is the issue.

**The Taoiseach:** The process will be fully transparent. There is an issue with the length of time, and we need to reduce that.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Some are waiting two years or more, and that is not good enough.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is nobody going around with the money in their hip pocket.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Well, someone has it. The doctors and the surgeons-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, can we wait and let the Taoiseach respond?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Whitmore and Deputy Paul Murphy raised the carbon budget issue. That went through committee and there was debate at committee level.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Not-----

**The Taoiseach:** In all of the debates on climate change, I am struck by the fact that everybody wants to delay the day of reckoning on all fronts.

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**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** This is not about delaying. This is about giving the committee an opportunity to participate in the process and have its voice-----

**The Taoiseach:** We had that earlier in the cost of living debate, when people said we should postpone the carbon tax.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are over time.

**The Taoiseach:** The same will happen with the carbon budgets.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** This is a committee report. There is no-----

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Committee members did not have an opportunity to have an input into the body of the report.

**The Taoiseach:** People will say it is not enough, but when specific measures will be put on the table in respect of realising these objectives, everybody will oppose them.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is not-----

**The Taoiseach:** This is going to be the story of climate change in next number of years.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** You should join the Green Party.

**The Taoiseach:** There you go again. All you seem to want to do is to say the Green Party is the greatest evil since time began.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** He is telling the truth.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not, Deputy McGrath. Younger generations in the country need the Oireachtas to deal with climate change once and for all. We cannot keep on postponing and delaying climate change.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is what the Government is doing.

**The Taoiseach:** Every time there is a big conference like COP26 or whatever, everybody is all ado for about a week or two.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Dance to the tune-----

**The Taoiseach:** However, when we try to do something concrete about it and resolve carbon budget issues, there are objections.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Why is the Government not following the science? Why can we not debate it?

**The Taoiseach:** We had a debate on it.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We did not.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will Members have a bit of respect for order in the House, please? Is the proposal for this week's business agreed to?

**Deputies:** Not agreed.

Question put: “That the arrangements for this week’s business be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 71; Níl, 52; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O’Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O’Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>O’Rourke, Darren.</i>	

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<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Earlier, the Taoiseach described the latest report of the Police Ombudsman as deeply concerning. It is indeed shocking and sheds light on the activities of British state agents and on their connection to 27 loyalist murders and attempted murders in south Belfast between 1990 and 1998. As he will know, this is just the latest report setting out the nature of the relationship between the British state and loyalist paramilitary gangs. As



the Taoiseach knows, collusion was a reality for nationalists in the North. Britain can have no hiding place from the deliberate, calculated policy of arming, directing and controlling death squads in Ireland. When will the Taoiseach give a full and comprehensive response to this series of damning reports? What contact has he had, or does he intend to have, with the British Government and particularly the British Prime Minister regarding this issue? Ad-libbing in response to a question posed on the floor of the House is not a sufficient response to the scale of Britain's dirty war in Ireland, which is now, report by report, coming to light.

**The Taoiseach:** In fairness, I was responding to issues raised by Deputy Mac Lochlainn. I certainly was not ad-libbing. I was giving a very considered response setting out my views regarding the latest report from the ombudsman, which is quite appalling. I make no bones about saying that. Last week, I met several victims' groups. I met Mark Sykes in the context of what happened in south Belfast. I also met Raymond McCord's group and Michael Gallagher in respect of Omagh. I refer as well to the activities of loyalist paramilitaries in respect of murders. What is clear from the experience of all the victims is the absolute necessity for truth, for full transparency and accountability and for people to be prosecuted where such prosecutions are possible.

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

**The Taoiseach:** I reiterated the Government's position that we have communicated, and I have spoken personally and formally to the British Prime Minister and the authorities in this regard, that there can be no amnesty. When we listen to the victims and the families of the victims especially, it is clear that the British Government must change tack here.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Has the Taoiseach spoken to them on the back of these reports?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No, we cannot have a discussion on this. I call Deputy Nash.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** Last year, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said he wanted to see the introduction of a new form of annual TaxSaver ticket for commuters. The Taoiseach and the Minister will be familiar with the concept. It would benefit commuters in places like Louth and east Meath by bringing down travel costs and reflect the new hybrid model of working we have seen operate well over the last year. The National Transport Authority, NTA, confirmed to me last week that this model is not yet available and ready to go live. There have been some delays in this regard. This is a real blow for commuters in Louth and east Meath who were hoping to see the cost of commuting reduced to reflect new ways of working. Can the Minister confirm when the NTA will amend the current TaxSaver scheme to provide for a new form of ticket which will be more cost-effective for commuters and will reflect the new hybrid model of working?

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Deputy is right. I had a meeting with representatives of the NTA yesterday and this issue was among the topics discussed. There are complications. The real difficulty is that we do not have the same facilities in our train stations as we have at Luas stops, where people can tag on and tag off. That makes it difficult to introduce a scheme, which we want to do, where it is not expected that people will be commuting five days a week. Therefore, we continue to look at the options. It is complex and difficult because of the architecture of some of our ticketing system. As soon as the NTA has a solution to that issue, I will come straight into the House to inform the Members because this is something

we want to try to deliver.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** On average, eight women every day are turned away when they seek a space in a refuge. Meanwhile, demand for services has increased by up to 200% during the pandemic. I do not know if the Taoiseach saw RTÉ's "Prime Time Investigates" report last night, but it is harrowing what these women and children have to go through. The Social Democrats have consistently called for the number of refuge spaces to be increased to the level recommended by the Istanbul Convention. It is welcome that the Government has finally come to the realisation that there is a need to provide those spaces. We are wondering when exactly that increase in the number of spaces will be provided for women and children. It is an especially critical question for those nine counties that do not have a single space currently.

**The Taoiseach:** I did see that programme last evening. I thought it was powerful in revealing the horror and brutality of domestic violence. The programme's power was that it allowed the victims to speak and speak truthfully about the manner of their experiences. It was the most effective way as a medium to bring home to us the enormous suffering that people have endured. The report covered the criminal justice system in the context of the victim's journey and how unsatisfactory for some victims that turns out to be.

On refuges and the number of spaces, in the interim the Minister is bringing forward a strategy. As well however, as was discussed with the party leaders last week, the audit will be brought forward. In the interim, however, we must do everything we possibly can to provide more places. We must work with the local authorities in those areas to seek to ensure places are put in place more quickly than otherwise would be the case.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Those nine counties will get refuge spaces.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Working people and the least well-off in our country are being absolutely crucified by the rising cost of living. The cost of energy is going up and there are unaffordable rents and real pay cuts for people, with inflation running way ahead of the pay increases received. People Before Profit has been very clear. We think that there should be controls on the cost of energy and on rents and that workers are entitled to a pay rise. The minimum wage should be increased and workers should put in pay claims. The Taoiseach set his face against all these things and said they would make the situation worse. Why does the Taoiseach say nothing about the price gouging and profiteering of the energy companies? The ESB made €616 million in profits in 2020 and that figure is expected to go over €700 million for 2021.

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

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Energia saw its profits go up by 46% last year.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please Deputy, the time is up.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Why does the Taoiseach not ask those companies to pay for the cost-of-living crisis by giving workers a decent pay increase and by controlling the cost of living?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am asking the Deputy to adhere to the time limit please.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, I am intrigued by the degree to which the Members opposite at-

tempt to misrepresent what I have said, and then try to establish it as a fact by continuing to repeat it in order to embed it in the public consciousness as a fact. I told the Deputy that wages have increased and that is a good thing, especially when linked to productivity. Wages have increased and I have no issue with that at all. We have controls on rents. Rent increases are now controlled by legislation. Increases are limited to 2% or the cost of living index, whichever is lower. That is a fact.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** They are not working.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government has said it is going to bring in measures to try to help people and to cushion the blow imposed by this inflationary cycle. We acknowledge that and we are going to deal with it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Berry.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** My question concerns the organisational capacity review of the Department of Defence. It has been ongoing for 12 months now. I would be grateful if the Taoiseach could update the House regarding where the review stands now. Is it complete? Is it going to be published? If so, is there an indicative date regarding when it will be published?

**The Taoiseach:** An organisational capability review of the Department of Defence has been conducted over the last year by the organisational capability review team based in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. It is part of a Civil Service-wide process being overseen by the Civil Service management board. It is, as the Deputy knows, completely separate from the Commission on the Defence Forces. As is the established process in such reviews, the Department will prepare an action plan to address any recommendations made. The report and the action plan will subsequently be brought to the Government and then be published. I do not have a date yet, but I will respond to the Deputy later in that regard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will have to cut the time for contributions to 30 seconds to fit everyone in. From the Rural Independent Group, I call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is here. The NTA did not get one penny, aon phingin, to continue work on the N24 road from Cahir to Waterford and the N25 road to Dungarvan. All the politicians in the south east are at one on this issue. A meeting has been requested with the Minister to emphasise the importance of this project and the continuation of the different aspects of this endeavour. If it goes off the Richter scale, the consultants will have only another month before they leave. Will the Minister please facilitate a meeting with members of the Oireachtas from the south east?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That sounds like a “Yes” or “No” question.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I look forward to such a meeting.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister. I call Deputy Joan Collins from the Independent Group.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I have a specific question for the Taoiseach on the cost-of-living increases. Is the Government seriously considering setting up an emergency hardship fund? Last week during statements on the costs of living, I raised this proposal. The ESRI has also raised the need for the establishment of an emergency fund to help to meet exceptional need payments and for such a fund to be administered by the community welfare officers based in the commu-

nity as they operated in the past.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, the Government is looking at a range of measures in terms of dealing with the current inflationary cycle to see what we can do best to target particular people on low incomes who are clearly under pressure as a result of this price cycle increase.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Last night we saw on RTÉ women who are victims of violence and have had to flee their homes. We need urgent action across all Departments on this. I know the Minister will open consultation on our strategy to combat gender violence next week. I really welcome her commitment to bring a refuge to all counties without a refuge, including Carlow, which I have raised here with the Taoiseach. Every town needs a refuge. As we saw last night, the women were so brave on the programme but there needs to be more places for women and men because they are being turned away. I ask that this public consultation be done as soon as possible.

**The Taoiseach:** The public consultation is obviously on the strategy and that will impact on the refuges and places. In those counties that do not have any refuge centre or proper centre, work should proceed with the local authorities in those areas to see if we can do something in the interim.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** The Tánaiste last week said we need to urgently increase the electricity rebate. We need to go significantly higher than the announced €113. We also need to address the issues in respect of fuel allowance, increase the benefits for people and the time, and the income they can get before they qualify. We need to look also at the squeezed middle, people who cannot pay their mortgages, the rising cost of living, and significant bills such as energy, childcare and rents.

**The Taoiseach:** As I said to other Deputies, I am not going to go into specific measures but there will be a range of measures we are looking at, particularly for people who are on low incomes and people who are finding it very hard on a weekly basis right now, to try to help them in their current situation.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Rents continue to rise in Galway city with a report recently stating that they rose by 8%. Regularly there are no houses to rent available in the city under the housing assistance payment, HAP, limits, pushing people into homeless, which rose by 42% in Galway over the last 12 months. As a measure to prevent a continued rise in homelessness, would the Taoiseach consider giving Galway HAP the same 50% flexibility as is given in Dublin?

**The Taoiseach:** I will talk to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage about that specific issue in Galway and I will come back to the Deputy.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** Cavan and Monaghan are two of the counties without a dedicated refuge centre. Tearmann services do a very good job locally in the two counties supporting people, both women and men but predominantly women, going through such trauma. Tearmann recorded a 35% increase in 2021 in the number of people seeking support since 2019. They support families along with the local authorities through HAP and rent supplement programmes. It is very urgent that a dedicated refuge centre be established in Cavan-Monaghan because if people need accommodation at the moment in such a centre, they have to source the accommodation in Louth, Meath or Sligo, which is totally unsuitable for families who want to ensure their children can still attend school while going through such trauma.

**The Taoiseach:** As I said earlier, my view would be that if the county council, for example Cavan County Council, and Tearnann services could combine and approach the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with a view to providing such a centre, these are the interim approaches we have to take while the strategy outlines the more medium term. I think we would be forthcoming in responding to the county council working with the local service provider there to accelerate the provision of a centre.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I want to ask the Taoiseach about the Cost of Disability report that was published by Government, an Indecon report, in December. This is not the first report to recommend the introduction of a cost of disability payment. There was one by Indecon 18 years ago this month. There was another one as far back as 1986, 36 years ago. The latest report, we are told, is now going to become part of a straw man proposal which will go to be reviewed by the national disability inclusion strategy steering group. Rather than having report after report and groups looking at it, we know a cost of disability payment needs to be introduced. It cannot be done overnight but can we get at least a timeframe for people who are waiting for this important support?

**The Taoiseach:** Again in terms of that report, it would have to feed into the budgetary process in terms of the next budget. Proposals will emanate from that and will fall due for consideration in terms of the Estimates for next year.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** As the Taoiseach knows, the prices of everyday essentials and utility bills have risen substantially. In January inflation hit a high of 5% right across the eurozone. The people and families I represent need a targeted suite of measures to help to ease the burden on their household budgets. We need to help people. We need to help low-income families and our squeezed middle who do not qualify for welfare support. Can we extend and expand the fuel allowance scheme? Will the Taoiseach bring forward social protection measures that are due to come into effect in June? How will this Government help families?

**The Taoiseach:** As I said earlier, I am not going to go into the specifics. There is a number of measures under consideration by the Government in respect of this issue and we will be revealing those in the next couple of days.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Gino Kenny is not present. I call Deputy Munster.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Last month it was announced that east Meath would be added to the Drogheda Garda boundary. The Minister for Justice at that time had said that Laytown Garda station might be refurbished and we would see an increase in Garda numbers. I sent a parliamentary question to the Minister a couple of weeks ago looking for details of the plan. She did not answer the question. I put the very same question to the Garda Commissioner and the response I got was that there have been no discussions relating to the realignment of Garda boundaries between east Meath and Drogheda and there has been no discussion of additional funding for the Drogheda Garda division. Which is it? Is it actually happening? Who is right, the Minister or the Garda Commissioner?

**The Taoiseach:** These are operational matters for the Garda. I do not have the details of that specific issue here with me today, as the Deputy will appreciate.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** At Cork County Council level there was shock and dismay at the announcement that the Dursey cable car will have to be suspended due to emergency repairs needed from 1 April until November 2022. This, coupled with An Taisce and some crowd



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called BirdWatch Ireland forcing a judicial review on planning given recently for a €10 million community development scheme, is leaving locals who have communicated with me in shock. There is a local solution. Unfortunately we cannot question what is wrong with the cable car. That is beyond me or the Taoiseach or anybody else. There is a local solution here that needs Cork County Council, and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, who has responsibility for islands, to come together and find the funds and the solution to all work together for this to happen for the Dursey cable car to continue this year. A local solution is possible. Is the Taoiseach willing to work with the locals?

**The Taoiseach:** There is a judicial review in respect of the proposal. Is that what the Deputy is talking about?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** No, I am talking about the Dursey cable car being closed for the summer months.

**The Taoiseach:** For repairs.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Yes. There is a local solution that could be accommodated by all if there were funds for it.

**The Taoiseach:** Maybe the Deputy might reveal the local solution to me.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am quite happy to do that. There might be a ferry service provided while the cable car is closed so that tourism can continue in Dursey Island, which is of huge importance.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** I wish to raise the issue of Shannon Heritage Properties with the Taoiseach. I have raised it many times before. A due diligence process is in place now for Clare County Council to effectively take over the Clare properties, as I am sure the Taoiseach is aware. Key to that is capital funding. Clare County Council has limited sources of revenue; namely, local property tax and rates. Nobody is going to thank it if it raises local property tax and rates in order to put a roof on a castle, for example. There will be funding required to ensure these properties are in a good state. Will the Taoiseach undertake to provide that funding?

**The Taoiseach:** Look, the council wants to take this over, does it not?

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** It does.

**The Taoiseach:** So they should get on with it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes Questions on Promised Legislation.

### **Island Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill 2017: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]**

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Question put and agreed to.

**Report of the Joint Committee regarding Carbon Budgets under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015 to 2021: Motion**

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I move:

That Dáil Éireann hereby notes the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action report laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas on 7th February, 2022, pursuant to Section 6B(2) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Acts 2015-2021 regarding the carbon budgets, which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 6th December, 2021, pursuant to Section 6B(1)(a) of the Acts.

Question put and agreed to.

**Fisheries (Commercial Fishing Licences) (Alteration of Duties and Fees) Order 2022: Motion**

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

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.

Question put and agreed to.

**Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development) Regulations 2022: Referral to Joint Committee**

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I move:

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

Planning and Development Act (Exempted Development) Regulations 2022,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 3rd February, 2022, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which, not later than 15th 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.

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### **Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion**

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

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

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media

Minister for Finance

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Transport

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform: Motion**

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

That, in accordance with the recommendation of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform pursuant to Standing Order 118A(2)(b), a Special Committee on International Surrogacy is hereby established, with Orders of Reference as contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform entitled “Orders of Reference for Special Committee on International Surrogacy”, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 4th February, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna - Questions**

#### **Cabinet Committees**

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [4364/22]

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [4807/22]

3. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will next meet. [5146/22]

4. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will next meet. [5957/22]

5. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will next meet. [6048/22]

6. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on environment and climate change will next meet. [6257/22]

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [6398/22]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [6401/22]

9. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [6404/22]

10. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will next meet. [6461/22]

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

The Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change last met on Wednesday, 8 December, and is next scheduled to meet on Monday, 21 February. This Cabinet committee oversees the implementation of the ambitious programme for Government commitments in relation to the environment and climate change. The key climate change commitments are now reflected in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, which sets out challenging carbon reduction targets for 2030 and the added statutory commitment of achieving a climate-neutral economy by 2050.

As part of its remit under that legislation, the Climate Change Advisory Council has proposed three five-year carbon budgets for the period until 2035. The carbon budgets are the overall, economy-wide emissions ceiling that we must work within if we are to achieve our reduction targets for 2030 and beyond. The proposals by the advisory council have been considered by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action, which yesterday published its recommendations. Over the coming weeks, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, having considered these recommendations and the original proposal by the advisory council, will bring a proposal to the Government on determining these budgets. When the budgets are agreed, the Government will then proceed to setting sectoral emission ceilings. These will determine the upper limits of emissions for each sector, which when added together must keep within the overall carbon budget.

Agreed policies and measures designed to ensure that sectors quickly and significantly reduce their emissions have been set out in the Climate Action Plan 2021, which was published by the Government before Christmas. The plan will be further revised this year to ensure the actions it contains are sufficient to meet the reduction targets that will have been made explicit through the setting of the carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

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Climate change is a profound challenge for this planet and Ireland must play its full part in addressing it. Just as the threats of climate change will touch each of us, the journey towards carbon neutrality on which we have now embarked will require all of our efforts. We have much to gain. We in government will take the lead and provide support where we can. Ministers will now be answerable for their performance on emissions reductions and ensuring that the sectors for which they are responsible play their part in cutting greenhouse gases. However, this is a shared journey. It will challenge us all to rethink how we work, how we live, how we heat our homes and buildings, how we grow our food and manage our land, and how we travel. Opportunities abound if we have the confidence to grasp them.

The Cabinet committee on the environment and climate change will continue to meet regularly throughout 2022 to progress all these aspects of the Government's ambitious climate action and environmental policies.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are many questioners present, but they will each have just one minute.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Last week, the Tánaiste expressed his frustration with the Government's slow rate of progress in accelerating plans and ambitions for renewable electricity and new fuels such as green hydrogen. If the programme for Government's commitments are to be realised, a Government-led hydrogen strategy is urgent. We can lead from the front on green hydrogen. This is the view of public and private energy providers, all of whom emphasise the role of green hydrogen in meeting our 2030 and 2050 climate targets. Currently, Scotland leads the way on offshore wind and published its first hydrogen strategy seven years ago. My colleague Deputy O'Rourke will introduce the hydrogen strategy Bill tomorrow. I hope that all Government parties will support it.

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive strategy with a focus on State-led investment delivering a return for the public purse and energy security. Ireland has one of the best offshore wind resources in the world. Capturing just a portion of this for the production of green hydrogen could deliver significant environmental benefits, green jobs and a return for the State. When can we expect publication of the Government's hydrogen strategy and the updated climate action plan for 2022?

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The Cabinet has approved retrofit grants of up to €25,000. There will also be low-interest loans. The aim is to retrofit 500,000 homes by 2030 and install 400,000 heat pumps. The €352 million allocated for this year is just shy of €1 million per day compared to last year's €221 million for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, schemes. However, there was a large underspend across SEAI grant schemes in 2021. The better energy, warmer homes scheme had a budget allocation of €100 million last year and the warmth and well-being scheme had a budget of €9 million. These provided for free upgrades for lower income households. Even allowing for the pandemic, though, only half of that allocation was expected to be spent last year. Even when the State was picking up all the costs of retrofitting, we were not getting the numbers done. How will this be addressed?

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The Taoiseach stated that climate change was a profound challenge that would require all of our efforts to address it. I agree. Akin to how we dealt with Covid, it is a fundamental societal challenge. When we were debating and dealing with Covid, we followed the scientists' lead and the evidence.



At the committee dealing with carbon budgets in recent months, the independent scientists were clear that the proposed carbon budgets did not go far enough. Not only did they not go far enough to meet our climate targets, but they did not go far enough to meet the Government's commitment under the programme for Government for a 7% per annum reduction. In fact, only a 5.7% reduction is provided by these budgets. Is the Taoiseach concerned that the carbon budgets coming to the Cabinet for approval do not meet the commitments that it made in the programme for Government and what will it do about that?

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** As the Taoiseach well knows, protecting and maintaining our woodlands and forest cover is a key element of reaching our climate action targets, especially given that Ireland has the least tree coverage of any European nation. That said, I ask that the Taoiseach support the communities in Riverstick, Belgooly and the Kinsale area in preventing the sale of 22 acres of pristine woodland at Ballymartle Woods into private ownership. I visited the site yesterday. It is a stunning location. I got a full tour. It has woodland walks and old oak woodlands, and it is a perfect example of the type of amenity that we should be keeping for communities. I ask the Taoiseach to support them in their efforts to prevent the sale of 22 acres of that woodland into private ownership.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** The Taoiseach will be aware of the significant impact that inflation is having on individuals and families across this country. The budget's increases in the fuel allowance were welcome, as are plans to give householders €113 credit against their electricity bills. However, these measures will only go so far. We know that inflation is likely to be higher than what was anticipated at the time of the budget. Will the Taoiseach consider increasing the electricity credit beyond €113 and rolling out an improved retrofitting scheme for minor improvements, for example, attic or other home insulation schemes?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The average cost of retrofitting a house is approximately €53,000. It can be €70,000 or €80,000 for older houses to get them up to the highest building energy rating, BER. If someone is wealthy, the mooted changes in grants will benefit him or her. They might allow someone to cover the difference between €25,000 and €53,000 or more. However, the hardest hit by the energy price hikes will simply not have the money. The social housing retrofit programme is a joke. In my area last year, 1% of the social housing stock was retrofitted. There are similar targets for this year. For those in private rented accommodation, this offers absolutely nothing. Why does the Government, therefore, not get the State to invest in the retrofitting of all homes on a much bigger scale, upfront, so we will generate savings further down the line that benefit both the climate and the householder?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Last week, I raised with the Taoiseach the case of the strategic litigation against, and bullying of, Ballyboden Tidy Towns group by the developer Ardstone. He responded that no one should ever intimidate a Tidy Towns committee. I agree but it is clear that Ardstone does not. In response to our interaction here, its representatives wrote another letter to the Ballyboden Tidy Towns group. It stated the group has continued to brief against their client, Ardstone, referring to what I said in the Dáil and calling for an undertaking not to defame Ardstone to any person, media body, Deputy or other entity at any future time. It is clear that what is taking place is precisely bullying and threatening behaviour to get the group to back down from standing for sustainable planning.

This is not the only case. Councillor Dean Mulligan in Swords brought to my attention a similar one. It concerns MKN Property Group, which relies on McCann FitzGerald for a judicial review, but rely on AMOSS Solicitors in respect of correspondence that threatens a group

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of residents, the South Swords Residents Group, with legal action, again to prevent public participation. This seems to be widespread. What will be done to prevent this from happening?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The retrofitting of homes should be the low-hanging fruit in any campaign against climate change. Making houses warmer, more efficient and cheaper to run and reducing carbon emissions should be the first steps the Government takes. Ten years ago, I published a plan that would have resulted in the deep retrofitting of 500,000 homes within five years. It was at a time when many skills that we needed to keep were being lost from the country. The target for the past three years was the retrofitting of 50,000 homes. Last year, 18,000 homes were retrofitted. If we have a larger target, how will the Government be able to ramp up to reach it in the next couple of years?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach has a little over three minutes in which to respond.

**The Taoiseach:** On Deputy McDonald's points on green hydrogen and offshore wind, the Government is of the view that offshore wind energy has enormous economic potential in this country. It could do an awful lot to redress the imbalance in economic development between the eastern and western seaboard. It will commence in a serious way off the east coast. Wind energy generation off the west and south-west coasts could be the equivalent of the Irish Financial Services Centre in Dublin for the regions. The Government, therefore, is really committed to a multidisciplinary approach to both wind energy and green hydrogen, which has enormous potential, and to working with the EU on its plans.

The marine area planning legislation we passed in this House just before Christmas is a very significant step forward. We now need to establish consents and get the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, up and running to enable us to work within our timelines and give the industry confidence we can achieve the targets we have set. Investors are waiting to get involved. There is significant potential. The line Minister will be publishing detailed delivery plans in respect of this.

Deputy Duncan Smith raised the issue of the upgrades, and several Deputies referred to retrofitting in general. Approximately 465,000 houses have had some retrofitting or other between 2000 and 2020, or since schemes really began in earnest in 2000. We must accelerate the rate of progress dramatically-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is less than 10%.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and that is what the plan we are publishing today will do. Today's Government decisions are significant. They represent a very significant ramping up of the retrofitting agenda.

Deputy Devlin raised the issues of attic insulation and cavity walls, for which the grants are to be up to 80%. There will be a significant take-up. We will facilitate people to proceed on a phased basis. The grants are far more generous than any we have had before. Deputy Boyd Barrett should note it would not be feasible to announce that the State, on its own, would do every single house in the country; it is just not going to happen. That is not a real-world possibility.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Why not?

**The Taoiseach:** The key challenge for us, even in terms of the targets we have set, as al-

luded to by Deputy Duncan Smith and others, is on the skills front. That is why it is important that we map out how the carbon tax revenues will be used for the retrofitting programme. Approximately €5 billion in carbon tax revenue will be used for retrofitting over the next decade. That is what is enabling it to happen. Without it, it just could not be done at the scale we are attempting to achieve. The skills part is the key.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Tax the profits of the energy companies.

**The Taoiseach:** The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is working on ramping up in respect of the skills requirements. We need to give the industry certainty and clarity regarding the roadmap and invest in-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach. We have to proceed to Question No. 11.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan raised the issues of woodland and forestry. I accept the points he was making. I am uncomfortable with Coillte selling valuable woodlands of the kind in question given that, to me, Coillte, Bord na Móna and other State agencies must now be leaders in respect of climate change. To be fair to Coillte, it has done some fantastic work across the country.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** What about the carbon budgets and the 7% commitment?

**The Taoiseach:** To be honest with the Deputy, we have an enormous challenge ahead of us to achieve what will be in those carbon budgets. We need everybody in the House to support this. We currently do not have the support, even in the House, to achieve the targets we have set.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The Government has support to do more.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have to move to Question No. 11. We need to talk about how we handle all these things because it is not satisfactory. Members ask the Taoiseach a lot of questions and then do not give him time to answer. When discussing Dáil reform, we might consider how to improve the system. It is much better than it was ten years ago but it is far from satisfactory.

### **Cabinet Committees**

11. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment last met; and when it will next meet. [4371/22]

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment will next meet. [5959/22]

13. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment will next meet. [6146/22]

14. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment will next meet. [6147/22]

15. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment will next meet. [6256/22]

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment last met; and when it will next meet. [6399/22]

17. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment last met; and when it will next meet. [6402/22]

18. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment last met. [6462/22]

19. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment last met and will next meet. [6685/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 to 19, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment first met on 8 July 2020. It has met a total of 17 times, most recently on 13 December. The next meeting is scheduled for this Thursday. Membership of the committee comprises the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Ministers for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Transport, Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Other Ministers or Ministers of State attend when required.

The Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment is responsible for issues relating to the economy and investment. Its initial focus was developing the July jobs stimulus and it has since overseen the development of the Government's economic recovery plan, as well as the review of the national development plan, NDP. It has also overseen the development of the Government's new national digital strategy. Issues relating to the economy are, of course, regularly discussed at full Cabinet meetings, where all formal decisions are made.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Last week, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, representatives were before the Committee of Public Accounts to discuss MetroLink. A sum of €250 million has been spent on metro north up to this point. Some €83 million has been spent since it became MetroLink in 2018. Given that it is supposed to be a priority of the Government and that there is cross-party support, why are State agency representatives continually appearing before Oireachtas committees or briefing the media with a view to pushing out the date and pushing up the cost, to the point where people believe the project will not happen? Dublin Airport is targeting 40 million passengers in the next eight to nine years. We need a light rail system.

While this is happening, there are tandem developments ploughing ahead, such as that at Fosterstown, Swords.

I, too, wish to put on record the intimidation noted by Deputy Paul Murphy in respect of the South Swords Residents Group, which has sought a judicial review to protect sustainable planning and local democratic master plans. The group is being put under intense pressure by solicitor firms and developers to withdraw its judicial reviews and actions, which it is entitled to take and which are very difficult for ordinary people and groups to pursue.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Oireachtas social protection committee published its report last week in response to the Commission on Pensions. It recommends no further increases to the qualifying age for State pensions, which is welcome. Workers should be entitled to retire with a pension at 65 if they so choose. The committee also supports the recommendation to allow workers to retire at 65 once they achieve the required contributions. The commission

and the committee have finished their work. What happens next from a Government point of view? The programme for Government commits to action within six months of the Commission on Pensions completing its work. Will the Government's response include State pension provision for a long-term carers, a commitment to rule out pension age increases and – what needs to happen – a return to the right to retire at 65 and an end to mandatory retirement? I ask the Taoiseach to respond to each of those specific points.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** As on previous occasions, farming has always led the way in economic recovery. However, this time around, it is becoming a massive challenge because of the increased cost of farming. I do not just refer to the cost of fertiliser, which has been well highlighted in this Chamber. It is also about the cost of ration, which has gone from €1 per kg to €1.30 per kg.

**The Taoiseach:** What is it?

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** The cost of ration. As we know, the cost of fertiliser has doubled. In terms of sustainability, farmers are not looking to spread more fertiliser, they are just looking to maintain the level at which they were spreading it. However, it is prohibitive when fertiliser is doubling in cost. Inevitably, this increase in costs does not just impact the farmer; it gets passed onto the consumer as well. As the Taoiseach knows well, farming is the backbone of our rural communities. We need to protect it, intervene and provide supports. From the sustainability perspective, one of the key measures is protected urea, but that is also increasing in cost because of the energy crisis. I would like to hear the Taoiseach's thoughts on measures to protect that sector.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** Amid concerns over sustained inflationary pressures, and as the midlands struggle to adapt to a new era with the fast-tracked carbonisation and the closure of Bord na Móna and the ESB operations in those areas, I ask the Taoiseach if he has a view on giving some consideration to a further decentralisation of Government Departments and agencies in Dublin, and bringing them out to areas that have been most adversely affected and have paid the biggest price in the understandable move towards decarbonisation.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Workers have returned, and are returning, to offices across the country, with many now working on a hybrid basis. Some work some days in the office and others work remotely from locations either at home or within the local town or village. However, the increased cost of fuel is having a significant impact on those workers. As part of efforts to combat climate change, promote modal shift and support workers, will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Transport to consider introducing free or discounted public transport options on a trial basis, perhaps here in the capital? This could include free or discounted fares for 90-minute journeys for all commuters across DART, Luas, bus or intercity services.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Economic recovery means very little if you cannot put an affordable roof over your head. In my area, average rents are now €2,200 a month and average house prices are in excess of €600,000. If you are on HAP, you are goosed, because the most they will give you is €1,900. So, what are you supposed to do? I would like to know what the Taoiseach thinks I should say to people coming into my clinic who are saying they have no place to live and they cannot afford to pay those sorts of rents. Of course, social housing should be the answer. However, figures just revealed by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council this week will really shock Members. Does the Taoiseach know many council houses were delivered in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area last year? Zero. Next year, the number of council



houses that will be delivered in the area will be in single digits. It is just beyond tolerable. Seriously, what does the Taoiseach expect me to say to people who are coming into my clinic and who are faced with homelessness because there is absolutely nothing for them?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Retail and hospitality workers were applauded over the last two years for helping to keep society running during the pandemic. Does the Taoiseach agree that those workers deserve a raise? Very many of them are on the minimum wage. The minimum wage in this country is a poverty wage. Does the Taoiseach think that is okay? Does he think it is acceptable that someone should work full-time and still be below the poverty line? For example, the average cost of a one-bed apartment in Dublin is around €1,600 a month. A full-time minimum wage worker earns less than €1,700 a month. How can someone be expected to survive on that income? Could the Taoiseach survive on that income? The German Government has announced that it will be increasing the minimum wage to €12 an hour from October. Will this Government do the same? Will it go further and agree with People Before Profit's proposal that we should move to €15 an hour? That is the equivalent of €30,000 a year for a full-time worker. At the very minimum, I ask the Government to accept the motion brought forward by Deputy Barry to have an emergency review of the minimum wage now to ensure that is above the rate of inflation.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I see the Taoiseach was out peddling the old Thatcherite myths earlier on about wage increases causing inflation. He was at it again. At a time when inflation stood at 5.5%, the Government increased the minimum wage by 2.9%. It is a statement of fact that the Taoiseach's Government and the Taoiseach have introduced a *de facto* pay cut for the lowest paid workers in this State. At a time when the average minimum wage increase across the European Union is 6%, the Taoiseach's Government has decided to increase Ireland's minimum wage by less than half of that. Tomorrow, in the Dáil, I will move a motion calling for an emergency review of the national minimum wage rate, for an increase that at least fully compensates for price increases as they impact on the low-paid, and for a new rate to be introduced no later than 1 May 2022. Many out there that the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, only said what the Taoiseach and his Government colleagues believe and say to themselves behind closed doors. Do the Government parties intend to vote for my motion tomorrow? If so, do they intend to act on it?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There is a tale of two countries currently. The foreign and direct investment sector is motoring away at the moment, but many elements of the indigenous sector, which employ the majority of people in this State, are in big trouble. Walking through any provincial town, you will see many shops that are shuttered and closed. We know that 40,000 jobs that existed in hospitality in 2019 will not exist this year. Some €3 billion of taxes has been warehoused from businesses that cannot afford to pay their taxes this year. We had a deficit of €7.5 billion last year. We have a national debt of around €250 billion that nobody in this House ever talks about and we are facing interest rate hikes from the ECB which will increase the servicing costs of that debt on this State in the future. All of that is eclipsed by racing inflation. Fiscal prudence is based on the fact that we take in as much tax as we need for expenditure. Does the Taoiseach agree with Fine Gael that there should be tax reductions for upper income earners in the coming years?

**The Taoiseach:** There was quite a range of questions. In response to Deputy Smith's question on MetroLink, as far as I am concerned, we need to get it going. It will happen. It could be subject to delays. If there are planning delays or judicial reviews, that will delay it, but some of those issues are beyond our control and people are entitled to exercise their rights, and so on.



However, we should be under no illusion that one of the biggest challenges for infrastructural projects in this country is progressing through all the various stages and so forth. The Government has made a decision to proceed with this and we will proceed with it.

In response to Deputy McDonald's question on pensions, again, the Oireachtas committee evaluated and gave its response to the report of the Commission on Pensions. We have asked the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to review the recommendations because there are recommendations in relation to PRSI and potential increases in PRSI to deal with a range of measures to improve pay-related sick pay and pensions as well. We will ask the Commission on Taxation and Welfare to give its views on that. The Government stated that six months after the publication of the report of the Commission on Pensions we would return with our views on it. There are no easy answers here. We should stop pretending that there are easy answers. The adult generation in this country needs to make sure that there is a sustainable pension system for younger generations. From what I am hearing in the House, I do not get the sense that there is really buy-in to that. I think there is a strong tendency in the Opposition to kick this down the road and to oppose any measures that would give pension sustainability, but that is the way politics works I suppose.

*4 o'clock*

We are committed to fulfilling that and getting meaningful recommendations too.

As regards the points raised by Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, I fully take on board the additional costs in relation to fertiliser and ration and other issues pertaining to farming. It is challenging; there is no question about that. Again, however, we hope through other measures and other income streams we can provide that we could try to offset that. I know the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is engaging with the stakeholders in farming to address some of these issues but they are not easy. The Deputy mentioned fertiliser. I mentioned cars earlier. The increased cost of fertiliser results from the global supply chain issue and part of the gas costs issue. It is a further illustration that what is happening globally on inflation is having an impact in Ireland.

Deputy Flaherty put forward a good idea in terms of decentralisation. I would be very open to that, given remote working and the fact that I remember being involved in the decentralisation to Carlow of part of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. Almost everybody working in Carlow was from that wider region. Instead of having to commute to Dublin, they were able to work in that unit in Carlow and it made absolute sense on a whole range of issues.

The point raised by Deputy Devlin is very imaginative. We are looking at a number of imaginative ideas around transport. Public transport has to be the way of the future also. We have to increase participation on public transport and cost is a key aspect of that.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, I would simply say that I do not understand why Dún Laoghaire had zero, or very few, social housing completions last year.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The council.

**The Taoiseach:** The council, yes. It should have had more. Other local authorities are doing much better on the social housing front and in 2022 the target is 9,000 additional builds through approved social housing bodies and through the council. I am not clear whether the

approved social housing bodies-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is a Fianna Fáil-run council.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not clear whether the approved social housing bodies-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is a Fianna Fáil-run council.

**The Taoiseach:** We do not run too many councils these days. We have a healthy-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Fianna Fáil runs that one with the Green Party.

**The Taoiseach:** We have the largest number of councillors across the country but, as the Deputy is aware, all councils are fragmented between different parties. It takes a collective-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Fianna Fáil and the Green Party run that council.

**The Taoiseach:** What I have known in many councils, though, is that a lot of parties to the left just keep opposing housing developments until the cows come home.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We have not been opposing council developments.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Paul Murphy raised the issue of retail and hospitality workers. Again, just on the minimum wage, ours is the second highest in Europe right now. Even if you take in purchasing power, we are the sixth highest within the European Union. I think we need balance. We are above the average European wage. Again, we support wage increases, particularly linked to productivity. We do not want to go chasing inflation forever because that does not work, but we do believe we can introduce measures that will help people on low incomes and that is something we are working on.

Deputy Barry misrepresented what I said, but that is par for the course. In terms of the de facto situation around pay and so on, pay has increased. In fact, pay more generally has increased over the past 12 months. I have a figure here for the growth in pay more generally. The Central Bank expects the domestic economy to grow by more than 7%. It is projecting that wage rises will outpace price increases over the next three years. That is what the Central Bank is predicting, notwithstanding the spike in inflation this year. The most important figure, though, is that unemployment is at 7.8%. The rate was above 20% in November 2020.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** That is an extraordinary recovery in our economy which one would not-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Tell that to the low paid.

**The Taoiseach:** Well it has been an extraordinary recovery. Employment is the best way out of low pay.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Good pay is the best way out of low pay. Low-paid workers are employed. It would be desperate if the record was so skewed.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Citizens' Assembly**

20. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [4718/22]

21. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [5961/22]

22. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach the status of the commitments on citizens' assemblies in the programme for Government. [6342/22]

23. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6400/22]

24. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6403/22]

25. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6405/22]

26. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6463/22]

27. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Taoiseach the timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6523/22]

28. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach the expected timeline and order of citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. [6524/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 to 28, inclusive, together.

As the House will be aware, the most recent Citizens' Assembly, on gender equality, concluded its work in June 2021. In the intervening period, circumstances pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic have meant that it has not been possible, until now, to arrange for the establishment and running of further assemblies. The recent easing of public health restrictions means it is once again possible to plan for the running of assemblies with in-person meetings.

I am pleased to confirm to the House that the Government has today agreed to the establishment of two citizens' assemblies, one dealing with the issues of biodiversity and the other dealing with the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin. It is proposed on this occasion to run the two separate assemblies concurrently, with inaugural meetings planned for April 2022. This will be the first time that two assemblies will run concurrently, and presents a significant opportunity to design and implement an operational model that can allow for a greater number of citizens' assemblies to be run.

It is envisaged that a citizens' assembly on drug use will follow these two assemblies, with the intention of running it concurrently with a citizens' assembly on the future of education. That decision, of course, will be taken later this year and will be informed by what we learn over the coming period about the benefits and challenges of running assemblies concurrently.

The matters to be considered by both assemblies are important and urgent, and the Government wishes to move with speed to get the assemblies up and running. The formal establish-

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ment of the new assemblies will require a resolution to be passed both in this House and in the Seanad. The Office of the Government Chief Whip will be engaging with the Business Committee this week to make the necessary arrangements to bring a motion before the Oireachtas next week.

The terms of reference for each assembly have been designed so that they are sufficiently well-defined to ensure a clear focus for the assembly, while at the same time not being so prescriptive as to inhibit the scope of the assembly to define its work programme as it deems appropriate. The terms of reference for the Citizens' Assembly on biodiversity derive from, and are consistent with, the resolution passed by Dáil Éireann in May 2019 which declared a climate and biodiversity emergency and called for a citizens' assembly to examine how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss.

The terms of reference for the Dublin Citizens' Assembly derive from, and are consistent with, the programme for Government, which contains a commitment to establish a citizens' assembly to consider the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin. The full terms of reference will be included in the motion that is to be brought before this House next week.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the Government wishes to move with speed to establish both these assemblies and we look forward to further progressing this matter this week and next.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are several speakers and the time is limited.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** First, I welcome the establishment of the Citizens' Assemblies on the directly elected mayor for Dublin and biodiversity. However, I have raised previously with the Taoiseach the fact that key agencies such as the National Biodiversity Data Centre are underfunded and understaffed. They are not even underpinned by legislation. That needs to be sorted out as a matter of urgency.

Equally urgent is the need for a citizens' assembly on the future of education. That was manifestly the case during the whole leaving certificate debate and debacle. There is also the issue of a citizens' assembly on drug use. I am very concerned that there has been a notable row-back by the Department of Health, with intervention by the HSE moving key services and supports away from their community focus. I am very concerned at the lack of capacity and focus, particularly on the issue of recovery. For example, despite the lack of capacity in recovery care, the HSE does not plan to reopen Keltol drug rehabilitation beds at St. Mary's Hospital in the Phoenix Park. That decision is madness at a time when one cannot get a detox or recovery bed for a person in dire need.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are going to run out of time for other speakers. I call Deputy Ó Ríordáin.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Since I have come back into this House I have been raising consistently - as have Deputies in government - the need for a citizen's assembly on drugs. We have tried to approach this in good faith so that all the issues we have in respect of drug policy can be discussed in a robust fashion at a citizens' assembly. We believe we have been mature and responsible in that respect. Last Thursday night, I pleaded in this Chamber with the Minister of State with responsibility for drugs to prioritise the citizens' assembly on drugs because lives are at stake. The difficulty is that, unfortunately, Irish society does not value the lives that are at stake. When the announcement came today about the Citizens' Assemblies on biodiver-

sity and a potentially directly elected lord mayor of Dublin, there was a level of devastation within the communities and families that are deeply affected by the issue of drugs. I ask the Taoiseach to please give us some level of hope of a timeline for the citizens' assembly on drugs.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** With the announcement of the Citizens' Assembly on biodiversity, this is an incredibly positive day for the efforts of this country to tackle biodiversity loss and the protection of wildlife. In fairness to the Taoiseach, last week he stated we need to act swiftly and with conviction, and here we are today, announcing the Citizens' Assembly will have its inaugural meeting in April. It is important that we continue the other work we are doing. There is the review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, the establishment of the wildlife crime investigation unit and the bolstering of that unit so that it can do its work properly. There is also a need for a proper agri-environment scheme that instead of penalising farmers for having a habitat on their land will actually reward them for this. I thank the Taoiseach again for his leadership on this issue. It is a very good day for those who care about wildlife in this country.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** If we are going to protect and improve biodiversity and increase forest cover as part of that, something radical has to change in Coillte, the State forestry company. The Riverstick forest sale is an absolute disgrace. Before Christmas I had to help the local community in the Enniskerry area to ring alarm bells about Coillte's plan to sell a public forest in that area, which is a public right of way used by the local community. Luckily, we were successful in that campaign but what is going on in Coillte? We need to address its mandate. Part of the problem is that it is driven, a bit like the ESB making all the profits from the energy crisis at the moment, by profit. It is not driven primarily by a concern to expand the forest estate but by making money. That has to stop and we need to change the mandate of Coillte.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Taoiseach spoke about how in May 2019 the Dáil declared a biodiversity emergency and called for a citizens' assembly. Three years will have passed by the time an assembly will have been established. That is not exactly moving swiftly or recognising the scale of the emergency that faces us. One quarter of bird species in Ireland are a "serious conservation concern". Some 77 species of plants and animals are officially endangered. The European Commission has 15 open infringement cases against Ireland on environmental issues. There is an absence of action from the Government.

For example, with regard to marine protected areas, the then Government in 2010 promised that we would have 10% by 2020. It did not have this and it is still at 2.4%. There is still no legal definition of "marine protected areas" and the ones that we have really just exist on paper. The question is whether the Government will take action following the inevitable advice from the citizens' assembly.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** Will the Taoiseach admit that the idea of raising the pension age to 67 and then 68 is now dead in the water? The most recent general election showed that there is as much potential support for this measure as a race for a return of water charges. The Oireachtas committee was only recognising the reality that, politically, this is now a complete non-runner.

Increasing life expectancy raises important issues about funding pension arrangements. Will the Taoiseach now accept that there are alternative ways to doing this rather than just levying extra taxes on the workforce? Extra taxation, for example, could be levied on rental incomes, bank profits, profits of big business and taxes on the incomes of the very wealthy. In fact, will he not concede that the end of the road for the raise the pension age argument should



mark the starting point for a real debate about the levying of real wealth taxes in our society?

**Deputy Neasa Hourigan:** As a result of the pandemic, the landscape of drug consumption in Ireland has utterly changed. Before Christmas the Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force issued a report on the increased use of crack cocaine. In my constituency, the North Inner City Drugs & Alcohol Task Force is experiencing a precarious funding situation. We need coherent funding strategies and an approach that is embedded in the community.

The current policies do not address the impacts of drug consumption on families, on health and on social interaction, on children and what happens when people are criminalised, which is what we are doing right now. I am glad to see other citizens' assemblies but we desperately and urgently need to reframe our national policy position on drugs. We need a national conversation that places the very vulnerable people in our communities that experience this issue at the heart of it. I urge that we put a timeline in place and take urgent action on this issue.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The majority of the citizens in the North voted to remain in the EU. Most polls show that the majority of citizens in the North either support the protocol or can live with it. The Good Friday Agreement is meant to put the will of the people at the heart of the direction of the North of Ireland yet we have the DUP, which is a minority party with a minority view, holding the whole of the North to ransom at the moment. Stormont is dysfunctional, broken and is not working for the people at the moment, which the Taoiseach himself admitted.

There are 44,000 people in the North on housing waiting lists, 4,200 homeless and on the streets, 250,000 living in poverty and 250,000 on hospital waiting lists for more than a year. We need to move beyond Stormont as it is currently constituted. The institutions need to be fully reformed so that no one party can ever tear it down again. When will there be a 32-county citizens' assembly to redesign the new institutions in the North to prevent this happening again?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am afraid the bad news for the Taoiseach is that there is only one minute left for all of these questions.

**The Taoiseach:** I welcome the comments made in respect of the biodiversity citizens' assembly articulated by Deputies McDonald and Christopher O'Sullivan. I take the point that we need to do more in a review of the NPWS and indeed the agri-environmental scheme. We need to work on this as that is why the carbon tax is important to provide funding for that agri-environmental scheme.

On the citizens' assembly on drugs, raised by Deputies Ó Ríordáin and Hourigan, I said that this would not happen until the latter part of the year but in the interim, and not just interim, officials in my office are working and endeavouring to recreate an area-based partnership approach in key areas that are suffering the most from the drugs epidemic and the impact it is having on communities. We need to revert back to the old RAPID approach of drug task force areas where we need a multidisciplinary and multi-pronged approach across Departments and agencies from the bottom up to deal with much of what is happening on the ground right now.

We are not waiting for the citizens' assembly to do work on the drugs issue but the intention is that we have the drugs citizens' assembly set up in the latter part of this year.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There was no answer to the question I asked on the-----

**The Taoiseach:** I answered that earlier. My own view on reconciliation on the island is that



we need to engage at both political party and community level with different traditions coming together. I am not clear that a citizens' assembly is the best model for dialogue and for the more consistent long-haul engagement that is required. This is the sort of long-haul engagement that was required that led to the Good Friday Agreement. A citizens' assembly would not have led to the Good Friday Agreement.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Stormont needs to be reformed now.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Gabh mo leithscéal ach táimid thar-am anois.

### **Dignity and Equality Issues in the Defence Forces: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

commends the Women of Honour, a group of former Defence Forces members, for their bravery, courage and commitment in telling their experiences in the public arena to bring about change;

notes:

— that violence, abuse, coercion and harassment of women and girls is systemic in society and is worse again in environments heavily reliant on power structures;

— the experiences of the Women of Honour group in relation to physical abuse, harassment, coercion, sexual assault and assault as highlighted are most serious; and

— that we have both a legal obligation and a moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State and offer protection to others at home and preserve peace abroad are themselves protected;

further notes that:

— the current internal system for dealing with complaints is not fit-for-purpose and fails to protect those who lodge complaints or those tasked with carrying out investigations;

— the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces is not an effective mechanism for dealing with complaints of the nature raised; and

— the Independent Review proposed by the Minister for Defence and its associated terms of reference fail to recognise the seriousness of this issue and do not offer sufficient scope to determine the scale and depth of the problems across the Defence Forces; and

calls on the Government to:

— establish a full statutory inquiry into allegations of abuse, harassment, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and repercussions following engagement with the internal system of righting a wrong;

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— re-engage with all key stakeholders, including representatives of the Women of Honour group, to create fit-for-purpose terms of reference which provide for adequate scope to deal with these issues; and

— commit to zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault, sexual harassment and sexual assault, and all forms of gender-based violence.

I welcome the opportunity to bring forward this motion in support of, and to achieve some measure of justice for, the group that have become known as the Women of Honour, and others. This support is echoed across the country and, it would also seem to be the case on some local authorities, by Government party councillors, given the motions that have recently been put forward. I am not going to lie or sugar-coat this when I say that I am appalled and deeply saddened that circumstances have progressed in such a manner that the motion is necessary. I am also deeply disappointed at the proposed Government amendment to the motion.

I am also somewhat perplexed by the Government quoting sentences from our motion.

Five months ago, listeners were rendered speechless by the “Documentary on One” by Katie Hannon, entitled “Women of Honour”. Even those of us who had been in contact with the women in the run-up to the documentary and had a small idea of what was to come were, like others, deeply disturbed at the range and depth of the issues raised. Those harrowing experiences recounted in public by the women of sexual assault, harassment, abuse and discrimination made for very uncomfortable and worrying listening. These female former members of the Defence Forces displayed bravery and fortitude in coming forward into such a public domain to speak about their experiences. Given the Government’s proposed amendment, those are characteristics the women will continue to have to call on as the Government effectively gaslights them. The revelation of what those women endured made it clear that Ireland, like many other countries, was experiencing its own #MilitaryMeToo movement and that it would not be left unscathed.

In the aftermath of the revelations, there were meetings between Ministers and officials and the group, and assurances were given in public and in private that the Women of Honour would have input into the terms of reference. In a statement in September regarding the establishment of an inquiry into allegations, the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, confirmed this would happen. However, in February 2022, there appears to have been not only a change of heart but a change of priorities. The only request, which was for a statutory inquiry, has been ignored. Instead, an internal review is the only show in town. The Minister and his officials are trying to convince both the Women of Honour and the rest of us that it is perfectly reasonable and not insulting at all to dilute the only request of the key stakeholders, a request made so that nobody else would go through the experiences they went through. How are these women, who chose to serve the State and were repeatedly let down by the structures and successive governments, expected to have faith in a review where nobody is compelled to engage or attend and which will rely entirely on the goodwill of potential conversations?

It is small wonder the Women of Honour left the last meeting with the Minister for Defence. I presume he is still at the meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, since he is not here to deal with a defence matter. The women said to me, as they said in a public statement, that they effectively felt like they had been patted on the head. That was their take from it. The core message from the Women of Honour is that they want to ensure no other member of the Defence Forces endures what they endured. They know, just as the Minis-

ter knows, that nothing will change as a result of this review. The Minister must re-engage with the key stakeholders, the Women of Honour group, and create fit-for-purpose terms of reference that provide for adequate scope to deal with the issues in a statutory inquiry, not a review. It may be late, but there is still an opportunity for the Minister for Defence to do the right thing for this group.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** The Minister is doing a grave dishonour to the Women of Honour by refusing to grant the commission of investigation they want and deserve. In recounting their appalling experiences at the hands of men, among them senior officers wearing the uniform of the State, they are taking on not just their alleged abusers but the entire apparatus of the Defence Forces and the State, and by God we know how the institutions in this State like to protect themselves. We know the lengths the State will go to in order to defend the indefensible, and do so lavishly and with great effort with the people's money. It is not lost on people that when anybody has to challenge the State and its agencies, it is the people's taxes that pay for the legal and institutional war the State wages against the person. The names Vicky Phelan, the late Emma Mhic Mhathúna and Brigid McCole come to mind.

The review proposed by the Minister is an insult to the Women of Honour, the experiences they are making public and their bravery. Such a review degrades their service, their courage and their commitment to the State and, by extension, to all of us. A statutory and independent commission of investigation is the very least that should be offered. What the women have raised - sexual harassment, abuse, coercion, manipulation and rape - are things that go to the heart of the history of women in this State. That they should raise this in respect of the Defence Forces of the State and that they are granted a review is, frankly, disgusting. It also revictimises and retraumatises them by diminishing their experience in the alleged behaviour and minimising the examination of it in a simple review. Ordinary people in Ireland are better than this, and we must do better by these women.

The women are highly disciplined and highly trained to defend and protect the State and to keep the peace overseas. They are not looking for kid-glove treatment. They are well able to defend the women who are coming behind them. I commend them on telling their story, and I commend Deputy Clarke on tabling this motion. As she has outlined, there should be no inside job here and no review. They should have the statutory commission of investigation.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I begin by commending the Women of Honour on their bravery, courage and commitment in sharing their experiences in the public arena to bring about change. Unfortunately, the allegations, while shocking, were no surprise to me. I had read reports on the work done by the former captain, Tom Clonan. I also read the emails that all Deputies receive, almost daily, from retired sergeant, Anthony O'Brien. Many Members will be familiar with the C1 Excel document which details a litany of allegations, including allegations involving male victims and the sexual abuse of children.

There are many sad and sick stories in this document, including that of a female soldier who was raped on her first tour overseas. Her rapist was fined three days' pay. The female soldier was labelled a troublemaker, a slut and worse. She was badly let down by the system that was meant to protect her. She attempted suicide a number of times and became an alcoholic. There is the story of a female sailor who was drugged and raped, which resulted in pregnancy. She miscarried. She told her doctor what had happened and he told her it was her word against that of the rapist. The officer who raped her was a serial rapist who was known for trying to get into female bunks while at sea. He was eventually forced to retire with a senior petty officer's pen-

sion and a gratuity. There is the story of the rape of two female soldiers by four soldiers while on a tour of duty in Lebanon. These soldiers had a reputation for depraved behaviour. The two female soldiers had their drinks spiked. They were then stripped and anally raped. The rapists then dressed them again and put them back to bed. There are many allegations that resulted in cover-ups, forced moves, closing ranks and the quiet retirement of perpetrators.

It is clear the current internal system for dealing with complaints is not fit for purpose and fails to protect those who lodge complaints and those tasked with carrying out investigations. In the Women of Honour documentary we heard the story of Ciara who not only had to endure sexual harassment but had to pay €2,500 to buy her way out of the Defence Forces. That is rubbing salt in the wound.

The Government must commit to zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault, sexual harassment and sexual assault in all forms, and all forms of gender-based violence. The first step is to establish a full statutory inquiry into these allegations. It is time to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and to ensure our Defence Forces are a safe environment for all.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** First, I thank my colleague, Deputy Clarke, not only for bringing this motion before the Dáil but also for the tireless work she has done on this issue. It was very difficult for the Women of Honour to come forward and tell their stories. They have had to wade and fight their way through bureaucratic and cultural systems that are designed to keep them quiet and not to challenge the *status quo*. On that note, I extend my admiration and support to the Women of Honour group and all survivors who have come forward bravely to tell their stories.

Abuse and harassment are totally unacceptable in any workplace and we must show zero tolerance as a society. The Defence Forces should be no different. All Defence Forces personnel should be treated equally with dignity and respect at work. They should have the same rights to a safe workplace as any other sector of society. Unfortunately, recent horrific incidents have brought the difficulties that women encounter daily right to the fore. It should not have taken the death of Ashling Murphy to catapult gender-based harms into the public domain, but we now have the opportunity address all the difficulties women face just by being women.

The Government needs to establish a full statutory inquiry into allegations of abuse, harassment, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and repercussions in the Defence Forces following engagement with the internal system. The Government, especially the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, continues to fail and let down these women. The proposal to hold a review is far short of what is needed. There must be re-engagement with all key stakeholders, including representatives of the Women of Honour, to create fit-for-purpose terms of reference that provide for adequate scope to deal with all these issues.

The current internal system for dealing with complaints is not fit for purpose. These allegations of bullying, harassment, assault and rape in the Defence Forces are deeply concerning and require a commission of investigation. Survivors have been very clear that nothing less than a commission of investigation will be acceptable in appropriately examining what has happened. It must be fixed now to protect all current and future members of the Defence Forces and the Navy.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to this very important mo-

tion that has been brought forward by my colleague, Deputy Sorca Clarke. We have all been horrified by the stories told in Ms Katie Hannon's RTÉ documentary from last September, which laid bare the horrific abuse, harassment and discrimination experienced by some female members of the Defence Forces. At that time, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, gave assurances that those affected would have input into the terms of reference of any investigation taking place, saying the matter was a priority for him. He met the women, who told him they wanted an independent investigation into the problems with the complaints procedures as well as the addressing of the cultural actions after a complaint is made, including prolonged harassment and bullying. Instead the Minister reneged on his earlier commitment and announced an internal review rather than a statutory inquiry.

That internal review had terms of reference that were not agreed by the affected women. There would be no compellability under the review and no criticism, blame or factual or legal findings. It was just an internal review of the process. Quite frankly, this is very offensive, showing contempt for the women who have experienced abuse and harassment and who have bravely spoken publicly about those dreadful experiences. These women rightly feel let down and that they have been sidelined. It is a complete failure by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to understand the seriousness of the allegations. It does nothing to address the root problems and it will not address what happens after a complaint is made, where the complainants are harassed, bullied and victimised.

The Minister must go back to the drawing board and establish a full statutory inquiry into these allegations, including what happens after a complaint is made. He must engage with the women affected and other stakeholders to ensure the terms of reference are fit for purpose. If the Government is serious about how women in society are treated, this must be fixed. We need a Government that will ensure zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual assault, sexual harassment and all forms of gender-based violence. We have had enough talk about it and now we need to see action.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I first commend the bravery and determination of these women in their pursuit of truth and justice. There should be no delay by this Government in the implementation of a commission of investigation into allegations by the Women of Honour. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, can do the right thing here and I implore him to do that. The State must stand up to the perpetrators of abuse towards women and let them see their alleged positions of superiority do not become a hiding place for their actions.

I receive weekly correspondence, as all the Deputies do, from an ex-soldier who has been championing the cause of sexual abuse survivors, both male and female, in the forces over many years, and nearly all at the hands of senior officers. This is not a new problem in the armed forces but it must stop and must be dealt with now. A workplace should be a place considered a safe environment. These brave women put their lives at risk in war-torn countries acting as peacemakers and representing the highly respected peacekeeping record of this country. They should not have to fear also their peers or superiors and targeted sexual abuse.

We have only heard in recent days of a breach of Covid-19 restrictions, where up to 260 people attended a barbecue at a time when outdoor gatherings were limited to 15 people, and the case of another alleged sexual abuse case on a young female soldier by a senior officer at the same event. There seems to be a sense of entitlement and a lack of fear of accountability in the Defence Forces. This must be dealt with. Senior officers, along with the Department and the Government as a whole, must do better.



**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The truth is that people throughout the country were horrified when they heard Katie Hannon’s programme last September as it laid bare something people could never have imagined would happen within the Defence Forces. I guess most people would have considered the Defence Forces as a place with a command structure and controlled environment. Of course, as we know from other institutions, even with that structure, predators can feel they have major opportunity. That has been the case for these women, who very bravely came forward and laid bare their souls to the country. They have been the victims of sexual assault, rape and abuse, as well as coercion and coercive control in that structure.

One of the biggest tragedies of this is that when these women went to their senior officers to complain and tried to get this dealt with, it was hushed up, covered up and they were shut up and put back in the corner. That is worthy of an inquiry in itself, without ever talking about the abuse they went through. We are a country with a long history of dealing with similar cases in various institutions, and it would be very remiss of the Government to go down the road of reinforcing the old ways rather than opening new ones. This is an opportunity to demonstrate that times have changed and things are different.

It is a relatively new position that has been uncovered in recent years in the Defence Forces. Nobody can say it has been going on for years and nobody knew about it, although perhaps people did. It is certainly something that was not discussed in this arena until very recently. The Government now has the opportunity to handle this correctly and demonstrate it will do it properly. We all believed the Minister, in fairness, when he met the Women of Honour and said this would be a priority and he would do what was required to show things would be different. Yet he has returned to this notion of having an internal review, which is totally inappropriate and wrong. It reinforces the wrong that happened in the first place. It is retraumatising these women, and we think of the courage they had to come forward and do the programme with Katie Hannon. They told their stories to the public but the Minister and the Government are turning their backs on them, which is an absolute disgrace. It would be a disgrace for the Government to continue down this path.

There must be a reflection on where the Government is going with this matter. The Government should recognise that this is an opportunity for it to do something historic in this country and do something right by women. It has never been the case in the past.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

“commends the Women of Honour, a group of former Defence Forces members, for their bravery, courage and commitment in telling their experiences in the public arena to bring about change;

notes:

— that, as part of the Government plan to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms, the Department of Justice is leading on the development of the third national strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence;

— the experiences shared by the Women of Honour group in relation to physical abuse, harassment, coercion, sexual assault and assault as highlighted are shocking,



very serious and utterly unacceptable;

— that unfortunately the systems, policies and workplace culture in the Defence Forces have not, and are not, serving all personnel well; and

— that the Government has both a legal and moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State and offer protection to others at home and abroad are themselves protected; and

further notes that:

— following a Government decision, the Minister for Defence has established a judge-led Independent Review:

— to advise the Minister for Defence on whether the current legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and practices for addressing incidents of unacceptable behaviour in the workplace are effective;

— to independently assess whether the pervading culture in the workplace is fully aligned with the principles of dignity, equality, mutual respect and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces; and

— to provide recommendations and guidance to the Minister for Defence on measures and strategies required to underpin a workplace based on dignity, equality, mutual respect, and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces;

— on receipt of the final report from the Independent Review, the Government will consider the requirement for further work, and in particular, if further work is required to examine issues of an historical nature;

— the Minister for Defence encourages all stakeholders, including the Women of Honour group, the men and women of honour group, serving personnel and the representative associations to engage with the Independent Review; and

— the Minister for Defence is committed to zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault, sexual harassment and sexual assault, and all forms of gender-based violence.”

Unfortunately, the Minister cannot be present this evening and he has asked me to pass on his apologies to Members. On his behalf I welcome the opportunity to respond to Sinn Féin on this important matter, and I thank the Members opposite for their contributions over the past 20 minutes.

I confirm, without question, that the Government commends the Women of Honour, a group of former Defence Forces members, on their bravery, courage and commitment in telling their experiences in the public arena to bring about change. I had the privilege of meeting the Women of Honour group on 29 October last, when I had the opportunity to hear first hand their personal experiences and their wish for change for serving members and future members of the Defence Forces.

There are policies, systems and procedures currently in place for dealing with allegations and complaints of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace, but it is clear from strong views

expressed at the meetings both I and my colleague have had with stakeholders, including serving members, that the pervading culture in the Defence Forces, and those policies, systems and procedures have not served and are not serving all Defence Forces personnel well. We share a common position on the issues being raised. I agree completely with the reference in the motion that violence, abuse, coercion and harassment of any individual in any society is totally unacceptable. The abuse of power is not acceptable in any form. This is why the development of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, led by the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, is so important in tackling this epidemic. As the Minister has said, “it is vital that we step up our policy response right across Departments and agencies to ensure that the third strategy is the most ambitious yet”.

The Government acknowledges that the experiences shared by the Women of Honour group in relation to physical abuse, harassment, coercion, sexual assault and assault as highlighted are shocking, very serious and utterly unacceptable. We have both a legal obligation and a moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State and offer protection to others at home and abroad are themselves protected. It is for this reason the independent review that has been approved by Cabinet is now operational and is proceeding without delay as a critical and necessary next step in addressing these serious issues. Members of the Defence Forces expect nothing less. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has an immediate obligation to serving members to ensure the workplace is safe and that there is zero tolerance of unacceptable behaviour in the Defence Forces. In this, the Minister has the full support of Government.

I am aware there was extensive engagement with a range of stakeholders over previous months, including serving members, the representative associations, the Women of Honour group and a further group of the original Women of Honour group - the men and women of honour group - on the terms of reference, which were approved by Government on 25 January last. I understand the Secretary General and senior officials at the Department of Defence met the Women of Honour group on seven occasions, and on three of those occasions the Minister, Deputy Coveney, was also in attendance. As I have already mentioned, I also met with the group on 29 October last. In addition, meetings have also been held with the men and women of honour group.

On foot of these engagements with stakeholders, I am aware a number of observations have been incorporated into the terms, including the bringing of the Department of Defence within the scope of the review’s body of work, which is a particular ask of the Women of Honour group. The review group will also be engaging with the various structures within the complaints process, including the independent Office of the Ombudsman of the Defence Forces.

While the independent review has the support of stakeholders, including serving members of the Defence Forces, I am aware the Women of Honour group has expressed the disappointment of its members with the review and is seeking the establishment of a tribunal of inquiry. I am aware the Taoiseach met with members of the Women of Honour group on Monday, 31 January. He listened very carefully to their views and advised them that he concurred with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on the need to take action now to address the need for a safe work environment for serving members founded on zero tolerance for unacceptable behaviour. The Taoiseach also met with members of the men and women of honour group on Friday, 4 February. They relayed their harrowing experiences to him and stated they supported the independent review and would co-operate with it. I express my appreciation to the members of this group for also having the courage to share their experiences with the Taoiseach.

These are complex issues with different views from stakeholders as to how best to address them. Both the Minister and the Taoiseach have underlined that the Government is not ruling out a further body of work in the future to examine allegations of a historical nature, and I wish to echo that message this evening. The terms of reference for the review provide that Government may consider further work on receipt of the independent review findings. The review group, comprising three members, is chaired by Bronagh O'Hanlon, a recently retired High Court judge. The other members of the group are senior counsel Mark Connaughton and HR specialist Jane Williams. Their work has commenced and they have been specifically asked to advise whether further work is required to examine issues of an historical nature and to make any recommendations in this regard. As the Minister has indicated previously, an interim report is expected within six months and a final report within 12 months, which will be brought to Government.

I again commend those in the Women of Honour group on their courage in sharing their experiences and I emphasise in no uncertain terms that their concerns are not being ignored. The Government is fully cognisant of the trauma that can be suffered by victims and the need to consider carefully the most appropriate course of action. On foot of initial engagements with serving members of the Defence Forces and the Women of Honour group last September, the Minister announced last October, interim support measures for members of the Defence Forces impacted by unacceptable behaviour in the workplace.

A confidential contact person, who has been appointed within Raiseaconcern, is available to assist serving and former members of the Defence Forces, and this provides a safe place to support the reporting of alleged wrongdoing in the workplace. The service is up and running since the announcement and has received and is receiving calls. Given the nature of the allegations, the Minister acted quickly in putting in place an appropriate confidential contact person who is independent and outside the chain of command, and whose role is to listen to the caller, assist in documenting his or her allegations, and provide guidance on follow-on options.

The Inspire confidential helpline, which is available on a 24-7 basis for all serving members of the Defence Forces, has also been made available to anyone who has contacted the confidential contact person. In addition, the personnel support service in the Defence Forces assists members and their immediate family with the provision of information and advice on areas, including stress management, counselling and referral options.

Whether recent or historical, however, the Minister and the Government have been consistent in the message that those who may have suffered serious wrong of a criminal nature are urged to report their concerns to An Garda Síochána, which has lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate such matters. I strongly support this position. I commend this counter-motion to the House.

Debate adjourned.

### **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 Michael Healy-Rae - to discuss assessments for, testing and treatment of Lyme disease in Ireland; (2) Deputy Ged Nash - to discuss the backlog of ophthalmic services for children and medical card patients in County Louth; (3) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss a breakdown of the €80 million announced in funding for Irish sporting organisations; (4) Deputies Mattie McGrath, Michael McNamara, Richard O'Donoghue - to discuss a review of the trolley crisis in University Hospital Limerick; (5) Deputies Eoin Ó Broin, Mark Ward, Emer Higgins and Gino Kenny - to discuss the transfer of lands in Collinstown Community College, Clondalkin for a primary health care facility; (6) Deputy John Brady - to discuss the Government response to Amnesty International's report, Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians; (7) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss the provision of affordable and accessible treatment for women suffering with hyperemesis; (8) Deputy David Cullinane - to discuss capacity constraints in University Hospital Waterford and funding to maintain services; (9) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss day care facilities in Dunmanway and Clonakilty; (10) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the eligibility of residential properties under the warmer homes scheme; (11) Deputy Kathleen Funchion - to discuss the status of Scoil Mhuire Lourdes girls school in Tullow, County Carlow, in regard to DEIS status; (12) Deputy Charles Flanagan - to discuss an enhanced Diaspora programme to allow Irish Americans to retire to and reside in Ireland; (13) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the need to support workers in the face of cost of living increases; (14) Deputy Réada Cronin - to discuss the delay in finishing childcare facilities in north Kildare developments; (15) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss supports offered to the victims and survivors of domestic violence; (16) Deputy Martin Kenny - to discuss difficulties accessing pain management consultants and gynaecological care in the west; (17) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss plans to review the current housing assistance payment, HAP, letting system; (18) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss an update on delivery of the Educate Together secondary school building in Castletroy, Limerick; (19) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the need to have Carrigtwohill and Midleton, County Cork, recognised as one education centre for the purposes of second level school transport; (20) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss an independent investigation or review of University Hospital Limerick overcrowding; (21) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss services available for children with the eating disorder avoidant restrictive food intake disorder, ARFID; (22) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the delay in releasing the eligibility criteria for allocation of the local authority-led affordable housing scheme; (23) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for a disability officer in Cork City Council; (24) Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - to discuss An Bord Pleanála's decision to approve plans to build a wind farm beside the Cork beauty spot, Gougane Barra; and (25) Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - to discuss Irish Water taking over group water schemes in Mayo.

The matters raised by Deputies Aindrias Moynihan; Charles Flanagan; Eoin Ó Broin, Mark Ward, Emer Higgins and Gino Kenny; and Holly Cairns have been selected for discussion.

### **Dignity and Equality Issues in the Defence Forces: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Sorca Clarke on Tuesday, 8 February 2022:

That Dáil Éireann:

commends the Women of Honour, a group of former Defence Forces members, for their

bravery, courage and commitment in telling their experiences in the public arena to bring about change;

notes:

— that violence, abuse, coercion and harassment of women and girls is systemic in society and is worse again in environments heavily reliant on power structures;

— the experiences of the Women of Honour group in relation to physical abuse, harassment, coercion, sexual assault and assault as highlighted are most serious; and

— that we have both a legal obligation and a moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State and offer protection to others at home and preserve peace abroad are themselves protected;

further notes that:

— the current internal system for dealing with complaints is not fit-for-purpose and fails to protect those who lodge complaints or those tasked with carrying out investigations;

— the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces is not an effective mechanism for dealing with complaints of the nature raised; and

— the Independent Review proposed by the Minister for Defence and its associated terms of reference fail to recognise the seriousness of this issue and do not offer sufficient scope to determine the scale and depth of the problems across the Defence Forces; and

calls on the Government to:

— establish a full statutory inquiry into allegations of abuse, harassment, sexual harassment, sexual abuse and repercussions following engagement with the internal system of righting a wrong;

— re-engage with all key stakeholders, including representatives of the Women of Honour group, to create fit-for-purpose terms of reference which provide for adequate scope to deal with these issues; and

— commit to zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault, sexual harassment and sexual assault, and all forms of gender-based violence.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

“commends the Women of Honour, a group of former Defence Forces members, for their bravery, courage and commitment in telling their experiences in the public arena to bring about change;

notes:

— that, as part of the Government plan to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms, the Department of Justice is leading on the development of the third national strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence;

8 February 2022

— the experiences shared by the Women of Honour group in relation to physical abuse, harassment, coercion, sexual assault and assault as highlighted are shocking, very serious and utterly unacceptable;

— that unfortunately the systems, policies and workplace culture in the Defence Forces have not, and are not, serving all personnel well; and

— that the Government has both a legal and moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State and offer protection to others at home and abroad are themselves protected; and

further notes that:

— following a Government decision, the Minister for Defence has established a judge-led Independent Review:

— to advise the Minister for Defence on whether the current legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and practices for addressing incidents of unacceptable behaviour in the workplace are effective;

— to independently assess whether the pervading culture in the workplace is fully aligned with the principles of dignity, equality, mutual respect and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces; and

— to provide recommendations and guidance to the Minister for Defence on measures and strategies required to underpin a workplace based on dignity, equality, mutual respect, and duty of care for every member of the Defence Forces;

— on receipt of the final report from the Independent Review, the Government will consider the requirement for further work, and in particular, if further work is required to examine issues of an historical nature;

— the Minister for Defence encourages all stakeholders, including the Women of Honour group, the men and women of honour group, serving personnel and the representative associations to engage with the Independent Review; and

— the Minister for Defence is committed to zero tolerance of workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault, sexual harassment and sexual assault, and all forms of gender-based violence.”

- (Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Deputy Jack Chambers)

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** In September, the Women of Honour bravely came forward to tell their experiences of bullying, harassment, discrimination, misogyny, sexual assault and rape. They were forced to go public with their very difficult and distressing stories because they had been so badly let down by the State and the Defence Forces in getting accountability for what they had experienced and because they were determined to get to the truth.

In that week, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, in this Chamber gave assurances that he would treat this issue as a priority. He gave assurances that the women impacted would have an input into the terms of the review. He said he would bring about real change. This never happened. Instead, the Minister, backed up by the Taoiseach, decided, with no input from the Women of



Honour, that this would be an internal review only and not a statutory inquiry, for which the women affected had asked. Bheartaigh sé nach mbeadh gá le gach duine dul isteach ann agus páirt a ghlacadh, iad siúd a bhí ag argóint i gcoinne na líomhaintí san áireamh. Tá na mná tar éis a cheistiú conas gurb é seo an fíorathrú a mhol an tAire ceithre mhí ó shin, agus tá an ceart acu. An internal review will not establish the extent of abuse by perpetrators. It will not get to the heart of the coercive influence and other negative career impacts that followed from what was a wholly inadequate complaints process.

Tá na moltaí seo ag ligean mná síos. Tá sé sin déanta níos measa de bharr cad atá ráite ag an Taoiseach nuair a dúirt sé go bhféadfaí iniúchadh breise a bheith ann ag uair éigin sa toadhchá, cé nach raibh sé soiléir faoi cathain a bheidh an t-am sin ann. Níl sé ródhéanach don Aire ná don Taoiseach an rud ceart a dhéanamh.

The Minister can and must establish a full commission of investigation. The Women of Honour have shown great bravery, determination and resilience in their pursuit of truth and justice. I believe “Women of Honour” is a good title for them. They have shown courage and they have a great deal of pride in their own service and their roles in the Defence Forces. They feel very badly let down. They still feel an obligation to their colleagues in the Defence Forces to make things better and to change things. It is now the Minister’s turn to take a stand against abuse and harassment, stand up for that honour and protect all current and future members of the Defence Forces and Naval Service. It is not too late for him to do the right thing.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** In December, following the airing of the RTÉ documentary “Women of Honour”, the Minister for Defence told the House that in light of the dreadful revelations that emerged he was going to put in place a process that would deliver real change. Unfortunately, what has come from his Department has fallen far short of this commitment or the great lengths to which the women concerned went in their pursuit of truth and justice.

When survivors of abuse, in whatever form or circumstances, go to great lengths and at great personal cost to tell their stories and to seek justice, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure every mechanism of the State is made available to address these issues and to ensure they do not happen again. Just as we have seen with the survivors of the mother and baby homes, the Government seems to listen to anybody else apart from those immediately affected. Just like those survivors, the women of honour and others who have had similar experiences continue to live with the consequences of the injustices imposed on them.

What we have learned through these revelations is deeply disturbing as it concerns some of the gravest allegations that can be made. An internal review will not deliver real change because we need to know the extent to which these problems prevail within the Defence Forces. There is a legal and moral obligation to ensure those who serve the State, offer protection to others at home and preserve peace abroad are themselves protected.

The Offices of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces is not an effective mechanism for dealing with complaints of the nature raised, given the seriousness of the allegations concerned, even if it accepts there are shortcomings in the ability of the office to deal with the issues arising from the Defence Forces. One of the most serious of these is the fact that section 4 of the 2004 Act does not adequately provide for certain categories of interpersonal complaints, including inappropriate behaviour, sexual abuse and sexual harassment, among others. This particular shortcoming means we do not have accurate data on allegations of this nature, nor does the ombudsman have the ability to conduct its own initial inquiries. We have left it up to the internal

investigation systems for too long.

The women of honour need a statutory inquiry that has the power and scope to determine the scale and depth of the problems across the Defence Forces. We have to examine the culture within the Defence Forces, not ignore it in favour of something lighter which will leave the women of honour feeling more abandoned than they already do. That is how they have told us they feel.

The Defence Forces is a workplace and, as such, the Minister has to commit to a zero-tolerance approach towards bullying, harassment, discrimination, assault and all forms of gender-based violence in the workplace by establishing a full statutory inquiry into the allegations and their repercussions. The women of honour most recently walked out of a meeting with the Minister because he would not address their concerns. If he continues to ignore their demands, what he effectively will be doing is ignoring every other victim or potential victim.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I would like to thank my colleague, Deputy Clarke, for bringing forward this motion in support of the women of honour. We fully support their call for a full statutory inquiry. We commend their courage and bravery. We believe them and we will continue to stand with them.

I have no doubt of the massive toll this has taken on them. Like many whistleblowers, they went through an incredibly difficult process to bring this to light and, like many whistleblowers, they were driven by what is right. These women have helped to blow the whistle on extremely serious allegations of abuse, sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination. The fact that an organisation set up to protect could enact this kind of treatment on those within its own ranks is dumbfounding. Like so many whistleblowers before them, the official channels failed them.

The measures proposed by the Minister to investigate these allegations are so inadequate as to be almost offensive. They are, in the words of these women, ineffective and powerless to get to the real heart of the issue. These women deserve a hell of a lot better than this. These issues are long-standing; we all know this. Dr. Tom Clonan's research into this kind of abuse laid it out in painstaking detail. As part of his research, 60 female soldiers, sailors and air crew were surveyed. Of these, 59 reported they had suffered abuse or discrimination and 12 said they had been sexually assaulted or raped. At first, there were attempts to discredit this research before eventually the findings were accepted and we were told it would never happen again. Yet, as Dr. Clonan said, the culture continues.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that members of the Government said in this House that we had to change how women are treated in this State. It is now within the power of the Minister to change how all women are treated. It is within his power to change how women in our military are treated. These women should be given the statutory inquiry for which they are calling.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** We are finally, as a whole of society, shining a light into the very structure of our society and, in particular, on the role of women and how women are treated here. Decades of campaigning for equality, during which incremental hard-won steps were made on that journey, still leave us a long way to travel.

This House reflected the shared outrage of the Irish people at the brutal murder of Ashling Murphy recently. Many more incidents of assault and harassment have come into the public domain since those statements were made here. That day, we committed to the people of Ireland

that the issue of violence, abuse, domestic or otherwise, and sexual assault would be rooted out of all areas of Irish life. All of us, across all of these benches, committed to keeping a firm and constant focus on these matters. I believe this motion falls squarely into this commitment, and I commend those who have moved it.

Military structures have been, for generations, overwhelmingly male and hierarchical. That is true worldwide. The opening of the Irish military to women, when 38 women became the first female recruits into our Defence Forces in October 1981, marked a sea change. All institutions reflect the societies they exist in, good and bad. If bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct and discrimination are issues for our society as a whole, they are likely to be issues for institutions in that society, such as the military. In fact, they are likely to be amplified by an institution that is structured on a hierarchy with a strong code of internal discipline and loyalty.

In that context, we, the public and their representatives depend on brave individuals to call out wrongdoing and stand up and demand proper, impartial and thorough investigations, the only function of which is to determine the truth, wherever it may lie and wherever the chips may fall. The women of honour are those brave women. They are willing to stand up and demand that their voices and those of others be heard and fully acted upon.

I was privileged to draft and guide through these Houses the protected disclosures legislation, the so-called whistleblowers Act. During that process, I listened to many cases of suppressed truth. I examined many legal models to try to provide the best possible assistance to any person in a workplace, be it private or public, who witnesses or experiences wrongdoing and wants to call that out. It is clear to me, after all of our debates and determination to build the best legal protection, that actually taking the step of calling out wrongdoing is very hard. It is always infinitely easier to stay silent, to not draw attention to oneself and to endure, rather than to step out from the crowd and say that something needs to be addressed.

*5 o'clock*

Too often - we have seen examples - the price paid by the whistleblower is a very high price indeed. Therefore, in justice and in fairness what should our response be to the matters before us now - the brave and shocking testimony of women who shared their experiences of physical abuse, harassment, coercion and sexual assault? There are others. Men have also experienced abuse within our Defence Forces.

I know the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to be a decent and fair-minded man. He has proposed an independent judge-led review. The day that he announced the review he stated, "We need to establish this critical Independent Review to ensure that the Defence Forces is a safe workplace for all current serving members while also reviewing historical allegations". The Minister of State has outlined this review to the House. He set out its membership and said that an interim report is to be provided within six months and a final report within 12 months. However, the stated intention of the review as set out by the Minister is in fact two separate and distinct aims: first, to ensure that the Defence Forces is a safe workplace, which must be a priority; and second, to review so-called historical allegations.

Many of us have long experience in this House. Most of us know that without all the powers of compellability, taking sworn evidence in public and so on available to a statutory inquiry, an adequate investigation of the serious cases of abuse and misconduct that have been set out by the Women of Honour is highly unlikely to be fully ventilated. That is our shared experience. If

we want to know the full facts, and find how these things happened and what the consequences are, we need a statutory inquiry to look into these matters.

Separately, there is an urgent requirement to achieve the Minister's first stated objective. He is an employer. He is obliged morally and legally to provide a safe workplace for the members of the Defence Forces who turn up every day to do the unique work they undertake. I firmly believe that the Minister needs to think again. He is a decent man, as I have said and he is well intentioned. I believe he has listened carefully to the voices of those who have suffered, but it is clear that each of his aims cannot be achieved by the mechanism he is now proposing.

Having regard to the Women of Honour and their experience and having regard to the thousands of women and men currently serving, a different model is required. Perhaps a twin model is required, one to examine the cases of abuse and a second to swiftly put in place robust and acceptable mechanisms for addressing complaints which replaces the current practices and mechanisms which clearly are not fit for purpose.

The fact that in recent days we have heard further allegations of sexual assault, which nobody can categorise as historical, requires us to take action and requires the Minister to take action. It cannot be delayed. The overwhelming majority of our defence personnel need to be assured that they have a safe working environment and that whatever culture existed in the past which undermined that safe working environment must be eliminated. We need robust mechanisms to deal with them. Therefore, the Government needs to put in place a safe working environment. That can be done swiftly. Separately, it needs to establish a statutory inquiry to provide the full unvarnished truth to those honourable women who have set out their experiences for all of us to see.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank Sinn Féin and in particular Deputy Clarke for tabling this motion today. It is certainly a timely debate that needs to be had. The very antithesis of restorative justice is to retraumatise the victims. That is not the first time I have used those words in this Chamber related to a group of people, in particular women, who have been wronged in a most gruesome fashion. I have said that the interaction they have had with the State has compounded their suffering as they have sought justice for the wrongs inflicted on them.

I thought about that statement again last week when, at the invitation of Deputy Tóibín, I along with Opposition Deputies sat in the audiovisual room of Leinster House and listened to the testimony of three incredible people who are part of a collective of survivors of abuse in our Defence Forces who came to be known as the Women of Honour. Honourable those women certainly are. Having first become aware of their experiences through the RTÉ programme of the same title presented by Katie Hannon and then through an exchange of emails with the group and through the extensive media coverage since, I thought I was familiar with the harrowing truths they were once again sharing with a room of strangers in search of justice and necessary reform of our Defence Forces. However, there is something altogether different about sitting in a room with women outlining their experiences of harassment, bullying, sexual assault and rape which shakes the body to its very core while staring into the whites of their eyes as they outlined their case.

Adding to the sense of anger in the room was the fact that the women in front of us had just returned from another unsatisfactory meeting with the Taoiseach that very same day. In previous days they had taken a decision to walk out in frustration from a meeting with the Minister for Defence, having felt that the promises made to them previously as to their involvement in

the drafting of the terms of reference or the form of the inquiry into the abuse which they suffered would take had been reneged upon.

Sitting in that room last Monday, I and other Deputies present could not help but wonder why the architecture of our Republic always makes it so bloody difficult for those wronged while in the care or employ of the State to make right the wrongs which they have experienced once they have been brought to light.

The motion calls for the establishment of a commission of investigation into abuse, assault and rape experienced by the Women of Honour and other men and women in our Defence Forces. It is a motion supported by the very people who experienced those horrors while in the service of the State. I see no reason to debate any further avenues, which survivors have already expressed no confidence in. That we are even here today debating the reasons an internal review into abuse, sexual assault and rape is not a satisfactory avenue for justice for the people who have experienced that very same abuse raises fundamental questions for me about in whose interest we seek to govern here and what exactly it means to be a custodian of a Department in our Republic.

The women of honour we speak of today and other men and women wronged while in the Defence Forces at every level have called for a commission of investigation with statutory powers. Neither the State nor any of us in this Chamber has any legitimacy in denying them that right and insisting upon a style of inquiry in which those who seek truths have no confidence.

I am very conscious that as we speak here today there is an ongoing debate on the role, purpose and capacity of our Defence Forces. As I sat before the Women of Honour last week, I wondered why anybody would choose a life in our armed services at this moment. Women and men subsequently came to me and outlined the corrosive culture where bullying exists and where internal reviews are not done in a satisfactory way.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I find it almost insulting that I had to leave one committee meeting on foreign affairs to come to another really important Dáil debate on an issue of incredible importance. I cannot be at both. If I, simply as a spokesperson for my party on these issues, cannot be in two places in once, how can a Minister think they can control both of those Departments when so many ongoing issues of importance are happening?

In a Republic, I fundamentally believe that institutions decay in the absence of ministerial control. Today's newspapers carry another report of a lockdown party outside McKee Barracks where a female soldier was assaulted by a military officer. We see the commission into the future of our Defence Forces finding that our Defence Forces are in disarray be that air, sea or land. They have absolutely no capacity. Retention levels among their personnel are at an all-time low, and we must wonder why that is. I would surmise that some of the experiences we are hearing about have led to that. If nobody is in control, accountability does not exist. From the very office of the Minister right down to the rank and file, there seems to be an absence of leadership and of investment not only in the capacity of our Defence Forces but also in the morale of those we ask to stand forward and serve. All these conversations about how we defend ourselves have to start with how we look after, manage and respect the very personnel we expect to put themselves in harm's way.

I know very well, coming as I do from an inner-city environment, where many people,



young fellas in particular but young girls too, aspire to be in the Defence Forces, that there is a great pride in going into our Defence Forces. People to this day are proud of that. We had a trip to Haulbowline several months ago and I went down to a naval base that is almost dystopian in the sense that it has ships that cannot go out to sea because we do not have the personnel to manage them. The members of the Navy sitting there wanting to go to sea are really proud to be in that environment and to represent and to serve our country. We talk about the overseas missions in which they have been involved, in particular in taking people from the waters. However, they also talk about the fact that they cannot provide for their families and find it difficult to pay their rent. Some of them are putting off having families because they cannot afford to do so. They talk about the conditions. I remember that a couple of years ago, when the Pope visited, armed personnel were asked to sleep on the ground. Then we go further into this and find that not only do the conditions they speak of exist but the conditions of bullying, harassment, assault in some cases and a horrific misogynistic culture still exists in the Defence Forces and nobody seems to have their foot on the brake. What I witnessed last week, staring into the eyes of the Women of Honour, was an endemic culture in our Defence Forces that is simply toxic. There are so many proud people in the Defence Forces, but the infrastructure of the State does not seem willing to support them.

Sinn Féin has tabled a motion seeking a statutory commission of investigation. We cannot deny that. It echoes the sentiments that have been expressed by people who have suffered abuse of the most horrific form in the Defence Forces. It is incumbent on us to go back to the drawing board. If people who have experienced this abuse are telling us they have no trust or confidence in the manner in which that will be reviewed, there is absolutely no legitimacy in denying them that - none.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I am sure the Minister will agree that many of the allegations of the Women of Honour relate to incidents that are heinous in nature. Women have been subjected to gross violations. A culture of sexism is absolutely unacceptable in any workplace. This cannot be seen in isolation; it must be seen as society-wide and in the context of how sexism and misogyny circulate in society. When women come forward, they do so to challenge terrible historical and present abuses. We have seen that through the #MeToo movement, whereby women across the world challenge terrible sexism and violations committed against them.

There is an obligation on the State to investigate the allegations of the Women of Honour. That is most important. There needs to be rigorous scrutiny in that regard. That can be done only through a public inquiry. That is what the women want. They are the most important voice in this debate. The independent review, as far as I understand, cannot compel witnesses to testify - the Minister might correct me if I am wrong on that - which means that it brings on a different definition. There was no consultation with the Women of Honour on the terms of reference of the review. They were largely ignored, which is very unfortunate. The women at the heart of this discussion were not consulted on those terms of reference. The women said this review or a public inquiry does not have to take years but must have teeth and must compel people to come along to testify on the reasons they engaged in this behaviour.

When the report is finalised - I think a period of six to nine months was referred to - it will not detail any specific incidence that happened, which is again very unfortunate. It is disappointing, to say the least, that the review will not make any recommendations on the assessments to which these women were subjected. Overall, and as we have said in the past few minutes, we need a public inquiry because that will ensure robust scrutiny of what has gone on and is probably still going on in the workplaces of the armed forces. A review is just not good

enough at this stage.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** “Allegations such as those revealed at McKee Barracks should not remain within the military system to investigate ... A similar regime was operated within the [Catholic] Church in which canon law was applied in horrific cases of sex abuse. It was not tolerated there, and it should not be tolerated in the Defence Forces.” Those are strong words today from Women of Honour group. As for the comparison with the Catholic Church, my understanding is that they are talking about an institution which is not covered by the civil law but has its own set of laws - Canon law for the church, military law for the Defence Forces. Those are strong words and I endorse them. I also note that we have today another case coming to light of a female apprentice in the Air Corps repeatedly being sent unsolicited lewd images from a colleague. These cases point to a rotten culture in the Defence Forces. Clearly, it is not a case of just one or two bad apples. A rigid, hierarchical command structure, low pay, poor conditions and the denial of trade union rights are a lethal combination, certainly for vulnerable women members of the forces.

An ICTU survey in 2019 found that four fifths of workers experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace do not report the incident to their employers. If that is the case in unionised workplaces, what is the position in workplaces where trade union organisation is banned and the workplace is run by command? The case of the Women of Honour needs to be treated more seriously by this Government. There must be no cover-ups. There should be a statutory inquiry with the ability to compel witnesses to attend and to give evidence and the ability to access in full all relevant documents and material.

This year, International Women’s Day, 8 March, must be a day of protest and of action on the streets of Ireland to demand real action on the issue of gender violence. I hope that workplaces will walk out to show support, I hope that college students will walk out to show support and I hope that more than one or two members of the Defence Forces will join those protests on the day.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate. I thank Deputy Clarke and her party for bringing it forward. It is very important matter to be discussing here this evening. I thank the Women of Honour group and the other groups that came forward to tell their harrowing stories over recent weeks and months. I have three points to make in the time allowed to me. The first is that we have to accept that we once again have a problem with sexual harassment and sexual assault in the Defence Forces. It had reduced radically in the noughties but, unfortunately, it is back. The main reason it is back is because it is now a problem across society. If it is in society, it is in the Defence Forces because the Defence Forces are a microcosm of that society. It is in most workplaces in the country. We even had our own difficulties here in the parliamentary community last year.

I will identify a couple of risk factors. Obviously, there is no excuse whatsoever for sexual harassment or sexual assault but, if we are to look at improving and targeting particular areas to stamp it out once again, we should consider this list of risk factors. The first is accommodation. It is very unusual in an Irish workplace to have accommodation, beds and ablutions on site. It is an area we have to focus on in order to stamp this out. The second relates to alcohol. It is very unusual to have alcohol in a workplace. I have been on a number of overseas tours of duty myself and, when there is alcohol, there is trouble. The best trips are those without it. I commend the recent decision to make the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, trip alcohol-free for Irish troops. That is a very good and positive step. It is something that

should be considered for all overseas trips at this stage. Another risk factor is that women are very much in the minority. Only 6% of members of the Defence Forces are female. That needs to improve. A critical mass is needed so that they have supports available and are not seen as a minority group. The extended periods of time spent away from home are also a risk factor.

The most important and biggest risk factor I have identified over the last ten years is the major upheaval the Defence Forces have been through in that time. It is not an excuse in any shape or form but it is a contributing factor. Many seasoned commanders and many seasoned, experienced and highly qualified enlisted leaders who would have properly supervised their troops and pointed out where they were going wrong and any inappropriate behaviours and attitudes have left. That critical piece is missing. The turnover rate in the Defence Forces is approximately 10%, a rate that shows dysfunction. Statistically, almost the entire population of the Defence Forces is renewed every ten years. There are people in the organisation who are strangers because they have just come in and there is very little mentoring or supervision.

How do we address this? I am in favour of the four Ps - perhaps Deputy Clarke has heard of them - of prevention, protection, prosecution and policy intervention. The prevention piece is very important. I presume and hope there is to be an awareness campaign within the Defence Forces as soon as possible to change the attitudes and behaviours of a minority, which need to be addressed. From a protection point of view, there needs to be safe areas in military installations. From a prosecution point of view, we need a dedicated subunit within the Military Police Corps to investigate specific sexual harassment and sexual assault cases. On the policy intervention piece, we need to review our policies to make sure they are in accordance with the best international standards and are effective on the ground.

The Commission on the Defence Forces is reporting tomorrow. That document needs to be implemented as soon as possible. From what I have heard and what I have read in publicly available reports, I understand that it calls for a significant increase in the number of women in the Defence Forces from the current 6% to something like 25%, 30% or whatever it says. That is the kind of intervention that is required to make sure that women are not a minority in their own organisation and to make sure they know they belong.

I am conscious of the clock. To repeat myself, we all need to fully accept that there is an issue in the Defence Forces in respect of sexual harassment and sexual assault. There is hope because the Defence Forces have improved in the past. The issue was almost entirely eradicated in the late noughties but, unfortunately, it is back. We have to do everything in our power to ensure that our armed forces display the standards, ethics and morals we expect of the armed forces of this type of country.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I am disappointed that the Minister for Defence is not here. Perhaps there is a reasonable excuse for that. Maybe he has an important job to do. However, this is a very important debate and one of enormous gravity. It is a debate on a matter the Minister is directly responsible for so it is disappointing that he is not here.

The Women of Honour are simply women who wanted to work in the service of the State. These women put their lives on the line and at risk for the rest of the citizens of this country. Shockingly, their service was met with assault, rape, abuse, bullying and discrimination in a State service. Given that their employer was the Government itself, it is incredible that this was allowed to happen. When they sought justice within their employment location, justice was blocked and prevented. On many occasions, instead of the perpetrators of the abuse being

punished, the women themselves were punished while seeking justice. It appears that there was a culture within the Defence Forces which sought to protect the organisation against attack. Where have we seen that before? Unfortunately, practically every organisation instinctively feels the need to protect itself from those who are seeking justice or reform of the organisation.

These women were forced to break their anonymity and to tell their absolutely harrowing stories. It is extremely hard for anyone to open up publicly about the shocking wrongs done to them. I give full credit to these women for the work they have done. This country owes a serious debt of gratitude to those women for what they are seeking to do and the manner in which they have sought to do it. Some of these women have taken on the equivalent of an unpaid full-time job to achieve reform in the Defence Forces. In case the Government has not noticed, that is its job, for which its members are very well paid. I also give credit to Katie Hannon for her documentary, which first gave voice to these women on the national airwaves.

The Women of Honour group met with the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, a number of months ago and he promised to finally listen to them. He also committed to giving them a role in the path to justice. He stated that he would facilitate their shaping of the terms of reference of any investigation that happened. I have worked closely with the Women of Honour over recent months and I was quite shocked that this was the Minister's response. I was pleasantly surprised that the Government was doing this because, in my experience, governments do not do that. Governments normally protect the organisation that is under strain. For decades, governments have protected organisation after organisation against those who have sought to reform them. However, my cynical distrust of the Government has proven correct.

In practically a mirror image of what is happening to the women involved in the Cervical-Check scandal, Ministers have spoken in the media and in this Dáil in measured tones about their shock at what is happening to people in this country. They have said that they will root out the causes of the difficulties and make sure they never happen again. However, similarly to the 300 women affected by the CervicalCheck scandal who find themselves having to go before the High Court to seek justice, the Women of Honour have been let down with regard to the promises given to them by this Government. The Government's words in respect of the Women of Honour have proven meaningless.

The Minister's credibility stands in stark contrast with the actions of the Women of Honour. His credibility has been hammered. He has reneged on the promise of a fully independent and external commission of investigation into bullying, discrimination and sexual violence in the Defence Forces. He has also reneged on his promise to tackle the systemic resistance within the Defence Forces which prevents victims and survivors from achieving justice. I ask the Minister of State to make sure we draw a line and to ensure that Ministers' actions match their words and that the Government provides justice for what probably would be the first time in the history of our governments. I ask that the Minister of State go back to the well, speak to these women again, allow them to have influence over the terms of reference and ensure they are provided with what they deserve, namely, a full commission of investigation into what is happening.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I call Deputy Berry.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I have already spoken.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** Okay. I call Deputy Michael Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I sincerely thank Deputy Clarke and Sinn Féin for bringing

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this important motion before the House. The Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, has established the judge-led independent review, but this is not good enough because it is not what the Women of Honour group wants. The group has criticised this approach and said that such investigations into alleged sexual assaults “still remain to be dealt with within the military system”. It has further said:

It is time for an independent public statutory inquiry and for the civil and criminal laws of the State to be applied to the Defence Forces .... The national laws which apply to the rest of the citizens of our State should apply to the men and women of our Defence Forces.

The Women of Honour group, which comprises women whose careers in the Defence Forces have been blighted by abuse, has stated that the recent case at McKee Barracks, and other cases like it, are simply unacceptable. The group has repeated its rejection of the Minister’s proposal to establish a judge-led independent review to look at issues related to sexual misconduct, bullying, harassment and discrimination in the Defence Forces. It has further stated:

Military police, in reality, are subject to the chain of command and act on behalf of the Defence Forces, investigate internal matters and then send a file to the Director of Military Prosecutions. It remains the case that the military legal system applies military law to address matters - of the military, by the military and for the military.

The group has also said that as well it being time for an independent public statutory inquiry, it is time for civil and criminal laws to be applied to the Defence Forces. It believes that “the frequency of [these] dreadful allegations” has resulted in “a toxic culture of [the] acceptance of cover-ups and victim blaming”, which should of course not be tolerated. The group has further stated that the situation “merits nothing less than a public statutory investigative process as the first step towards the radical change needed”.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The members of the Women of Honour group must be respected after years of abuse in the Defence Forces and a full commission of investigation must be set up. These women were treated shockingly. A proper investigation is required. It should be one where no areas are hidden. A situation where people cannot get the truth out should not be allowed. To be quite honest, this matter sounds as bad as it gets. We are talking about people who work hard in their jobs and then to think that this type of abuse is going on. While this case is slightly different, it is unfortunate that it is not the first time that treatment of the Defence Forces has reached rock bottom. In July 2019, the Minister of State was recorded as saying that “morale [was] at an all-time low” under the then Minister of State with responsibility for defence, Deputy Paul Kehoe. I refer to it being suggested that issues concerning pay, recruitment and retention were being shockingly handled by the then Minister of State.

That was scandalous, but these current public allegations must be dealt with immediately. I call on the Minister of State to do everything in his power to ensure that a full commission of investigation is set up. There should be no kicking of the can down the road as before in respect of this and other issues in the Defence Forces. This issue must be dealt with and dealt with quickly out of respect for the Women of Honour and the way they were treated. These are women who, like everybody else, go to work in the morning and expect some little bit of respect. Unfortunately, that was not afforded to them. They are now having to fight again, this time against the Government, which, in their view, is trying to set up something which is not going to bring about a full and clear investigation. I fully support the Women of Honour group, as does the Rural Independent Group. I ask the Minister of State to step back from the direc-



tion he is going and to perhaps sit down with the members of the Women of Honour group and come to a full agreement.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I also thank Deputy Clarke and Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. For far too long, the members of the Defence Forces have not received recognition for the work they do. We have only to look back on all the men and women from our Army who went to undertake peacekeeping duties in Lebanon and other places and where they put their lives in danger. For far too long, we heard that they were not being paid properly, had to sleep in cars and were getting income supplement payments. That kind of a situation which saw people working on behalf of the State not being paid properly and having to get an income supplement was disgraceful.

In this case, the Women of Honour group issued a statement on Sunday, 6 February in which they said that the current review proposed by the Minister, Deputy Coveney “will be ineffective and powerless to get to the real heart of the issues”. The group was commenting following reports of military police investigating an army officer. That is like putting the fox in charge of the chickens. I ask the Minister of State to have an independent public statutory inquiry and for the civil and criminal laws of the State to be applied to the Defence Forces, and especially in the cases of these women.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** In November last year, I sought assurances directly from the Taoiseach in this Chamber to ensure there would be an independent statutory inquiry into the allegations raised by the Women of Honour group. The serious nature of these allegations deserves nothing less than such a statutory independent inquiry. That is why I feel it is of paramount importance that that is done and that we get to the bottom of these serious allegations.

This is an issue that I have pursued and I submitted parliamentary questions on it. I was informed that efforts to establish an independent review were at an “advanced stage” and that the issues would be examined as part of the report of the Commission on Defence Forces. It was only subsequent to that reply, however, that the Women of Honour campaign made clear to me that the independent review was proceeding without anyone having consulted and, indeed, without the victims, serving and retired, having been consulted. That makes no sense. We must ensure we have the voices of those women at the centre of this independent statutory inquiry.

That is what needs to happen. It makes no sense to move ahead with any sort of inquiry without consulting the parties concerned. The decision to do so was deeply regrettable, even if further meetings have taken place since then. We already have reports from the independent monitoring group, IMG, and from the external advisory committee on the Defence Forces. The women affected now need decisive action, firm Government commitments and, more importantly, accountability. I have submitted more parliamentary questions on this issue to the Taoiseach and to the Minister for Defence. Unfortunately, the responses will not be processed until this evening. I assure the Women of Honour group, however, that it has my full support for its campaign.

**Deputy Richard O’Donoghue:** The members of the Women of Honour group say they are not resigned to there being a judge-led review into the allegations of sexual abuse and bullying in the Defence Forces. Our laws need to change to protect our people in the Defence Forces against inappropriate behaviour. This is surely every person’s right. Every member of the Defence Forces has the right to be treated with respect, equality and dignity and to carry out his or her duties in a safe workplace, which is underpinned by a culture of zero tolerance for any kind

of bullying, discrimination or harassment.

These women in the Women of Honour group are part of our front-line services. We talked about the front-line workers in the health services before, including our nurses and student nurses. Again, when it came to the student nurses, I regard it as discrimination that the Government did not pay them. We now have the members of the Women of Honour group, front-line service members in our Defence Forces, and the Government will not bring them in and ask them their side of the story to get the truth. The best way to get the truth is to ask the people themselves. These members of the Women of Honour are a part of our Defence Forces. They have grave concerns regarding irregularities. They need to be listened to in order to get the right sense of what happened and to bring to account the people who had anything to do with it. There cannot be anybody saved from these women's testimonies. Nobody can be saved. Everybody has to be held to account who had anything to do with this.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank Sinn Féin and, in particular, Deputy Clarke for tabling the motion, which I have no difficulty in supporting. It is disappointing that the Government has tabled an amendment. I thought sense would have prevailed and that we would make language mean something in that we heard what the Women of Honour whom I met last week told us. I thank Deputy Tóibín for organising that. We heard them, we believed them, and then we proceeded to ignore them. That is what we are doing here.

In the first instance I want to deal with something Deputy Berry said. He is still in the Chamber. He talked about the progress that was made in the 2000s. I have to take issue with him on that unless he can show me the evidence. I would like to know what analysis exists on the number of men and women who left the Defence Forces in that time due to sexual harassment, assault or a prevailing culture of fear of reprisals. It is a legitimate question to ask. What analysis has been done on the downgrading of accusations of serious sexual assault to minor breaches of discipline under a particular section of the Defence Acts? How many persons have had such minor charges laid against them after being accused of serious assault and have then been transferred or relocated? These are essential questions if we are to take at face value what the Deputy said.

I am not personalising this in respect of the Deputy. It is just that he highlighted this. When he said, and he is correct, that there has been a decline, what he is saying really if he looks at the facts is that there has been a decline in the number of investigations. In the 1980s, there were 54; in the 1990s, 35; in the 2000s, 20; and in the 2010s, 17. The number of investigations has reduced but we have to ask why. Were the women or, indeed, men afraid of reprisals? What are the reasons? What analysis has been done? It is a dangerous conclusion to come to in light of the ongoing reports of further allegations against women. I take issue with that completely. I would also like the Minister of State for clarification. I think some of those figures came from an article in the *Sunday Independent* or *Irish Independent* towards the end of last year, based on a report that was given to the Minister. Are any of the Ministers of State present aware of that? Have they the report to hand? Could they enlighten me? Is that where all of these figures have been set out? What conclusions were drawn from them? Were they the conclusions Deputy Berry is entitled to draw or are there other conclusions that should be drawn from them if we are going to learn?

I have the greatest of respect for the judge. She is an independent, female judge with lots of experience and she has shown her mettle. If she can rise above the pathetic terms of reference, fair play to her. Fair play to her if she can produce a report within the time allowed, which

seems to change depending on which Minister is talking - a draft one at six months, something else at nine months, something else at 12 months. If that can be done within the terms of reference I will take my hat off and I will be the first to apologise here. We have the three overall aims of the independent review, which I have quoted before and will not quote again. Then we have 13 terms of reference and no powers whatsoever to compel anyone or seek any documentation. I will come back to the Women of Honour; should the men and women decide not to participate who should go forward, the others, if they decide not to, that is it. Goodbye. There is nothing that can be done about that. Term of reference No. 13, at the bottom, finally refers to historical matters, “to advise whether further work is required to examine the issues of an historical nature and to make any recommendations regarding how this might be pursued”. Of course, that is No. 13. Perhaps the Ministers of State will tell me the recommendations are not ranked but it is interesting that it is coming last. It is interesting that the time is a movable feast.

Most significant and beyond interesting is that the women who had the courage to come forward are not going to participate, which makes the whole inquiry very difficult. That might be an understatement. If they are not going to participate and they are responsible for highlighting all of this, it begs the question as to how it can work. The very terms of reference, if the Ministers of State look at them, state that they are going to examine the policies, practices and procedures on the ground to see if they align with dignity. We know well they do not align with dignity because we have had a whole series of allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault down to rape. Now we are going to look at the policies. We are not going to look at what the women and men have told us about what happened to them. We believe them. The three monkeys come to mind - hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil - but do the evil and have no accountability.

Forgive me for my cynicism. Before I speak, myself and my assistants in my office usually try to look, study and examine the necessary documentation. I have done that. When I look back to see if my cynicism and my questions are justified, going back to Tom Clonan in 2000, I see what happened to that man. His research was discredited. When he stuck to his guns and the discrediting programme did not work, a review was set up which I will come back to. Subsequently Tom Clonan, I understand, said he understood and believed that the changes had occurred, in good faith. Then I realise he had been duped. Maybe that is too strong a word. Maybe his belief that systems could change was not based on reality. My experience in a number of different roles is that institutions do not change. If institutions changed, we would not have needed Katie Hannon’s documentary on RTÉ or the women’s courage in coming forward. That is what has led to this. To add insult to that, we do not allow them to take part in the discussion on the terms of reference. The Minister of State spoke about having met them on a number of occasions, or the Taoiseach and the Minister, which was very nice. The important thing was to have them engage in the terms of reference, which did not happen.

Let us look back. We have Tom Clonan’s research. A number of his findings have been cited in respect of the situation at the time. “Women in combat: The status and roles assigned to female personnel.” This featured anonymised interviews with 60 female officers, 59 of whom suffered abuse or discrimination and 12 of whom said they had been sexually assaulted or raped. This also included bullying and sexual harassment including rape and so on. In 2019, Tom Clonan said that he believed the Defence Forces had taken it on board. That was done some time after 2000. Clearly they had not. Following his research in 2002, an independent review panel was set up. There was one external woman on it out of five people. It was set up to review existing policies and procedures. That was 20 years ago; we were reviewing existing

policies and procedures and now we are going to set up another independent review to review it.

Following on from that, we had a monitoring committee, which was excellent. The Minister for Defence seems to misunderstand what a monitoring committee does. It produced three reports. On the last occasion in 2014 it made three specific recommendations. No Minister here today has referred to that. The Minister used words to the effect that it did not do its job because the culture had not changed. The culture had not changed because the Ministers over the years had not done their job. Army management had not done its job. The only ones who had done their job were the members of the monitoring committee that highlighted what still needed to be done. What do we do? We abolished it and did not re-establish it, notwithstanding that Mark Mellett wrote to the Minister of State with responsibility for defence at the time, in January 2019, asking for it to be re-established. At that point they were investigating 15 cases of alleged misconduct by personnel in 2019.

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I am nearing the end of my time. I am speaking on the basis of having done research and thought about this subject and out of respect for the Women of Honour group, whose members have come forward in this public way to tell of the most horrific abuse. We get a review of policies and procedures to see if they align. I cannot imagine how more insulting it could get. At the very least, I would have expected a detailed speech on the actions to date following on from the various reports, why the independent monitoring committee was not renewed and why the recommendations were not acted on.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I thank my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, for presenting the Government's opening statement. Unfortunately, due to a change in times by the Business Committee, my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is unable to present the closing statement. He sends his apologies to the House.

On behalf of the Minister, I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this matter under Private Mem-

bers' business. This discussion is important and deals with serious issues that are a priority for the Minister for Defence. I assure the House that the Government is committed to providing a safe place of work for members of the Defence Forces, with a zero-tolerance approach to unacceptable behaviour, while also examining ways of addressing allegations of an historical nature.

I acknowledge the strong views of a number of colleagues in the House, including calls for a statutory inquiry. I echo the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers's comments that the Women of Honour have displayed tremendous courage in sharing their experiences and that the matters they have raised are serious. I also extend my appreciation to the members of the Men and Women of Honour group for coming forward to share their experiences with the Minister, departmental officials and, more recently, the Taoiseach.

I appreciate the references in the motion to the legal and moral obligations to all members of the Defence Forces. It is for this reason that the Minister is proceeding with this independent review. My colleague has an immediate duty of care to serving members of the Defence Forces to ensure that they can carry out their duties in a workplace that is safe and has a culture underpinned by dignity and equality. This is what the review group is currently examining and why the independent review is so important. Recent media coverage of an alleged incident last year has only reinforced the thinking on this.

In taking this first critical step, the Minister has the full support of serving personnel and other stakeholders, including the Men and Women of Honour group. It is what they need and expect him to deliver. Their views and the views of the representative associations have informed the terms of reference. In those terms, my colleague has specified that the Department of Defence will be included in the scope of the review group's work. This was a particular request of the Women of Honour group. I do not accept, therefore, that the terms of reference fail to recognise the seriousness of this issue. They offer sufficient scope to determine the scale and depth of the problems across the Defence Forces. The terms of reference are wide ranging and provide the review group with the scope to examine the end-to-end process for making a complaint of unacceptable behaviour and to assess whether there are barriers to serving personnel making complaints and fully and actively engaging in the process. The review group will also examine the extent to which reprisal, the fear of reprisal or the existence of a culture of silence or complicity may act as a barrier to reporting or investigating as well as any indication of inconsistencies or challenges in the application of policies.

In addition to incorporating a number of views from stakeholders, the independent review's terms of reference are based to a large extent on those developed by the departments of defence in Canada, the UK and the USA where similar serious workplace issues were identified to those encountered in the Irish Defence Forces. The Attorney General's office provided the Minister with advice on a range of matters, including the terms. My colleague was also advised on this approach by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. I am fully satisfied, therefore, that the terms are sufficiently broad to allow the independent review group members significant latitude to explore the areas that they need to explore and to make recommendations for future actions. I should add that the secretariat function will operate independently of the Department of Defence under the direction of the membership of the review group. The review group is led by the recently retired High Court judge, Ms Bronagh O'Hanlon, who will bring valuable independent, external and unbiased expertise to this body of work.

My colleague has set an ambitious timetable for the review group. He looks forward to receiving the interim report in six months. The Minister and the Taoiseach have confirmed with



the Women of Honour group that the Government is not ruling out an inquiry in future.

Former members of the Defence Forces have been incredibly courageous in coming forward to share their experiences. The allegations of an historical nature are not being ignored, but we have to take this first step. The independent review group has been specifically asked to consider if a further body of work will be required. If such a recommendation is made, the Government will consider it.

The interim supports that the Minister put in place last October, to which my colleague, the Minister of State, referred, are there for people who have been affected by these issues. The confidential contact person and the 24-7 Inspire counselling service are important support mechanisms and they are being utilised. In addition, the personnel support service, PSS, within the Defence Forces assists members and their immediate families through the provision of information and advice on areas, including stress management, counselling and referral options.

The serious issues raised by the Women of Honour and serving members will not be resolved overnight. It will take time, but we have made a start. While I understand that the Women of Honour are disappointed that a statutory inquiry is not being established at this time, I hope that they understand the need for this independent review as a first step in meeting our immediate obligations to serving members.

The terms of reference provide that submissions can be made to the review group and that former and serving members of the Defence Forces may engage with it and share their experiences. I hope that all stakeholders, including the Women of Honour group, will avail of this opportunity and engage with the process. Their contribution will be important in moving this forward.

I echo what my colleague, the Minister of State, said in his contribution. Those who may have suffered serious wrongs of a criminal nature, whether recent or historical, should report their concerns to An Garda Síochána, which has the lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate such matters. I strongly urge anyone who may have been subject to any such alleged abuse or harassment to seek professional help and guidance, which is available from State agencies such as the HSE or from registered charities that specialise in this area.

I reiterate in the strongest possible terms the Minister, Deputy Coveney's commitment, and that of the Government, to addressing these issues in the most comprehensive and efficient way possible. I assure colleagues that the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces will engage with the independent review group in respect of their respective roles and functions now that the review is under way. Therefore, I ask the House to allow the independent review group the time to undertake this important work and to support the Government's amendment.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I do not doubt that the Minister has determined to look into a system to deal with these complaints and the long-term issues that have been highlighted by the Women of Honour, but the fact remains that we in this State have a long history of failing those who have suffered abuse, of not learning from the past and of not putting in place systems that work.

The criterion that matters in this situation is the statement by Women of Honour that this approach will not cut the mustard. Like many others, I commend the Women of Honour on their bravery in highlighting these issues, which have lasted for many years and have not been addressed. Regardless of whether the Government or the Department had intentions of dealing

with this and putting in place a system that was fit for purpose, we have not gone far enough. This is like some of the conversations the Dáil has had in recent years about historical abuse by the State and how the State is still failing to do that piece of work whereby the people who have suffered such abuse are taken across the line to a system that is fit for purpose, works for them and can provide them with the answers they require.

*6 o'clock*

That they have not added their voices to that of those who may believe what has been offered can do the business it is meant to speak for itself. The Women of Honour are the people the Government needed to sign off on this, but they have not done so. That is where most of the Irish people will lie in regard to this issue.

We all accept the need for a proper system for complaints against those who have engaged in sexual harassment or abuse so people will face the repercussions necessary. We need to ensure in the longer term that this work is done; however, first and foremost, we are starting from a bad place in the sense that what has been proposed is not being accepted by Women of Honour.

We have all engaged in the wider conversation on violence, abuse and the issues with which women across society must deal. The problem was highlighted to us by the dreadful murder of Ashling Murphy. Reports on other alleged attacks of women have also entered the public domain. We are listening more keenly now. I have been always aware of the work done locally by the likes of Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Centre North East but I am more keenly aware of it now. I am aware of their underfunding and of services that are not fit to deal with the issues that arise. If we are truly serious about this entire matter and wish to deal with it, we will have to carry out a needs analysis, have the genuine conversations and ensure we provide resources.

Whether we are talking about the Defence Forces or wider society, we all accept that we have to do specific work that involves everyone questioning themselves regarding how they operate, what they call out and what they have failed to call out to date, thus creating a culture that does not allow for any gender-based violence, harassment or abuse, or any such behaviours that are utterly unacceptable to the vast majority. We just need to ensure we leave no space for these behaviours in society.

As regards the issue in question and Women of Honour, what the latter deserve and what they are getting are not the same. They have been failed by the State over and over. They are not happy with what is being put on offer at this point. Therefore, the Minister needs to re-engage and get their endorsement. That is an absolute requirement.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Will the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, confirm whether he is here as Minister of State at the Department of Defence?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Yes.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** When he referred in his opening statement to meetings he and his colleagues have had with stakeholders, was he doing so as Minister of State at the Department of Defence?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** Questions are not permitted.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The reason I ask is that in a reply to a parliamentary question by

my colleague Deputy Ó Snodaigh, Deputy Coveney, who is the Minister for Defence, stated, “No functions of the Minister for Defence have been delegated to the Minister of State and full responsibility for defence policies, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces remains with Minister Coveney who will continue to represent Defence at Cabinet.” That is further evidence of the lack of seriousness in the Government’s approach to this issue. That is deeply disappointing.

The Minister of State said in his opening statement that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has an immediate obligation to serving members to ensure the workplace is safe and that there is zero tolerance of unacceptable behaviour in the Defence Forces. If the Minister is so concerned with the speed of change regarding that duty of care, does he not see that the commencement of an effective and accountable statutory inquiry would lead to an immediate change of behaviour, meaning the culture of unaccountability effectively would be over? Does he not see that the resistance to the inquiry might embolden those who behave unacceptably, based on the perception that the Minister somehow has their back.

I take issue with the fact that the Government amendment states that “unfortunately the systems, policies and workplace culture in the Defence Forces have not, and are not, serving all personnel well”. It is not unfortunate that somebody may be raped, that somebody may be harassed and that there are women in the position of Ms Diane Byrne, who ended up taking the State to court over the way she was treated when she was pregnant as a serving member of the Defence Forces; it is an absolute disgrace. So, too, is what happened to Ms Yvonne O’Rourke, who had to take the State to the Workplace Relations Commission and who won in December 2020 after years of battling. At that point, Mr. Bonnländer, from the Workplace Relations Commission, stated, “It beggars belief that women should have been serving in the Irish Defence Forces for decades, without the Forces’ systems and instruction ever having been appropriately updated to ensure they reflect anti-discrimination law as it applies to pregnancy and maternity.” Where was the urgency there? I have asked the Minister. Distinct recommendations were made by the Workplace Relations Commission, one of which was to make a payment to Ms O’Rourke for the delay in the investigation and hearing. The Defence Forces did not withdraw their jurisdictional objections earlier than the closing arguments at the hearing. That is not unfortunate; that is an absolute disgrace.

The Workplace Relations Commission ordered the Defence Forces to carry out measures to combat pregnancy-related and other forms of discrimination, with all such work to be complete by December 2021. In March 2021, I asked the Minister about this. I was told it was currently being considered. In September 2021, I asked again and was told the directions were being implemented by the military authorities. Therefore, the arguments of concern and wanting to see systemic change immediately for serving members simply do not hold up to scrutiny. The Minister of State knows as well as we do on this side of the House that the only genuinely effective mechanism to bring about the systemic change needed is a statutory inquiry. Failing to deliver on that is failing to meet not only the needs of the Women of Honour but also the needs and expectations of those who serve today, be it in the Army, Naval Service or Air Corps. It will fail to serve them in the future. That is truly not what the Minister wants as a legacy. It is a disgrace.

Amendment put.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

## **Estimates for Public Services 2022: Messages from Select Committees**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** The Select Committee on Justice has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2022: Votes 20, 21, 22, 24, 41 and 44.

The Select Committee on Environment and Climate Action has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2021: Vote 29.

## **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

### **Third Level Education**

48. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps that are being taken to increase places at third level for in-demand courses to address skill shortages and take unnecessary pressure off the leaving certificate system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6457/22]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Government has decided to deny the students the choice when it comes to this year's leaving certificate. This is despite students having come through years of a severely disrupted leaving certificate cycle. I and Sinn Féin believe that that is wrong and they should have had a choice. Students deserve to be given a choice. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure additional places are made available on the in-demand courses, particularly those courses where there is both a high demand and a skills shortage?

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Sinn Féin's government in Northern Ireland has decided that the A-levels should proceed. It did not offer anybody in Northern Ireland a choice. I do not think young people who look across the island will ignore the breathtaking hypocrisy of the stance that Sinn Féin has about the exams down here and the stance it has about the exams up there. I have met students, as I am sure the Deputy has. I have been in countless schools across the country. I think I have been in five or six counties in the past week. When I talk to students now, I find that they are happy with the certainty and clarity when I take them through the options they have in relation to the papers, and when I take them through the really good decision that my colleague, the Minister for Education, took on grade inflation. It compares very much favourably with an area on which Sinn Féin has been very quiet in respect of the A-levels in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Deputy will respond-----

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** When Fine Gael has representation in the North, we will deal with that. I look forward to it.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Sinn Féin has representation in the North. We generally engage

constructively, but taking young people for fools is not going to wash at all.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We are not taking anybody for fools.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland is, or at least was, the joint head of the Government. A-levels are going ahead with no predicted or calculated grades. Where Sinn Féin is in government, it is not making the announcement that it is shouting and roaring for down here in opposition. Be that as it may, Sinn Féin is actually a partitionist party when it comes to the issue of educational policy. It is the same on college fees, but we will get to that in a moment.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Right, Minister.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It has to be said; it cannot just be one-way traffic. It cannot just be given; it has to be taken as well

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Do not worry.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** If Sinn Féin is serious about government, it needs to be consistent in its stance, North and South.

With regard to this issue and what steps I am taking, this Government has increased the places in third level by 6,000 over the past two years. That is a massive increase. It is important that leaving certificate students hear that the number of applications to the CAO on deadline day this year versus last year was down 1,141. I say that to be, hopefully, somewhat reassuring to students. Now that we know the situation in respect of the leaving certificate and we have clarity earlier than we had last year, we will shortly see the breakdown from the CAO of how many students applied for the different courses. My Department will do what we did last year and the year before. We will work with the system on additional places. I fully agree with the Deputy on the issue of in-demand places. I have gone over my time. I would like to talk about that in my next response in regard to medicine and some of the steps we want to take this year.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We need to recognise that grade inflation is only part of the story. The fact that CAO points are going up is also about how many places are available. Every year more students are sitting the leaving certificate, but as the Minister has admitted so many times, third-level education is not adequately funded. He must take responsibility for that. His party has been in government since 2011. This has led to an increase in the number of courses that are cheaper to deliver rather than an expansion of in-demand courses that reflect the real needs of the economy and society. I do not blame the individual colleges. This is how the funding model is set up by the Government. The Government has announced thousands of additional places in the past few years, yet it has had little effect on the pressure of the CAO points,-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** That is wrong.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** -----the in-demand courses or the stress of leaving certificate students. That needs to be faced up to. It is important that we admit that the skill needs in our society are not being met in a number of vital areas, particularly healthcare and construction. There is a shortage of dentists, nurses, mental health professionals, as well as quantity surveyors, engineers, architects and many others. There is demand from students and a need from society. We need to join the dots here. A clear example of this is that the number of un-



dergraduate medical places have essentially not increased in the past ten years.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I fully agree with the Deputy that this year should not just be about announcing an additional number of college places. More college places will be available this year. As the Deputy rightly suggested, it has been the case in previous years as well. Budget 2022 provided approximately €20 million for extra growth in the higher education sector. There will be additional funding and places. As the Deputy correctly pointed out, the bigger challenge is to try and focus in this year on the in-demand courses or the courses where there are particular pressure points. One such course is medicine. I fully agree that from a public health policy point of view, we need more doctors. As she will be aware, it is not just a case of creating a college place, because for every place on a medicine course, a training hospital place is required. It is a similar story with dentistry and a number of other courses. What my Department has been doing for the past number of months, and is intensifying now, is trying to work with Department of Health to identify whether we can provide X number more of funded medicine places in September across our college system and the Department of Health can provide Y more training places. I expect to be in a position to bring forward good news on that. Our focus is exactly as the Deputy suggested in looking at the in-demand areas and the areas in which we want to see public service improvement.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister has a responsibility to ensure that people are being trained to have the skills that our society needs. It is not simply about students getting onto the courses that they want; it is about the proper planning for the skills that we need in the future.

Almost 4,000 students enrol in pre-nursing courses. Fewer than 5% of them go on to further education to get nursing degrees in the State. Similarly, people go abroad. The Minister constantly mentions pre-law courses when discussing alternative pathways, but his Department does not collect data on the number of students that progress to law degrees. It is always about places and place availability tomorrow, but we need to be straight and honest with people. We are not providing the education for what we need in society, particularly in the area of medicine. We are not providing what is needed for those nursing students that need the pathway to get into our health service. That, together with the chronic underfunding of higher education, is why there is a shortage of people to fill those positions.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** No, it is not. It is about pathways, actually. It is about recognising that different students will want to do different things. I think the Deputy and I agree that it is about broadening the conversation beyond just higher education to further education apprenticeships. It is about ending the snobby and elitist view that when someone goes to a school, the student believes that the only conversation to have is about the CAO and points. It is complete nonsense. It is a system that we have developed here without any policy debate. It is one of the reasons we have had a shortage of tradespeople in this country. It is because of that pressurised view that we have created that success is about taking one particular path. That is why, this year, the CAO website has been changed. That is why, this year, we have seen a record number of people - 8,607 - apply to be apprentices, which is more than ever before in history of our State. Most of them applied for craft apprenticeships. It is why the CAO.ie/options web page has seen 15,646 direct users – students, one would presume – go and check out apprenticeships from that link. It is absolutely about pathways. It is about recognising that different students will want to do different things.

On the pre-nursing issue, and I want to agree with Deputy on this, we need to see more plac-

es ring-fenced in higher education for pre-nursing students, and not just a general increase in the overall nursing numbers. That is something I am actively working on with the institutions.

### Third Level Education

49. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department will commission an audit of buildings and teaching practices in third-level institutions to determine the accommodations that must be made for students with a disability. [5972/22]

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I ask the Minister whether his Department will commission an audit of buildings and teaching practices in third-level institutions to determine the accommodations that can, and must, be made to enable greater access to students with disabilities.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for the question, which is very timely. I have some positive news and perhaps we can build on it. Inclusion is a core goal for my Department, for the House and for Members on all sides of this House. It is about ensuring that there is access and equity of access for all students of both further and higher education. It is most likely that we will publish a new national access and inclusion plan with a budget of €5 million to deliver on measures in 2022 in March. While higher education institutions, HEIs, are autonomous, the approach of my Department has been to offer a range of supports that enable them to meet national objectives, including those relating to inclusion and supports for people with disabilities. Last year, for example, we provided €5.8 million in funding for initiatives in 24 HEIs aimed at supporting students with disabilities to access and engage with higher education. That has delivered a variety of projects, including sensory spaces, training of staff, development of assistive technology, mental health supports, development of wayfinding apps to help students with disabilities navigate their way around campuses, and capital accessibility improvements to campuses. This strategic projects fund was additional to the standard fund for students with disabilities.

As regards the specific question on buildings and estates, I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the Higher Education Authority, HEA, is in the process of finalising what it describes as a detailed space survey of the higher education estate. As part of this survey, HEIs have been asked to indicate the compliance of their buildings with part M of the building regulations, which addresses access for people with disabilities. The survey will be regularly updated and progress on the issue will be monitored and reported going forward. Institutions can address issues of non-compliance - of course, people have to be helped to become compliant - using funding from devolved capital grants or as part of a broader building upgrade project. In this respect, I am pleased I will this week launch a new phase of capital investment calls that will include an emphasis on alignment with universal design principles and fostering inclusion in all its facets.

The Deputy is onto a very important issue here. The space survey will be a foundation on which we can build.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I am delighted to hear the news hot off the press that a space survey will be carried out by the HEA and that the Minister will launch the new phase of capital investment calls later this week. It is welcome that will include this emphasis on universal design principles. What both I and the Labour Party spokesperson on higher education, Senator Hoey,

have been hearing is that many students and potential students who are not even counted in figures kept by universities and colleges on students with disabilities require greater levels of accommodation and support. It is thought that as many as 20% of students currently in higher education have a disability. That is a sizeable minority of students, not all of whom may have indicated to college authorities that they are in that cohort. There are potential students who would like to go to college but need greater encouragement, facilitation and support to do so. My experience of engagement as a college tutor for many years with the disability office in Trinity College Dublin is that the office is superb but students with disabilities do not want to have to raise concerns about access at every interval. That is why universal design principles are so crucial. They should be accommodated in building design so that students do not have to keep asking. I ask the Minister to elaborate on the capital funding allocations.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I find myself in full agreement with the Deputy. To be honest, one of my concerns in respect of the national access plan, which has achieved a lot, is exactly what she and Senator Hoey have identified, that is, there are people with disabilities not counted within those figures. I think of students with autism or those with intellectual disabilities or dyslexia. There are others who are not counted. There is more work to be done in respect of students with visual impairments and the likes. I had a very good meeting recently with the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, NCBI, and the Dyslexia Association of Ireland regarding some of the assistive technology they introduced during the pandemic and how they wish to now make that permanent and spread it. I have had very good meetings with, and visits to, the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, which the Deputy knows very well. It is quite an inspiring place.

Alongside the capital plan, she should expect a more comprehensive definition of a student with a disability in the national access and inclusion plan, as she and Senator Hoey are suggesting. If something is not measured, its progress cannot be monitored. Although there has been progress in respect of disabilities, the definition has been too narrow, quite frankly.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Minister. The NCBI told us recently that lack of access to curriculum and learning materials is one of the main factors preventing students with visual impairments from reaching their potential. Building on the remarks of the Minister, it also reported that the number of students with disabilities in third level is growing, which is very welcome and largely to do with the successful access programmes and disability offices and centres such as the inspirational centre at Trinity College Dublin to which he referred. However, the number of students with sensory disabilities, visual or hearing impairment or severe speech impairment is not growing at the same rate. It is clear the access programmes for students in those particular groups are not having the same effect and that needs to be examined. There are several related issues in respect of facilitation in studying abroad and engaging in work placements, all of which would be of significant support and benefit to any student who is able to participate. Again, of course, those with disabilities may find additional obstacles facing them in taking up places on Erasmus+ programmes, internships or work programmes. I ask that in rolling out programmes on access for students with disabilities, account is taken of these perhaps hidden issues and facets of college life.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will absolutely take that on board. I present the issue as two separate and distinct but very much interdependent parts, as does her question, in fairness. There is the capital piece, on which I expect we will make further progress through both the existing fund we have in place for students with disabilities and the drawdown of that fund to provide facilities such as sensory rooms that are beginning to roll out. In addition, our capital calls,

which can be expected later this week, will involve a focus in the criteria on inclusion, universal design and the likes that will mean that projects coming forward will begin to rectify this.

The second part of the Deputy's question is even more interesting, perhaps, because alongside the bricks and mortar, it is about things like teaching methods. Many students in general, but particularly students with disabilities, have told me they would like things that became commonplace during the pandemic, such as recorded lectures, to become embedded. Obviously, that requires discussion with staff representative bodies but we want it to happen. I refer to initiatives such as the wayfinding app, where people have been able to use assistive technology. It is very much about the bricks and mortar alongside the use of technology and the teaching methods. We are committed to funding and progressing both but also, crucially, trying to measure in our new plan disabilities that have not been measured in previous national access plans.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

**50. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the cause of the 17% increase in apprentices waiting to access off-the-job training in the past two months, which has brought the total back up to half of all craft apprentices currently on waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6458/22]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Too many apprentices have been failed throughout the pandemic. They were unable to access the offsite training they needed to complete or advance their apprenticeships and become the qualified tradespeople we sorely need. It is truly alarming that there has been a 17% increase in apprentices waiting to access off-the-job training in the past two months, with figures back up to just under 10,000. That represents half of all craft apprentices. What has caused this and what steps are being taken to address it?

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank the Deputy for her question. The backlog in apprenticeship training to which reference was made results from the adverse impact of Covid public health restrictions on the operation of the education and training sector. In responding to these restrictions, it has been a priority to seek to facilitate, whenever possible, access to on-site teaching and learning for essential skills-based activities such as apprenticeship. However, the Deputy will appreciate that education and training providers have been closed for extended periods since March 2020 on public health grounds and that during periods when apprenticeship classes were permitted, they were running at half capacity under social distancing measures.

A detailed and comprehensive emergency plan to tackle apprenticeship waiting lists has been under way across further education and training since August 2021, when some training facilities started to reopen. At that point, 11,859 apprentices were delayed in their training. Since then, a €20 million additional capital investment has provided a large increase in workshops and equipment in every training location in the country. A further €17 million was provided under budget 2022 to further facilitate the response of SOLAS and the HEA, including a significant recruitment campaign to increase the number of trainers.

By the end of January, almost 7,000, or 60%, of those on the July 2021 waiting list were back in training or had completed their phase of training and were progressing in their appren-

ticeship. The number waiting at the end of January 2022 was 9,570, reflecting the rapid growth in registrations during 2021 and to date in 2022.

Craft apprenticeships are demand-led, with no restrictions on registrations in any single year. The current apprentice population is more than 24,000, the highest it has been since 2009. Apprenticeship registrations in 2021 were the highest they have been since 2007, with 8,607 apprentices employed on 62 programmes. Some 6,955 registrations were in craft apprenticeship programmes, with more than 60% of these in the electrical, plumbing, carpentry and joinery crafts.

My Department, SOLAS and other apprenticeship partners are actively working on additional measures to ensure the waiting list is removed as speedily as possible, enabling apprentices to progress through their apprenticeship as quickly as is feasible. By the end of the year, the vast majority of apprentices waiting for phase 2 placement will have started this training. By the start of April, the backlog for phases 4 and 6 will be cleared.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State. On the phases, in September, we had 1,000 in phase 6 and 2,000 in phase 4, but the vast majority - 7,000 - were in phase 2 at that time. In one sense, when the Minister of State gives the figures and says that phases 4 and 6 will be cleared by April, I obviously welcome that, but the vast majority are in phase 2. We need to be careful of that.

It is positive that apprenticeship registrations are up, and this is to be welcomed. The Minister of State should, however, be careful of what he takes credit for unless he wants to accept the blame for the collapse of registration numbers in the past. Craft apprenticeship registrations reflect demand in the construction sector, but the Minister of State cannot explain why 10,000 people were unable to access the off-the-job education component because the target was surpassed by 300. This happened months after people had been taken back to work at full capacity. How can we have insufficient capacity when the Minister of State has spent the past year and a half telling us he was ramping up capacity to deal with the backlog? Things just do not just add up. The true figure is even higher, because his Department removes apprentices from the waiting lists when they get the start date for the training and not when they actually start.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputy for her comments. In the initial reply I outlined to the Deputy that significant money had been applied to this issue and I believe she has acknowledged that. In total, across both this year and last year, €37 million will have been made available to address this issue. This includes a change in the structure of phase 2 off-the-job training which will facilitate a third intake of apprentices per annum and an opt-in rapid employer assessment, which has been piloted at phase 7 for the on-the-job element, for those apprentices who have completed phase 6 and who have spent more than four years in their apprenticeship scheme.

The Deputy is aware of the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme and the impact that has had, and I have spoken about the increase in registrations. We brought in that scheme during Covid-19 when it was extended and played a vital role in ramping up the numbers who came in at a period when there were other demands in our sector.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** There are 500-odd fewer apprentices who became qualified tradespeople in 2021 than in 2020, despite the reopening in September. I want to know when the waiting lists will be cleared and the apprentices will be able to complete the training in the



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allocated four years, like every other student? The people with the skills we need to meet housing and retrofit targets need to be valued and the system that trains them needs to be functioning properly. Instead, the Minister of State's Department, over 2020 and 2021, saved more money due to the waiting lists than was spent in addressing the backlog. The State saved more than €55 million, mostly from apprentice allowances, and only reinvested €37 million. The Minister of State has left almost €1 billion sitting unused in the National Training Fund.

To make matters worse, in a written response to me, the Minister of State actually used the backlog as a justification for his plans to reform the apprenticeship model. These reforms were previously described by the Connect Trade Union as essentially privatisation of the service. Is the Minister of State allowing the system to collapse so that he can justify dismantling the craft apprenticeship model?

**Deputy Niall Collins:** With respect to the Deputy, that is total nonsense. To try to present a scenario that we are trying to accrue savings and not invest in apprenticeships or not reform the whole space is simply not the case, and the Deputy knows this. We have 62 apprenticeships up and running, as the Deputy is aware, and we have approximately another 20 in development and approximately another 15 expressions of interest. We launched the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 to 2025, which has a number of key targets in diversity and equality. We have set up and resourced the National Apprenticeship Office and the stakeholder alliance which will support that. There is a great deal happening in this space as the Deputy knows well. We are moving into completely new and unprecedented areas. The Deputy's presentation is that the house is falling down, on which I simply cannot agree with her. The Deputy's contribution was more a statement than a question and this is my reply to it.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

*Questions Nos. 51 to 53, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Educational Disadvantage**

54. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the strategic action plan for equity, participation and success in higher education 2022-2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6380/22]

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** Will the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science tell me the status of the strategic action plan for equity, participation and success in higher education for the period 2022 to 2026, and will he advise the House of his plans?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Moynihan very much for raising this issue, which I know is one in which he has a particular interest. Development of the new strategic action plan for equity, participation and success in higher education, which I call the national access and inclusion plan, is at its very final stage. The plan is being developed collaboratively between my Department and the Higher Education Authority. The plan has involved significant consul-

tation with interested stakeholders, as is right and proper, including the institutions but also with students, individuals and representative groups of students with disabilities and students from a range of under-represented groups. I am pleased to say there was a very strong response to the consultation process, and in addition to workshops and engagements, we have also received a total of 122 submissions from a wide range of stakeholder groups.

The approach of this plan will be rooted strongly in a partnership approach involving the role of the Government, institutions and communities. It will focus on improving the learning experience and success of learners and will seek to enhance support for people who are under-represented in the learner population in higher education.

Among the key themes in the new plan will be the continued targeting of progress with specific groups with policy measures, funding and institutional initiatives aligned to support these groups. I am particularly delighted to say that for the first time this will address people with intellectual disabilities who have been, quite frankly, overlooked in previous plans. I am quite excited about this and it is an important move.

It will also be a move away from just measuring access, which is important. It is quite easy to measure access, that is, how many students have got into the college. This, however, will follow their pathway through college, their successful completion and what happens post college in employment terms

There will be a stronger focus on pathways between further education and training and higher education to try to create that more unified and connected third level system. There will also be an evidence-based approach to policy, with a strong focus on data.

I intend to bring the final plan to Government in advance of publication in March. We have a budget of €5 million for 2022 to put a number of initiatives in place to try to advance this plan.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** The Minister mentioned the timeframe. There is a great urgency with this. Even though the education system has quite rightly served the country very well over the decades, we need to look at those who are not benefiting from education, those on the margins of society and those, as the Minister has said in his response, who are not represented in it.

I have a number of questions. I am glad the Minister is looking at the whole experience. What are the outcomes for people with disabilities in further education? Many of those in the further education sector and in many of the colleges throughout the country in the sector would say they have been the Cinderella of education for quite a long time. A great amount of work has been done, a very small percentage of people have gone back to further education through the colleges, and their lives have changed dramatically because of that. We as a society need to be very mindful of that. We must also challenge all of Government - this Department and others - to ensure we are looking towards the people who are not engaging with further education, how we can make it more accessible, and how we can devise a programme and strategies that will ensure the best possible outcomes for people with learning difficulties and every kind of challenge who are on the margins of society. The Minister needs to focus on that.

On the submissions, is the Minister still taking submissions on this strategy or has this process closed at this point?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The submissions process has formally closed but it is never too

late to submit a good idea. If there are any further groups or ideas the Deputy wishes to bring forward, I will be very happy to hear from them. The Deputy is 100% right as he has described those at the margins. One of the things a group or stakeholder driving the strategy said was that there needed to be additional priority groups. As I was saying in my response to Deputy Bacik earlier, we have made good progress on a number of category groups. There are more students with a disability in higher education than ever. However, that masks another reality. We are not measuring all disabilities, so we expect additional priority groups.

On the outcomes piece, that is exactly it. We cannot just say, and this came from the feedback and the consultation, that it is great a student with a disability got into college. Of course it is, but that is the student's right. What we need to do is see what the student's college experience is like. That brings me to the Deputy's next point, because the plan will require joined-up thinking, including with the Department of Education on the transition planning between second level and third level and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on what happens in terms of job opportunities afterwards.

On the point about further education and training being the Cinderella of education, from a capital point of view that has been correct, but the Deputy can expect a significant uplift in capital funding in a new capital call. He can expect an announcement in that regard probably later this week.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** On the capital side, I look forward to that later in the week. On the revenue side and the day-to-day running of it, what percentage of the overall higher education budget will be targeted towards people on the margins of society? There are people who have multi-generational issues whereby they have not got into third level education and do not see a prospect of third level education. In addition, on the disability side, it is necessary to ensure there are outcomes for them there. There is a fundamental attitude across society that has to change. While the Minister says the figures have increased, it is from a very low base. We must be able to say that everybody has a role to play in society. With this new Department and by making sure this strategy is correct, I believe we can encourage more people into education and see better outcomes for them, but it has to be targeted at the most vulnerable and those with disabilities.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am 100% up for that. I hope the Oireachtas and Oireachtas committees, including Deputy Michael Moynihan, can genuinely play a helpful and active role in monitoring this. It is not a static document. In my term as Minister, I have been regularly invited to the oversight group. We publish the documents and the targets, but then the work begins. Our figures for higher education participation are very good and among the best in Europe, but headline figures can flatter and can mask another reality. They are very good and there has been progress across all groups, but not equal progress. That is why this is a national access and inclusion plan, identifying the priority groups where we want to make progress and provide funding. In fairness to my colleagues in the Government, I am pleased we have a €5 million fund this year to drive forward some of these initiatives, so it will not be a plan without real funding.

The question about the percentage of the budget is very good. I will have to get the answer for the Deputy because, of course, it is not one budget line. We provide a variety of supports for students with disability across SOLAS, the HEA, the SUSI grant system and the fund for students with disability. Perhaps I can send that information in writing to the Deputy.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Third Level Fees**

55. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when he will bring forward a plan to reduce student fees for third level students; if this will be in place for the next academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6450/22]

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We are facing a crisis in the cost of living and students and families have to pay the highest fees in the EU. As a means of taking the pressure off students and their parents, will the Minister and the Department reduce fees as part of a sustainable funding model for third level education? I am also conscious of the fact that they need help now so I again call on the Minister to increase SUSI support for this academic year. In addition, reducing the looming cost of third level fees coming down the line would be a welcome relief for many.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** This is something on which we agree. I passionately believe we have to reduce the cost of education. We have already taken a number of steps since the Government took office just under two years ago. I will not go through them all in the time available. There is the first increase in the SUSI grants. I accept that some of them do not take effect until September, but some of them have taken effect this year. There have been increases in the student assistance fund, and the Deputy and I have engaged on this. Indeed, the Government will consider the cost of living in the round at a Cabinet committee later this week.

However, I am conscious that when we talk about a sustainable funding model for higher education it cannot be just a model that is sustainable for the institutions, although that is very important. When I consider what a sustainable model would look like, I think of it as having three parts. It looks at the level of investment we need to put into higher education now and into the future to ensure it can meet the needs of our society and some of the issues the Deputy and I were discussing earlier, and how we can know it is adequately and sustainably funded. The second issue is how the grants system can be completely overhauled. We have a SUSI review to go alongside that. The third is the cost of education. I believe we need to do work with regard to the registration fee. The factual answer, as of now, is that I updated the Cabinet committee in December. I am engaging bilaterally with my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and I will shortly bring forward proposals on what that sustainable funding model looks like. I must say again that we have ruled out student loans. That is very important. I do not believe it works; it is a failed model. Students should not be leaving college heavily indebted and paying back the Government for loans, at a time when they might well want to be saving for other things in their lives in terms of progression.

We have made a number of changes to the SUSI scheme. There have been changes that have taken effect, including in respect of postgraduate students. There are more to come in September. We announced an increase in the student assistance fund last week as well. We continue to keep all these issues under review. However, I wish to be clear that I want to see the cost of education go in a downward direction as we bring forward the sustainable funding model.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We have to be conscious of families who are really struggling at this stage, and of students who, because they cannot get accommodation even at a very high price, are driving long distances and of the extra cost that is putting on students. In addi-

tion, it is time for a new accommodation strategy because the cost of accommodation is prohibiting students from attending and participating in the colleges they wish to go to. We must do everything we can to bring higher education within the reach of everybody. That is why I am seeking a commitment from the Minister that fees will be reduced. With regard to SUSI, I hope the Cabinet decides, on the Minister's recommendation, to bring forward some of the reliefs there to take the pressure off students and parents.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for the points she raised and for the constructive manner in which she did so. It is important to say there are existing supports available, and I always say this particularly when I visit schools because sometimes students, when they hear about the cost of education, might not perhaps be aware of that fact. That is worth saying whilst trying to improve them. More than 65,000 students not only do not pay the highest tuition fee in Europe but pay either no tuition fee or a significantly reduced rate of fees. These costs are covered by my Department through the SUSI scheme. Last year, we allocated €190 million to meet those fees to help the students most in need in terms of targeted interventions.

We have made a number of changes to the SUSI scheme. I accept they largely come into effect in the new academic year. It is the first increase in the grant for a number of years for everybody. There is a significant reduction in the adjacency rate so more students will qualify for the higher grant. There is also an increase in the income threshold so more students will qualify than previously. We need to continue to take many actions to reduce the cost of education.

On all parts of this island we have to reduce the cost of attending college. Yes, there is a student contribution fee of €3,000 in this jurisdiction and I would like that to go down. There is a tuition fee in Northern Ireland of €5,434. The only reason the Deputy can say we have the highest fees in Europe is that, sadly, Northern Ireland is not in the European Union. I hope she will join with me in taking an all-island approach to wanting to reduce fees. I was in Northern Ireland and the students there are not very happy with the Deputy at all.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister should not worry. He should concentrate of the students down here-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Surely the Deputy would like the Government to take an all-island approach.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** -----where he has a mandate.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It is a commitment under the Good Friday Agreement that I must fulfil as a Government Minister.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The difference between Sinn Féin and this Government is that we listen to students and to what they want. The Minister knows that the only reason the fees in the North are not £9,250 as they are in England is that Sinn Féin is in government in the North as well. The Minister twisting his play of words is not fooling anybody.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** That is an extraordinary answer.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** It is not; it is a truthful answer. I want fees here to be reduced. I do not want the highest fees in the EU; that is not a label we want in this State.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Hear, hear.



**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We must work together to make sure they are reduced. The Minister said that some people do not pay fees. Yes, many do not. However, we see the people who are working day and night, the people who are excluded, locked out and not entitled to anything because they are just above the thresholds. We must help those students. We must give those students and their families the opportunities they deserve. We do not need to punish them for going out to work and for earning a very modest income that then excludes them from any help.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am sure the Deputy did not mean it. I presume the Sinn Féin Party is very much aware of my commitments under the Good Friday Agreement as part of the Irish Government to have an active interest in many things relating to Northern Ireland. The Deputy will ask me in the Higher Education Authority legislation to take an all-island approach, and I do and I will do so. That is why I visited Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and it is why we will deliver our commitments to students in the North. By the way, when Northern Ireland and Britain left the European Union, sadly, we continued to ensure students there could access the Erasmus programme. I have a very active interest in and fulfil my commitments relating to the North.

If I were the Deputy, I would work on the fees aspect. If her party is taking credit for not putting the fees at £9,000, I presume she is happy to see them at €5,434.57.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Not at all.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** My maths skills are not great but we charge €3,000, which I see as too high. In the North, where Sinn Féin is in government, it is charging €5,434. Shame on the party.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We do not have control of those finances.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Shame.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister knows we do not control those finances.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It should listen to the students and reduce those fees in the North. Do something about the A levels as well.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister should speak to British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** With the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, we will reduce the fees over time for students. We will ensure a sustainable funding model and we will put more into SUSI. We will work on an all-island basis to look after all the young people.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** We will see what is delivered.

### **Third Level Admissions**

56. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to increase degree places for nursing and midwifery for September 2022 and beyond; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6386/22]

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**Deputy Gary Gannon:** This relates to increasing the number of places in universities for nursing and midwifery. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for this important and timely question. My Department is strongly committed to supporting the health of our population through the provision of graduates with the key competencies and skills to be effective in the health workforce and to support a range of clinical teams in our health services. I am pleased that in the two years this Department has existed, in both 2020 and 2021, we ensured additional places for nursing and midwifery. There were approximately 200, or perhaps slightly more, additional places on nursing and midwifery courses in 2021. We quite significantly increased the number of nursing places last year.

My officials are currently engaging with the Higher Education Authority and institutions on the provision of additional places for the coming year. It is the intention that there will be a focus on areas such as healthcare. In agreeing with Deputy Conway-Walsh on this point, I indicated we must take a targeted approach this year. As Minister, I am asked how many extra college places will be created, which is important, and more places will be created. The more important question, as raised by Deputies Gannon and Conway-Walsh, is how to provide these places in targeted areas where we need more people. We are working with the institutions and my colleague, the Minister for Health, to see if we can provide additional college places, particularly in the health service area, and whether it can then provide additional training places. Of course, for every additional nurse or doctor place, a training placement is required also.

We are very actively engaging with the Department of Health, as we have been for some time, on determining the longer-term skills needs of the healthcare services and the role the further and higher education sector can play in meeting those skills needs. We provided additional places in nursing last year and the year before and I expect there will be further additional places this year. I am happy to provide the Deputy with more detail when we conclude those conversations, which is likely to be in March.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** That is brilliant. I have a suggestion about where some of those places may come from. A couple of months ago my office was contacted by a young woman who took part in a QQI level 5 course in nursing. She got full distinctions on the course but was unable to access university because there were a limited number of places for people transitioning from QQI level 5 to nursing at university and college level.

We called around to different colleges and determined that at QQI level 5, or colleges of further education, there were between 1,168 and 1,296 places for nursing, depending on interest, but there were only 152 places in 13 colleges for students trying to access nursing through that route. We also have the figures for midwifery. Could we look at improving access via this route of QQI level 5 courses? Students have a passion for the subject but they simply cannot access the places in colleges. We could look at this way of increasing the cohort in question almost immediately.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is entirely right. Since giving my initial response, I found the figure in question from 2020. There were 135 additional places in 2020 and approximately 200 additional places in 2021. It is an increase of approximately 335 nursing and midwifery places over the past year.

The Deputy is on to something and he is entirely correct. All of us, including me, regularly

tell students about the options and pathways that further education has. It is true those pathways are not as developed as they need to be for nursing. I will not name the institutions in this House but I have been in parts of the country where the college of further education is in one place, You can see through its windows the university or institute of technology, and the venue for pre-nursing and-or the university degree is adjacent but there is no pathway in place. One of the conversations I am having is, instead of having a global figure of increase this year, whether we can ring-fence some of those places to increase pathways from further education.

It always happens, regardless of points, that some people who would make a very good nurse or midwife go the further education and training route. I accept we are losing too many of them now. “Yes” is the short answer. Rather than just increasing the general number, we must work with the autonomous institutions to see if more places can be ring-fenced for this. I am happy to work with the Deputy on this.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I do not need to dwell any more deeply on this. Last year, for example, 1,296 students were in colleges of further education who would have made exceptionally good nurses. They chose that pathway, studying for a year in the area, before finding there were very limited places for them in university. I worked in career guidance for early school-leavers, encouraging people to do nursing that way because they would have been fantastic in the field. They might do great over the year but the pathways are very limited. We can and should address this. I appreciate that universities are autonomous but there is a exceptional talent pool in those FETAC courses. We should harness it and give those people the option to progress to university and a vocation.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** While I always feel obligated to say the universities are autonomous, I do not wish to sound that I intend in any way, shape or form to be a bystander on this matter. They are autonomous but they are also funded heavily by the taxpayer. We have a right as an Oireachtas to have a policy view on this. Deputy Conway-Walsh asked about a sustainable funding model and there will be a list of reforms we can legitimately say, from a public policy perspective, we would like to see addressed. The pathway from further education and training to higher education is an obvious one. There are some genuinely good examples but nursing is an underdeveloped pathway.

As I go around the country, I have identified areas where there could be significant improvement. The Deputy can be sure my officials, as they engage on the global numbers for nursing and midwifery this year, will want to increase it again, as we have in the past two years. We will genuinely give focus to this. As we sit down to have the conversation about sustainable funding models, this will be a key reform request on our side of the table.

### **Third Level Costs**

57. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way his Department intends to address the costs associated with further and higher education such as student accommodation costs and the student contribution charge; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6120/22]

**Deputy David Stanton:** Some of the question has been dealt with in respect of accommodation costs and student contribution charges. Does the Minister wish to expand on that answer? Will he address the question of the availability of accommodation, which has an impact

on cost?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for his time when we visited Midleton College and Carrigtwohill Community College recently. I had a chance to engage with students about some of their pathways and options after school and to see the new and exciting plan for Carrigtwohill Community College.

I, along with everybody in the House, am highly conscious of the rising cost of living and how we must work together to ensure cost is not barrier in education. Costs in education can come in many forms, as the Deputy correctly suggests in his question, including as a student contribution charge. There can also be costs for accommodation and living away from home as well as for books and supplies.

I recognise that student contributions are a significant cost for those who pay them. It is worth stating, nonetheless, that more than 65,000 students in higher education and their families receive support from SUSI and either pay no contribution or a reduced contribution level. I would like to see that number increase, and that is why in the budget we voted to increase the income threshold so more families would not have to pay the contribution fee and would be eligible for the maintenance grant. It is also why we have put in place measures to increase the SUSI grant by €200 across the board from September.

Specifically on the question of adjacency, we have decreased the distance very significantly from 45 km to 30 km. It is an important move and we must do even more on that. More students and their families will now qualify for the higher rate of grant as well.

I have already said in this House, and I will do so again, that as we work on a sustainable funding model for education, it cannot just be about how we better fund institutions. It must also be about how we can better support students and their families with costs. I am engaging with my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and all of the Government in that regard.

On the question of student accommodation, we changed the law not just once but twice last year to ensure no student could be asked to pay more than one month's rent and deposit. Students were being asked to pay a lot upfront, such as four, five or six months of rent. That was not on. We also changed the law to ensure a student in student accommodation only had to give 28 days' notice because many students were losing money if, for whatever reason, they needed to return home. We want to build on this in the coming months.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I thank the Minister for his response and acknowledge the work done by him and the Minister of State in the area, especially with regard to travel distance. Is there any role for hybrid work or study to assist students in the area?

*7 o'clock*

Has the Minister looked at this at all?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I ran out of time when referring to student accommodation. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and I, along with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, are working intensively to make sure that our technological universities can borrow for the very first time and start to build student accommodation. In Deputy Stanton's part of the world, for example, it opens up opportunities for the

Munster Technological University also.

The Deputy asked a very interesting question about hybrid learning. We are trying to start a conversation by recognising that not every student is 18 or 19 years of age, and not every student wants the traditional full college experience. More and more we are going to see students in full-time employment, with dependants, with a job or with a mortgage, who will need to access part of the education system. This is where the hybrid model becomes very attractive, or indeed the remote learning option. We introduced a range of emergency measures during Covid across education to keep the show on the road. We now want to sit down with education stakeholders to see what good learning can be had from that, that we want to see embedded in the education system. In a county as large as the Deputy's constituency, where people can live quite a distance from a college, there is a particular appeal to making education available in remote working hubs or online at home.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I thank the Minister for the response, which I welcome. I acknowledge the work done by the Minister of State with regard to the local training initiatives. This is also part of further education. What further plans does the Minister have to support students financially, and those people who provide the courses, in these local training initiatives that are part of further education? This also applies to persons for whom the formal education has not worked.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Absolutely. I had started to answer the question, and I believe I have to conclude on it. I acknowledge the work the Minister of State is leading in this area. We are now trying to make sure that the range of supports available in higher education begin to transition in an appropriate way that works for further education and for community education. I will give a couple of quick examples. We have introduced the mitigating against educational disadvantage fund. Perhaps it needs a better name. It is the first time ever that community education has been able to draw down, annually, on an actual fund. This is making a real transformational difference. I see this as I travel across the State. We have also waived and abolished the fee for PLC courses. With regard to our capital announcements, Deputy Stanton will see in our capital calls, which we will announce in the coming days, significant attention and priority being given to further education on a scale that simply has not been seen before.

## **Nursing Education**

58. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if additional places on nursing courses will be provided for the 2022-23 academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6459/22]

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I want to establish if the Minister is going to focus on having additional places for nursing and for other critical skills, additional places in college, and through the various channels, for the year ahead.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Aindrias Moynihan for this important and timely question. The Government has increased the number of places in higher education by approximately 6,000 over the past two years. Obviously, that is a global figure. I would also make the point, which might be somewhat reassuring or informative to leaving certificate students this year, that, as of the CAO deadline last week, the number of students who had applied to the CAO relative to the same time last year was down by 1,141. We will have to see how this



plays out in the weeks ahead, but there is a slight decrease this year in the number of students applying through the CAO compared with last year.

We have made a number of significant increases in the overall places, and we have made targeted increases in specific places, including nursing and midwifery, where places have grown by 325 over the past two years. The Government, the Minister of State and I are very conscious of the need to do more. This is why we are working very closely with the Minister for Health and the Department of Health to identify if our sector is in a position to provide further places is the HSE and the Department of Health in a position to provide matching training places. As Deputy Moynihan will be aware, when it comes to healthcare studies the college place is one part, but often the more important component can be the hospital training place. I expect very good progress on that, and I acknowledge the very close working relationship with the Minister for Health in respect of it.

While the initial CAO deadline was last week, we will find out the breakdown of courses, exactly how many people actually applied for the courses, and types of course, in March when the deadlines for higher education access route, HEAR, and disability access route to education, DARE, applicants also passes. I would expect by March to be in a position to give more detail on where the additional places will be, and how that corresponds with the demand we have seen through the CAO this year.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I acknowledge the additional places that have been provided over the past two years. A lot of the references are in the context of college places. There are a number of different channels through which people get qualified for nursing. For example, there is a QQI level 5 nursing studies PLC course in McEgan College of Further Education in Macroom. There is a health and social studies course at level 6 in Mallow. There is a whole range of different channels through which people can access nursing studies. These are very passionate people who want to get in there and will take whatever route possible to make it happen. Is the Minister providing additional places in those courses? When those people then move on into the degree course, is the Minister reserving places for them to ensure that they have the opportunity? I ask that the Minister would also bear in mind that these people would be the 2020 leaving certificate students and will be competing with 2022 inflated grades for places. There will be that further intensity for them. Perhaps the Minister could clarify if there will be additional places for those people, who are clearly very interested and passionate about getting into nursing.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** With regard to Macroom and Mallow and those courses specifically, I will check with SOLAS and Department regarding the capacity to do more this year. Generally, when it comes to further education and training we tend to be in the space of being demand led, and where there is a local demand we try to provide those additional places at the further education and training levels. I will revert to Deputy Moynihan on that. If there is a willingness and a desire to do more locally, then I am very happy to work with the Deputy to deliver on that. I imagine that we could certainly do that.

The second part of the Deputy's question is, truthfully, trickier. We have dealt with it a couple of times in the House this evening. It was around the pathways between further education and training and higher education. In the interests of time I will just outline briefly that this is an issue we want to focus on. I am not satisfied that there are enough reserved places in higher education for people who have come through the further education route through pre-nursing.

On grade inflation, I pay tribute to my colleague the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. The scheme the Minister has devised this year, which was outlined last week to leaving certificate students, will effectively, for want of a better phrase, take into account the level of grade inflation from last year to this year, and will provide that level playing pitch between this year's leaving certificate students and last year's students. I am aware that this was a concern many of them had.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I used the McEgan and Mallow college courses as an example to illustrate the position regarding PLC courses. Consider a student called Hannah, for example, who is clearly passionate about becoming a nurse. She is a 2020 leaving certificate graduate and is now going to be competing with 2022 leaving certificate students and the inflated grades. There needs to be a certain amount of reserved places for people coming through those different channels.

It is not always just about the degree course, the Minister also needs to have additional capacity in those PLC courses and the various different channels through which people will access nursing. Has the Minister looked at that, and will he confirm that there will be additional places so that people who are coming through those channels will have reserved places in those courses? There would have been at least three or four people coming through some of those course who would have been expecting to get into a nursing degree last year but did not make it. Were the additional places at the expense of the PLC people or were they over and above new places?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Those extra places were over and above. While they may not have been ring-fenced for people in further education and training, they certainly did not take away from any existing places. I want to make the point that these were newly created places amounting to 335 additional nursing and midwifery places over 2020 and 2021. That figure will grow further.

I cannot give the Deputy a commitment on the record of the House until I can be sure that I can deliver on it. I can tell the Deputy that it is an absolute focus of my Department in our conversations with the universities that we do not just look for an increase in the global figure when it comes to nursing and midwifery, as relevant to this question. We also look to see how we can grow the number of places that they set aside from that additionality for the further education and training pathway. I am very confident that we can and will be continuing to expand the number of students we will be taking into our PLC courses for nursing. We are investing record amounts there, but quite frankly I believe that we can do even more on that with the budgets we have and the facilities we have. I will come back on the Deputy's specific examples, and I accept that the Deputy is using them as examples. The piece I am trying to work on is the pathway between further education and training and higher education, which Deputy Moynihan has outlined very well.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

59. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his strategy to broaden the number of new apprenticeships; the details of the development of the seven new apprenticeship programmes announced for 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6379/22]

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**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Dillon):** This question will be taken by Deputy Niamh Smyth on behalf of Deputy Cathal Crowe.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I ask the Minister of State to outline his strategy to broaden the number of new apprenticeships and the details of the development of seven new apprenticeship programmes in 2022.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputy for the question. The action plan for apprenticeships 2021-2025 sets out new ways of structuring, funding and promoting apprenticeships to make apprenticeships more accessible to employers and learners in order to achieve a target of 10,000 annual registrations across a wide range of programmes by 2025. Expanding apprenticeship across all sectors of the economy has widened its impact in areas of skills shortage such as engineering, technology skills, logistics and fintech. Under the plan there will be an increase in the online visibility of apprenticeship engagement and apprenticeship development processes for employers and sectors that wish to assess the potential of new apprenticeship development.

The development of new apprenticeships is employer-led, with consortia comprising employer groups and educational providers coming together to identify a skills need and appropriate apprenticeship responses in a sector. It is open to any industry that wishes to explore such options to bring forward a proposal. Applications for new apprenticeship development are open on an ongoing basis, allowing all employers to progress the development of programmes in response to emerging skills needs on an as-needed basis.

There are currently 62 apprenticeship programmes on offer, comprising 25 craft programmes and 37 programmes which have been introduced since 2016. Eight new programmes were launched in 2020 and 2021, despite the pandemic: arboriculture; equipment systems engineer; healthcare assistant; principal engineer; professional doctorate; recruitment executive; sales; scaffolding; and supply chain associate. A further three programmes are close to launch, namely, wind turbine maintenance, bar manager, transport operations and commercial driving. There are 17 additional programmes being developed across agriculture, construction, engineering, equine, finance, horticulture, hospitality and food, ICT and logistics. A number of other potential apprenticeships are at an exploratory stage, in sectors such as health, beauty, environmental, engineering, ICT and finance.

To meet our targets, we require an apprenticeship system that is flexible and responsive and provides a strong value proposition for employers and potential apprentices. It must be attractive and easy to engage with and deliver high standards and sought after qualifications, therefore embedding apprenticeship as a preferred route to skills development.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I thank the Minister of State. He has outlined some exciting new and progressive courses. It would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to mention Cavan Institute, which the Minister, Deputy Harris, visited. Not only does it provide academic subjects, it also endeavours to provide apprenticeships in hairdressing and for commis chefs. It is a victim of its own success and space is now required to help it to continue to provide those programmes.

Ireland has traditionally lagged behind our neighbours in the scope and range of apprenticeships offered here. We know that ETBs, formerly VECs, have always taken a lead role in that delivery. In the programme for Government, there is a number of key commitments to examine new ways of structuring funding and promoting apprenticeships, and it recognised that we need

to encourage wider take-up of these programmes, especially for women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups. The action plan for apprenticeships launched last year was a welcome commitment to widening and expanding the type of apprenticeships available. The Minister of State touched on some of that in his response. Perhaps he could expand on that further.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I welcome that apprenticeships are now part of the CAO process. With respect to young people who drop out of apprenticeship programmes, which is quite a lot in some areas, does the Minister of State intend to commission any research or study into why this going on?

**Deputy Niall Collins:** On the last point raised by Deputy Stanton, that is an issue which the Minister, Deputy Harris, and I have raised with the new director of the National Apprenticeship Office. It is something which is very much on its work programme. There is a dropout rate similar to that across all sectors, but it is something we are conscious and aware of.

On the point raised by Deputy Smyth, the apprenticeship action plan has a number of key targets in terms of new registrations and the number of apprentices in training at any point in time. We have put a lot of focus on that. As the Deputy said, in terms of diversity and gender we are also challenging the State, including the Civil Service and public service, to get involved in the apprenticeships space.

She again raised the case of Cavan Institute. The Minister, Deputy Harris, and I are happy to engage on that, as we are happy to engage with any institution or college of further education. Our Department will advertise for expressions of interest for our capital development programme in the coming days. We will accept applications and business cases from colleges and further education institutes for capital development.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I thank the Minister of State. What measures are in place for those waiting to move forward in their training to tackle the backlog in apprenticeships across SOLAS and the higher education sector, in particular craft apprenticeships?

**Deputy Niall Collins:** We discussed this earlier. Across 2021 and 2022, €37 million has been provided to address the significant backlog which arose due to the Covid pandemic and the restrictions that were imposed throughout various lockdowns that significantly impacted the off the job training available to apprentices. SOLAS and our ETBs are providing extra capacity and are hiring extra trainers. They are doing everything they can to reduce the backlog. Earlier, I outlined the specific numbers in terms of how that will be reduced over the next number of months. We are making good headway on that.

*Question No. 60 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Further and Higher Education**

61. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the projects that will be progressed in 2022 in the upgrading of existing accommodation and the provision of new accommodation in the further education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6437/22]

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** As the Minister knows, there was a welcome commitment in

the national development plan to increase capital investment in the further education sector. I had the opportunity to speak with him on a number of occasions regarding the needs of Cavan Institute and the welcome increase in demand for places in the further education sector. I hope the Minister is in a position to announce a substantial investment in the provision of upgraded accommodation at our colleges of further education and also new build projects.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Smith for the question. The national development plan commits to a step up in investment in further education and training infrastructure. As the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, outlined, under plans being developed by my Department it is projected that expenditure will increase from less than €20 million in capital funding for further education and training in 2020 to approximately €100 million per year by 2025. That will give the Deputy a sense of the stepped increase.

There are more than 35 projects in the pipeline for delivery in 2022, at various stages of the project lifecycle. They are classified in two main areas, namely, capital projects and emergency health and safety works. The project range includes refurbishment and renovation works, civil works, addressing serious access issues, roof repairs, mechanical and electrical projects, with a focus on safety issues and emergency replacements.

An apprenticeship specific capital grant scheme was, I am pleased to say, introduced for 2021-2022. It has provided €10 million for further education and training and €10 million for higher education, and is jointly administered by SOLAS and the HEA. I am pleased to advise the Deputy that in the coming days I will announce a new and significantly more ambitious phase of capital investment in the further education and training sector. I should be clear; it will be an invitation for projects to come forward. It will provide ETBs with a framework to put forward projects in 2022 to upgrade and enhance the further education and training strategy and advance the priorities of the future further education and training strategy.

I am particularly excited about capital investment, which will be a key enabler of what we call the further education and training college of the future, which the Deputy will have heard me talk about when I visited Cavan Institute. Deputies should expect significant news in respect of a stepped increase in capital investment from the Government for further education and training. From a process point of view, it will be for the ETBs and institutes to come forward.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister for his positive message regarding increased investment. A new building complex was completed in Cavan in 2005. Cavan Institute was the first dedicated post-leaving certificate college in the country. I and other public representatives were very much involved with the local authority in the transfer of substantial lands at that location to enable the building of the college at that time. There is an increased demand for space and accommodation. I want to see new permanent accommodation. As a layperson, I believe the proper location for that would be adjacent to the existing main building of the college. There is plenty of space there and it would keep the college in the town.

It has been a very successful college, one of the leading further education providers in the country. We spoke about this previously in the House. The Taoiseach has committed to further intensification in the provision of further education on an all-Ireland and cross-Border basis. Given its geographical location, Cavan Institute can be a key provider in ensuring that we step up that collaboration. We have it on an *ad hoc* basis but we want it structured. That will bring benefits to students on both sides of the Border and throughout the island.



**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** As the Minister knows, the building was built in 2006 to accommodate 420 students. The college has gone from strength to strength which is totally down to the wonderful staff, and management, and the commitment from the students and the ETB. As my colleague has said, there is a greenfield site there. There is no need to find a site or anything like that. The college has more than 1,100 students and it needs that new building. Up to now it has been all over the place with sites in multiple locations. As leases are now up, there is a golden opportunity to deliver the new college that is needed for Cavan Institute.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputies Brendan Smith and Niamh Smyth for making the case very forcefully for Cavan Institute. I genuinely enjoyed my visit to Cavan Institute and was extremely impressed by what I saw. That followed on from a virtual meeting we had with Cavan Institute. I know that both Deputies understand that I am taking a very personal and active interest in this project.

Commitments were made to Cavan Institute and commitments were made to Dunboyne College. I believe those commitments need to be honoured in addition to any future capital call that may be made for new projects. As Deputy Niamh Smyth mentioned, the multi-location aspect needs to be resolved. It is important to try to consolidate on one site. Work needs to be done in that regard. Rather than getting into the detail of that now, it would be useful for Oireachtas Members from Cavan-Monaghan to meet me to see how we might make further progress. Perhaps, I could visit Cavan again shortly.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister for his reply. Very high standards were set in Cavan Institute from the word go. I had the privilege of being the first chairman of the first board of management of that college. It has carried on a very fine tradition in ensuring that any public representative who visits to college gets a very warm welcome, in particular a Minister making an announcement of major investment in the future. There will always be a strong *cead míle fáilte*. The money would be put to good use.

Cavan-Monaghan ETB in anticipation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's roll-out of the new capital investment programme is preparing a proposal which will meet the criteria. As I have said to the Minister both in this House and in Cavan that day, I believe the preference is to have as much of the accommodation of the college as possible on one site. There is plenty of space there and thanks to the successful negotiation between the then County Cavan VEC and the local authority at the time, a prime piece of land, practically in the town, was made available to the VEC to develop that college. We want the broader expansion of it to ensure it continues to grow and has adequate accommodation for the students attending.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** As a Fine Gael Minister, I feel in a very difficult position almost having to referee between the levels of enthusiasm for the project from both Fianna Fáil Deputies, Deputy Brendan Smith and Deputy Niamh Smyth. I notice the very significant links they have with the project. In the interests of keeping the coalition together I should mention my colleagues the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and Senator Joe O'Reilly. We have had very good visits, very good engagement and very good support from Oireachtas Members on this project. I know how important it is.

I often give the example of a student I met from Cavan Institute who talked to me about the pathway he took. Earlier Deputy Conway-Walsh mentioned a pre-law course. The example I always use is that of Jack, the young man I met from Cavan Institute, who is now studying for

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law in Maynooth. Cavan Institute gave him that pathway. I was very impressed by the students I spoke to there. One said, “I was not sure about FET, but I have developed and grown as a person, not just educationally but as a person.” I am particularly impressed with the kitchen facilities used for the apprenticeship scheme there. I received a very warm welcome the last time I went there. I can only imagine the warmth of the welcome when we get this project over the line together.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** That was fantastic teamwork on behalf of Cavan-Monaghan.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It is tough being the referee.

### Grant Payments

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** We now move to County Meath and I call Deputy Tóibín.

62. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of persons who were granted a SUSI grant in each of the past ten years by county in tabular form. [6315/22]

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I am sorry to break up the love-in here. Documents released to Aontú under the Freedom of Information Act reveal emails sent to the Minister by students who were refused SUSI grants. Homeless students, orphans and students who are full-time carers of their parents are all emailing the Minister on this issue. Why is the Department refusing to give these people the SUSI grant?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Of course, my Department does not refuse people the SUSI grant; my Department sets the criteria under which people may apply, as is the case with any Government grant. I acknowledge the very serious issue that the Deputy and his office have consistently highlighted in engagements with my office on the need to reform and overhaul the SUSI grant system. I accept that the system is rigid. I accept that a system which made progress in consolidating student grants from VECs across the country needs to significantly catch up in understanding the reality that many families and students are facing now.

The scheme operates within the parameters set out in the legislative scheme, which in turn broadly reflects budgetary decisions that we make in this House. I have been conscious that the overall trend of awards in recent years has not kept up with cost-of-living increases or income increases that have happened across the economy. That is why we have brought about the first increase in quite a while in income thresholds. That will kick in from September of this year along with a general increase in the rates.

While the SUSI grant scheme is a very important scheme which supports many thousands of students - some 65,000 students either pay no registration fee or pay a very significantly reduced registration fee - it is just one avenue available to student support. Any student who does not qualify for the student grant scheme for whatever reason may avail of the student assistance fund. That is a significant scheme with a budget of, I believe, over €18 million this year after we provided an additional €1.3 million for it last year. That scheme is available to assist students with many of the costs they may face including the rising cost of living.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The SUSI grant system has let down homeless students who have been refused the grant. If a system is not providing a grant to a student who is homeless, then it is absolutely broken. There are inadequacies and discrepancies. Many families are caught in that gap just above the threshold but still finding it increasingly hard to pay the fees. I know of a number of students who had to take out loans just to pay for fees for their education.

Another issue is that the threshold for the grant focuses on the household income from the previous year. A couple could be made redundant in a particular year, but their income hardship is not recognised by SUSI because they were comfortable that year.

Another big issue relates to students who are estranged from their parents. The application process is nothing short of inhumane.

When will we have an update on when the SUSI reforms will fully kick in? Will the Minister take immediate action to ensure that no homeless student who applies for a grant is left unaided?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is talking about a specific case, as is his right. I do not have the information available to me on a case. Obviously, appeal mechanisms are available. A system that does not understand the needs is a very significant concern. I acknowledge that and I am happy to engage with the Deputy on this specific case. This is a scheme based on income thresholds. It is there to support the most vulnerable, the most marginalised and those most in need of assistance based on the income level in their household.

The Deputy has identified difficulties under the current scheme whereby some students are not being assessed on an independent basis and instead are linked to their parents' income despite their estrangement. I regularly hear that from students. In response to the Deputy's specific question, I have just received the SUSI review. It is a commitment in the programme for Government. The Deputy will be familiar with the terms of reference. They are quite broad in acknowledging that the scheme needs to be overhauled. I intend to bring that to the Government alongside the sustainable funding model. I expect to do that in the coming months and to come forward with SUSI reforms as part of the sustainable funding model.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Minister will agree with me that holding Ministers to account is very important. Sometimes it is hard to do so in this institution because Ministers move on from one Department to another. A whistleblower, Sharon Butler Hughes, has received documents under freedom of information, FOI, from the Department of Health which basically amount to reams of notes that are fully redacted. These are the Minister's own briefing notes from 2019. Does he agree that, in the interest of transparency, the Department should release his briefing notes with information on key moments in the CervicalCheck controversy unredacted, within reason, such-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** That is not related to the question.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I understand it is not related, but usually the Minister is very forthcoming in talking about health service issues.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell):** The Chair has Standing Orders-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I would just like to put that question of accountability to the Minister.

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**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am always happy to be accountable and I am very well aware of my role in this House. I am also conscious that the Deputy's supplementary contribution is out of order but, to be helpful, I am happy to answer. The Freedom of Information Act, as the Deputy will be well aware, should not in any way be open to political interference in the form of any Government Minister deciding what should or should not be issued. The laws of this House are very clear on that. Lest there be any doubt, I had no role in any issuing of any freedom of information documentation. Transparency is always good.

*Questions Nos. 63 to 67, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Departmental Policies**

68. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the importance of mathematics in the work his Department is undertaking to promote and support research, innovation and science; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6119/22]

**Deputy David Stanton:** I was not expecting to be called so soon. Things are moving very fast.

This question is about the importance of mathematics. A number of years ago coding was hugely important. I put it to the Minister that mathematics is now vital. What is happening at third level to look at different ways of teaching mathematics and of using mathematics for innovation, science and research? Is the Minister aware of a concept I have been talking to him about for some time, PolyUp mathematics?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I must admit, I am aware of it only because the Deputy has kindly brought it to my attention, for which I thank him. I have asked my officials to provide me with a viewpoint on it in the context of our overall work on the importance of mathematics and of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, in general and the needs of our students, our economy and our society. I will revert to the Deputy on that matter.

Developing a strong supply of science, technology, engineering and maths graduates is critical to Ireland's positioning as a world-class centre of research and innovation and to supporting high-growth sectors such as ICT, life sciences and business and financial services. My Department is committed to raising awareness of maths and other STEM disciplines, ensuring a strong pipeline of suitable graduates and supporting research and innovation in these areas. Raising awareness of STEM, including maths, is a critical enabler to all our work in this area.

I am pleased to say that last March I announced a national investment of €5.2 million through Science Foundation Ireland's Discover programme. The funding supports 49 public engagement and education initiatives that aim to promote and improve public awareness and understanding of science, technology, engineering and maths and to engage a wide audience of people with STEM topics. SFI also supports awareness-raising of science and science careers through the Discover primary science and maths and smart futures programmes.

The availability of qualified teachers is also critical, as the Deputy will know. Last April, the Minister for Education and I announced additional places for 2022 on programmes to up-skill registered post-primary teachers to teach more subjects, including mathematics. I detect

a real yearning for this from the profession. I visited the DCU school of education recently to discuss this. I am pleased to say that significant progress has been made over recent years in increasing graduate output in STEM disciplines, including maths. In addition to mainstream programmes, there has been significant provision of relevant skills through Springboard+ and the human capital initiative. My Department's science funding agency, Science Foundation Ireland, also supports our STEM talent and skills pipeline in a number of ways, including by funding fourth level master's and PhD students, early career researchers and more established, world-leading researchers.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I thank the Minister for that comprehensive reply. Does he agree that, for many students, mathematics is extremely challenging and difficult and that we need to look at different ways of teaching mathematics from the earliest age? What research is ongoing in his Department or at third level on different ways of teaching mathematics using the modern technologies of apps, tablets, mobile phones and so forth? Will the Minister come back to me with a view on the PolyUp methodology, which is being pioneered in Stanford and which I have seen in action? It is quite impressive.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will come back to the Deputy on that. I thank him for bringing it to my attention.

The Deputy highlights an extremely important issue. We talk about how to increase the number of STEM graduates. That is important and we have made considerable progress on it. We often talk about that just in the context of the student, which is important, but we do not often talk about it in the context of how we upskill and support the teacher in how he or she teaches the student to help him or her get to the level of mathematics, science or technology that is required. Not too long ago, I visited DCU's school of education and had a very interesting engagement with Professor Anne Looney and others on this and on how one teaches the teacher of the future in order that he or she can in turn pass on that learning and the new ways of learning mathematics and science subjects and technology in general. Through Science Foundation Ireland's centre for research training, we have provided €13.6 million in funding for what we call foundations of data science. That funds a cohort of PhD students to look at the area of applied mathematics, statistics and machine learning. PhD students trained in that centre will develop skills that will make them uniquely adaptable to the rapidly evolving needs of Irish and global society. Also, through our Springboard+ programme and human capital initiative, we are positively discriminating, if you like, in favour of STEM and the upskilling of individuals working in education and maths.

I will revert to the Deputy on his specific proposal.

### **Further and Higher Education**

69. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which third and fourth level education is likely to focus on the need to supply suitably qualified staff in the public and private sectors and in areas currently experiencing difficulties in obtaining and retaining staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6349/22]

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** This question is about the extent to which the Minister remains focused on the need to supply the workforce with suitably qualified people as quickly



and as often as needs arise.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The challenge to deliver suitably qualified graduates to meet the demands of the public and private sectors is a fundamental focus for my Department. It needs to be and is a fundamental focus for the Government and this House, I am quite sure, across the entire skills system, including tertiary. I often say to students when I meet leaving certificate classes that everybody in the Dáil says we need to build more houses, and we do, but I am not going to build a house, and if every Member of the Dáil were to come together, we probably would not build a house between us. Some of the biggest societal challenges we face, whether climate change or housing, require making sure we have a skills pipeline. That requires a broadening of the conversation we have with young people about their options after school. I passionately believe that.

We have made huge progress on university progression and we should be proud of that. We now need to apply a similar level of focus to broadening the conversation about apprenticeships. Let us debate in this House how best to do so, how we might do it more quickly, what we do well and what we do not do well. I think we can all agree on the need to make sure the students sitting in sixth, fifth or fourth year classrooms today are aware that the trades and the crafts can provide high-paid, skilled jobs that can help address some of the biggest societal challenges. We are putting a focus on making sure that, for the first time ever, apprenticeships and further education and training options are on the CAO website. I am pleased to see that more than 15,000 students who logged on to *cao.ie/options* went directly from that page to the apprenticeship website to find out about more options.

We have an advanced system of skills provision across further and higher education and lifelong learning, which is agile and responsive to changes in the world of work. It is critical that graduates acquire technical and transversal skills. This is an important point in response to the Deputy's question. We need to embed transversal skills in our degree programmes and higher education institutions. The development of skills policy and responses to skills needs is evidence-based and informed by the work of the skills and labour market research unit of SOLAS, which is an agency of my Department, and the expert group on future skills needs.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I thank the Minister for his reply. Is it possible, or has consideration been given, to turn on an accelerated supply of suitably qualified people, particularly in the tourism, hotel and catering sectors, where premises cannot open fully, even though they want to, due to a lack of suitably qualified staff?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The regional enterprise plans are soon to be published. We need to align courses, apprenticeships and training provision to meet local needs and future skills needs. The establishment of the Atlantic Technological University in my own region will certainly strengthen further investment in job creation. We can build better capacity within our life science sector, look to be more innovative with regard to green technology and expand growth within our tourism and business sectors. We need a cohesive approach across Departments to ensure we address deficits with regard to future skills needs and that we have a long-term strategy and approach.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I thank the Minister for his visit to Tralee, which was very productive and helpful. I invite him to come to Killarney in the near future to meet representatives of the tourism and hospitality industry because there is a particular difficulty there with regard to obtaining and retaining skilled staff. That will be one of the great challenges for the tourism

and hospitality sector as we emerge from the pandemic. It deserves really close focus and attention. It would be marvellous if the Minister could come to Killarney, meet representatives of the industry, listen to their views and, it is to be hoped, help to put a solution in place.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** To respond to Deputy Durkan, the short answer is “Yes”. I want to work with the tourism and hospitality sector. We have already shown that when we worked with the Irish Hotels Federation to put in place a range of upskilling and reskilling programmes. Its members wanted to use the difficult times of the Covid restrictions when they were not able to open their premises to provide their staff with the skills they might not have had the opportunity or time to develop during a busy season. We remain willing and able to do more in that space and have a budget to do so.

I thank Deputy Dillon for raising the issue of the skills needs of the regions. I am very excited about the opening of the Atlantic Technological University in April. I thank the Deputy for his support and work on this matter. Castlebar will become a university town and Mayo will become a university county. I want to send a clear message in respect of the Atlantic Technological University. Its role will be to work in the context of the regional jobs plans and enterprise strategies and with the regional skills fora to identify where the jobs for the future and for now are in Mayo and the north-west region and to provide the courses and pathways necessary to develop a pipeline of talent. I look forward to visiting Mayo with the Deputy shortly to look at that.

I thank Deputy Griffin very much for his invitation to visit Killarney. I would be delighted to come to Killarney with him to meet businesses, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector, and to see how we can do more with regard to further education and training opportunities, particularly for those sectors that are busy and that we want to be busier, and to make sure that education and training is provided in an agile and flexible way that works for them. I am delighted that we have provided an employer incentive scheme worth €2,000 to people who take on new apprentices. I hope that will be of use and I look forward to being in Killarney soon.

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

### **Planning Issues**

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Last week’s decision by An Bord Pleanála to approve a wind farm at Derreendonee in Curraglass, along the southern rim of Cork’s beauty spot, Gougane Barra, has really taken locals in Ballygeary by surprise. Cork County Council had refused planning permission, as had the board’s inspector. The council’s response was an adamant and definite refusal. The council’s planner said that the plans would “materially contravene the stated Objectives of the Cork County development plan” and “provide for a highly intrusive visually domineering form of development that debases the integrity and the landscape charac-

ter". The council was very adamant. These towers, whose tip height would reach 178 m, would dominate the landscape in the area. It is acknowledged that alternative energy sources are needed and that wind energy is going to form part of that. A great many wind farms have already been built across County Cork, including seven locally, but this is a question of the suitability of the Gougane Barra area. You cannot make another Gougane Barra but you can find other locations for a wind farm.

When you think of Gougane Barra, you think of the secluded valley, the tiny oratory on the big tranquil island and the tall cliffs around it. It is an isolated lost valley. There is a real opportunity to develop the whole area, right the way down the Lee Valley from Gougane Barra, through the Gearagh and on to Blarney Castle, for tourism. An awful lot of people rediscovered the area during the pandemic but Gougane Barra had already established its identity, nationally and internationally, well before then. We want to see tourism developed in the area. When An Bord Pleanála examined this application, it would have looked at Fáilte Ireland studies from 2007 and 2012. Even with those, it was not satisfied. It would have had to supplement them with studies from Scotland because the others were from so far back. How much consideration was given to tourism when this decision was being arrived at?

The proposed development on the southern slopes of Derreendonee in Curraglass are right on the rim of Gougane Barra. If you imagine Gougane Barra like a horseshoe with the lake in the middle, these towers would be on the far side of the cliff, on the southern side as you approach from the Wild Atlantic Way from the Bantry direction. To put the 178 m height of these towers in context, the spire in Dublin is only 120 m tall. Liberty Hall is 59 m tall. These towers would be as tall as Liberty Hall with the spire on top of it. Towers of that height situated 300 m above sea level would be seen from a very long distance away. They would have a very significant impact.

The local community is very much against it. Coiste Forbartha Béal Átha'n Ghaorthaidh is now faced with having to put together funds to possibly take on a judicial review. The council has identified Gougane Barra and only a handful of other places in the county as tourist attractions of special quality. These include the likes of Garnish Island, Blarney Castle and Gougane Barra. This development would stand out like a sore thumb. What consideration was given to the tourism value of the area?

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I thank Deputy Aindrias Moynihan for raising this matter, which is very important to his community. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage's role in relation to the planning system is primarily to provide a policy and legislative framework under which the planning authorities, An Bord Pleanála and the Office of the Planning Regulator perform their statutory planning functions. The legislative framework chiefly comprises the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended. The Department has also issued planning guidelines under section 28 of the 2000 Act that planning authorities and the board are obliged to have regard to in the exercise of their planning functions. However, the day-to-day operation of the planning system is a matter for the planning authorities, and for the board where planning appeals or strategic infrastructure development are involved.

In making decisions on a planning application, a planning authority or the board, as appropriate, must consider the proper planning and sustainable development of the area having regard to the provisions of the development plan, any submissions or observations received

from the public and the statutory consultees, and any relevant ministerial or Government policies, including any guidelines issued by the Department. Under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is specifically precluded from exercising power or control with regard to any particular case with which a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála is, or may be, concerned. Consequently, it would not be appropriate for me to comment regarding any individual planning case or cases.

It is important to be aware, however, that Ireland has set an increased goal under our revised climate action plan for the generation of up to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by the end of the decade. An electricity grid powered by renewable energy sources will contribute to Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets by substituting primarily wind and solar electricity generation for fossil fuel electricity generation, as well as displacing emissions in other sectors, for example, through the electrification of car transport and residential heating.

The renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, is Ireland's flagship policy to deliver on this up-to-80% target and to set a pathway to a net-zero economy. The first RESS auction for onshore wind and solar projects was held in 2020. The second RESS auction process has begun, with the qualification application window having closed in January. The auction is scheduled to take place in May and the final notice of award in June, which is three months ahead of our previous plans. It is anticipated that RESS 2 will deliver a major increase in renewable electricity generation by the end of 2024. The RESS programmes, including the launch of the second onshore auction and the forthcoming offshore auctions, are a major step forward in meeting the Government's ambition of reducing emissions by 51% by 2030 and delivering up to 80% renewable electricity by 2030.

A cornerstone of the RESS is the provision of pathways for increased community ownership of, participation in and benefit from renewable electricity projects. To facilitate delivery of this objective, an enabling framework for community participation has been developed. This framework includes a preference category for community projects to ensure a route to market for communities; a community benefit fund for all projects to ensure that benefits are distributed to the local communities hosting these projects; and a suite of supports, such as information toolkits, trusted intermediary advisers and financial grants, to help communities to develop their own generation projects. Furthermore, a supportive spatial planning framework for onshore renewable electricity generation development is critical to ensure delivery of the electricity targets set out in the climate action plan.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Almost all the Minister of State's response focused on the need for energy and climate action requirements. There is widespread recognition of that aspect from locals and the planning authority in this case. There are, however, places that are more suitable for different uses. It must surely be recognised that tourism is to be considered in this context as well. Gougane Barra has to be regarded as a stand-out area for tourism. Just because a national policy is in place to approve wind farms, that does not mean that every application submitted, even in unsuitable locations, must be encouraged as sites for wind farms. Gougane Barra must surely be recognised as being more suitable for tourism. The county council was adamant about this point and even An Bord Pleanála's own inspector recognised this. It is not possible to make another Gougane Barra. It is not an option available. There are, though, many other sites for wind farms.

Chuir sé an-ionadh ar fad ar mhuintir na háite agus daoine go forleathan ar fud an domhain, dáiríre, gur cheadaigh An Bord Pleanála an t-iarratas i nGuagán Barra. Bhí an chomhairle con-

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tae glan ina aghaidh agus níor bhraith sí go raibh an áit oiriúnach in aon chor. Glacaimid leis go bhfuil gá le foinsí fuinnimh éagsúla agus le gaoth ach tá áiteanna nach bhfuil oiriúnach agus teastaíonn an ceantar atá mórthimpeall ar Ghuagán Barra a fhorbairt i gcomhair turasóireachta. Tá sí níos oiriúnaí i gcomhair turasóireachta ná mar atá sé i gcomhair gaoithe. Mar sin, ghoill sé go mór ar mhuintir na háite. Ní féidir Guagán Barra eile a dhéanamh ach tá roghanna ann maidir le fuinneamh gaoithe.

Alternatives are available. We already host many wind farms in our community and it is recognised that there is a place for doing so. Gougane Barra, though, should surely be recognised for what it is. The county council recognises that, Fáilte Ireland recognises that and surely An Bord Pleanála should recognise it as well. I do not feel that appropriate consideration was given to tourism in this regard.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** I thank the Deputy again for articulating the concern of local residents in Gougane Barra. I am clear, however, about my role under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, which means that I am unable to comment on specific cases. This is clearly enshrined in the legislation. I referred to the guidelines and energy targets earlier to try to set the context regarding where the Government is coming from and its direction of travel. Regarding this project, however, An Bord Pleanála has clearly set out in its report the reasons for granting the decision. Therefore, it is worth having a look at that, reviewing it and taking cognizance of the context of the decision. Unfortunately, I cannot get involved in operational issues or comment further in that regard.

## Diaspora Issues

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I am thankful for being facilitated in this short debate this evening. In the context of the easing of Covid-19 restrictions, after almost two difficult years, it is appropriate that we should focus on the issue of the Irish diaspora. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, to the House. I wish him a renewed vigour in the context of his work now, considering he probably was not engaged in the type of travel over the past two years that he might otherwise have been in his role. I wish him a successful and busy year in 2022.

Similarly, the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the USA brought a renewed focus on the special relationship between Ireland and America. The history between our two countries is rich and enduring. First and foremost, it is a people-to-people relationship. It is also complemented, however, by deep political ties and a vibrant political relationship from local authority level, here and in the US, right up to the White House. Over the years, millions of Irish people emigrated to the USA. They eked out livelihoods there and built homes. More than 10% of the population of the USA, almost 33 million people, claims to be of Irish descent. Pre-Covid-19, more than 1.5 million people visited Ireland annually from the United States for tourism and business or to visit relatives. The strong people-to-people contacts I mentioned are also accompanied by dynamic economic and social contacts. Some 800 US firms across Ireland directly employ 180,000 people. The American Chamber of Commerce Ireland, ACCI, states that another 140,000 are indirectly employed. Equally, more than €3 billion annually is added to the Irish Exchequer in this regard.

Therefore, what I want to discuss with the Minister of State and ask him to examine are the possible elements of an enhanced package of measures on immigration, which I trust he would examine in conjunction with his Government colleagues. I refer to a new programme, or an



extension of existing programmes, to those who wish to live, perhaps work or even retire to Ireland. It would be targeted specifically at US citizens. I am calling for a package of measures for those demonstrating real and close ties to Ireland. They might be joined by a spouse or partner.

There would, of course, be conditions. The people concerned would have to be of good character. There would also be certain income criteria to be met. Equally, there would be a pathway to citizenship after several years. Let us look at the success, for example, of the various schemes which run for a shorter time, such as the Fulbright programme. What I would like to see is a bespoke residency scheme for US nationals. The programme would be US-specific and not available for the nationals of any other country.

*8 o'clock*

It would of course have to comply with EU law. It would require amendments to our employment work permit schemes. We are going to be doing that in any event having regard to the shortage. I ask the Minister of State to give this appropriate consideration. Perhaps between now and the summer we can see how best we can enhance and develop that really important relationship.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I thank the Deputy for raising this topic and I pay tribute to the work which he undertook, as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and as Minister for Justice and Equality, in regard to facilitating a whole-of-government response to issues affecting the Irish abroad, whether in the context of recent emigrants or the broader diaspora issues he is raising this evening, particularly with regard to those seeking to return to Ireland.

The Government's new five-year diaspora strategy, which I had the honour to launch in November 2020, owes much to the vision and strategic thinking underlying his work. A key pillar of that strategy is our people. This includes our goal to "empower vibrant Diaspora communities that are connected to each other and to Ireland" and the related commitment to be a voice for Irish citizens who wish to find pathways to legal migration, especially the undocumented in the US. The proposal which the Deputy has raised this evening touches on both of those areas. Under the existing scheme, which was developed by the Department of Justice under the Deputy's direction, the financial threshold for American citizens looking to take up residency in Ireland was set at €50,000 per person per annum, in addition to proof that they would have access to sufficient funds to cover any unforeseen major expenses. To a large extent, this adjustment of the threshold has meant that the majority of Irish Americans without Irish citizenship who are looking to retire to Ireland are in a much better position to do so.

The reciprocal agreements that we have with the US in regard to taxation and social security are another important aspect that needs to be borne in mind. As Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, I am supportive of looking at how that scheme has operated to see whether additional modifications could appropriately be made to improve it further. I agree with the Deputy that there is particular scope to look at how we improve the provision of relevant information and communication in countries such as the US that are home to significant Irish diaspora communities about these opportunities, whether this relates to retiring to Ireland, returning here to set up a business, which is a programme for which we have doubled the funding this year - it is a very successful programme and we are hoping for even more success out of it this year - or to students travelling under the working holiday authorisation.

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Irish America - comprising those who are Irish born, those who claim Irish ancestry and those with a strong affinity for Ireland - is of tremendous importance to Ireland. As the Deputy knows, we work closely with grassroots organisations and community groups right across America in support of Irish citizens. In 2021, my Department provided more than €4.22 million from the Government's emigrant support fund to support diaspora organisations in the US. This represents one third of our total expenditure on emigrant support. I had the opportunity to be in New York to announce some of that funding. Our relationship with our diaspora and emigrants in the US, as the Deputy said, is greatly important. The Deputy mentioned Covid. A dedicated Covid response fund was also set up to help these organisations meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable, including the undocumented.

In recent years, we have also expanded and reinforced our network of diplomatic missions across the US, including opening a new consulate general in Los Angeles in 2018. We will be opening a new consulate general in Miami this summer. We have established Ireland House operations in New York, Austin and San Francisco to provide for a team Ireland footprint. This includes not just our diplomatic but our economic State agencies. We have also worked closely with Culture Ireland to deepen our cultural ties by appointing dedicated cultural officers in the consulates in New York and Los Angeles.

Returning Irish emigrants or those of Irish heritage bring with them skills and knowledge gained abroad that help develop both the national and local economies. They help maintain and strengthen bonds between the Irish at home and abroad. Thankfully, as we move away from the restrictions, we will have a greater opportunity to engage with our diaspora.

**Deputy Charles Flanagan:** I thank the Minister of State for the very positive nature of his reply. I look forward to sitting down with him over the coming weeks to see how best we can fine-tune a new and enhanced scheme. I ask him to engage in discussions with his colleagues, the Minister for Justice, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Taoiseach, who will embark on what I trust will be a very positive visit to the US on St. Patrick's Day.

Tomorrow ambassador-designate Claire Cronin arrives from the US to our shores. She arrives here as a friend of Ireland. She arrives here with a very active and engaging programme of work. I wish her well in that regard. I also acknowledge the announcement over the past few days of the reintroduction of the very successful J1 visa scheme, which has facilitated in excess of 150,000 Irish students and young professionals who undertake summer work on an annual basis, and travel programme. I acknowledge the Fulbright Commission scheme supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs under the auspices of the Minister.

This is a two-way relationship that benefits both our countries, the US and Ireland. It is time that we should look at all of the schemes. I understand there are about nine different schemes for people travelling from the US to Ireland. It is important that we put together an enhanced scheme which would facilitate a more long-term arrangement, a long-term residency for people who are currently citizens of the US and who want to settle here in Ireland. The least we should provide them is a form of long-term residency and security.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** I thank the Deputy for those remarks. I would agree very much with what he is saying. The thrust of my work since I became a Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora has been to strengthen and deepen the ties with our diaspora. There is a need for that recognition that the Deputy talked about that it is very much a two-way street.

We must deepen and strengthen ties with our diaspora but we must also be willing and open to bringing our diaspora back and to recognising that there is a large percentage of people who want to come to Ireland for many reasons, to study, work or live, who are part of that diaspora. We have benefited greatly from our diaspora. I do not think there is another country in the world with a comparable diaspora to that which we have and that has enjoyed the benefits of its diaspora in the way we have.

It is very welcome that the changing situation in respect of Covid-19 and the pandemic will ensure that we will have an opportunity for a really strong engagement starting with St. Patrick's Day and the engagement right across that day not just with the US authorities but with the diaspora and with civil society in the US. We are going to be building on that. I will be in the US on a number of occasions throughout the year to strengthen and deepen those ties with our diaspora group. It is critical for that in terms of the new diaspora strategy that I mentioned earlier in my opening remarks, that is all about recognising the deepening of our ties, reaching out to elements of the diaspora that we have not engaged with in the past and particularly that facilitation of people, be they Irish born or part of our greater affinity diaspora, who want to engage with Ireland in terms of being able to come here and experience what Ireland is all about. We will very much be working in that area. I thank the Deputy again for raising this matter.

### **Land Issues**

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I thank the Minister, Deputy Foley, for making an extra effort to be here today. I understand that she had an earlier engagement. It is genuinely appreciated by all of us.

The question in front of us is very simple. It relates to land ultimately in the control of her Department that was to be transferred to the HSE for the purposes of a primary care centre. I have been active in this constituency for over a decade. This issue has been going on longer than my time there. We are very keen to see how the Minister can assist us and the HSE in releasing that land so that the community in north Clondalkin gets the primary care centre it deserves. It is a strong and vibrant community, but also one that experiences significant socioeconomic disadvantage. Therefore, the delay in this facility has all sorts of additional consequences. I urge the Minister to work with the cross-party delegation of Deputies to get this matter resolved as quickly as possible and allow the HSE to proceed with the primary care centre that the local community so desperately needs.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I thank the Minister for taking the time to address this matter. A state-of-the-art primary healthcare centre is badly needed in north Clondalkin. As Deputy Ó Broin mentioned, this situation has been ongoing for a long time. In 2015, there was an agreement between the Department of Education and the HSE on the transfer of lands at Collinstown Park Community College. Planning permission was granted in 2018 for the construction of a two-storey primary care centre. We are now in 2022 and not a sod of earth has been turned despite planning permission, fire safety certificates and disability access certificates having been granted. All of the groundwork has been done, so the delay is unacceptable. Two arms of the State seem to be delaying the process. The centre is much needed by the people of north Clondalkin. What is the delay and can the Minister do anything to ensure that the project is not delayed any further and people can get this much-needed service?

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** My constituency colleagues have outlined the problem and we are

all united in our desire for action on it. The centre has been planned for years and the local community is desperate to have it delivered. The centre will offer speech and language therapy, occupational and physical therapy, a dental suite, a paediatric suite, GP suites and a mental health suite. These are much-needed services in the local community. Having no location for them is becoming an obstacle because it is a barrier to hiring and assigning healthcare professionals to the area. The sooner the transfer of land can happen, the sooner we can get the ball rolling on delivering this much-needed facility, which will have a major impact on the ground in north Clondalkin.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I thank the Minister for taking this important matter. The primary care centre in question was earmarked ten years ago, and probably longer. Deputy Ward and I have lived in that area. The current health centre in Rowlagh is antiquated for north Clondalkin's population of nearly 20,000. More than five years ago, 35 primary care centres around the State were earmarked and meant to be completed. At this moment, however, nothing has been done as regards the Collinstown site.

Judging from the response to a parliamentary question, there is obviously an issue with the transfer of land from the Department of Education to the HSE. That may be the case, but the people who are being disadvantaged are those who live in the area. They need this healthcare centre as soon as possible. I hope the Minister will clarify the matter.

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I thank Deputies Ó Broin, Ward, Gino Kenny and Higgins for providing me the opportunity to update the House on the transfer of lands and the provision of a primary healthcare facility at Collinstown Park Community College in Clondalkin. I acknowledge that there is unanimity among the Deputies and I appreciate the passion with which they speak and the necessity for their constituents.

The HSE has been seeking to acquire a site for a primary care centre at Collinstown Park Community College. This school site is in the ownership of the Minister for Education. Discussions have taken place with the HSE regarding the disposal of part of the site to the HSE for the development of the primary care centre. Discussions between the HSE and Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education Training Board, DDLETB, have been ongoing for a number of years and, more recently, with my Department. The initial proposal developed from an engagement between DDLETB, the school and the HSE was that the HSE would construct a facility adjoining the primary care centre for the use of the school. The site for this development is separated from the main school building by an internal access road. Initially, this facility was intended to be a library, but it then evolved into a multifunctional space that could be subdivided, if required.

Following a review of the proposal by my Department in consultation with the HSE and ETB, it was determined that the provision of additional facilities for the school that adjoined the main school building would be more effective and provide a value-for-money solution. The Department of Education has engaged with the HSE and the ETB concerning the delivery of the facilities at their revised location adjoining the school as part of the disposal agreement.

Following further engagement with the HSE and ETB, I am pleased that it has now been decided that the disposal of the site for the primary care centre will proceed separate from delivery of the facilities to the school. This is a significant positive. My Department will proceed to progress the disposal of the site to the HSE in line with the protocols for the disposal of sites between State bodies and subject to the sanction of the Minister for Public Expenditure and

Reform.

The Department of Education is in discussions with the ETB regarding the provision of additional facilities for the school. The ETB will be submitting an application for the proposed additional facilities shortly and this application will be processed promptly upon receipt. It is anticipated that the Department will be in a position to advise the school and HSE of the outcome of this engagement with the ETB soon.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I thank the Minister. It is always good to get positive news, even if it is only half of the way. That the transfer to the HSE will proceed is welcome. I invite the Minister to go a step further and try to give the four Deputies present an indicative timeline for the transfer and indicate whether she anticipates a speedy approval by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Crucially, if we had a notional timeline for when the transfer would take place, that would keep all of us content this evening.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I welcome that the disposal of the site for the development of a primary care centre in Collinstown will proceed. To echo Deputy Ó Broin, having the timeline would be very welcome. People have been in touch with me left, right and centre about this service. Occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology services and so on, which are not available in the north Clondalkin area current, could be available in this centre.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** I thank the Minister for her reply and for her acknowledgement of how significant an issue this is locally. It is great to hear that a decision on the disposal of the site has been reached. I ask the Minister to ensure that the disposal is seen through as urgently as possible.

I welcome confirmation of the additional facilities for Collinstown Park Community College. I urge the Minister to ensure, as she has committed to, there is an adjudication on the funding and planning as soon as possible so that the services are delivered in tandem.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I welcome the response but it was slightly ambiguous. It still does not give clarity as to when this will happen. We could have been discussing this matter five years ago and the same answer might have been given. I am slightly concerned about the ambiguous nature of the Minister's response. At the end of the day, the people who will benefit are the people of north Clondalkin, who badly need this centre. I suspect that, if this were to happen in a more affluent area of Dublin, there would be a different response.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** I wish to be clear, as there is no ambiguity in this. To be fair, I have had a short amount of time to move this project along. It is a progressive and positive step, and should be acknowledged as such, that the disposal of the site for the development of the primary care centre will proceed separately from the delivery of facilities to the school. This means that there is now the impetus for that project to move ahead.

I appreciate how the timeline is an issue for the Deputies' constituents. The Department will proceed to finalise the head of terms with the HSE for the disposal of the site. The Department will also obtain the necessary sanction from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for the disposal of the property. As with all property disposals, due diligence is required, which the Deputies will appreciate. This can give rise to added complexities. Therefore, it is not possible to give a definitive timeframe. However, the Department can provide the HSE with the necessary licences to enable it to commence development work on the site pending completion of the sale. That is fair progress. In tandem with that, my Department will process the application



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from the ETB for additional facilities for the school.

I can confirm to the Deputies that officials in my Department will endeavour to progress and expedite both matters as quickly as possible. This is significant progress for both projects, which are of particular significance to the Deputies' constituents.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ag 8.20 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 2 Feabhra 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.20 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 February 2022.