



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 22 Feabhra 2022

Tuesday, 22 February 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I begin by extending, on behalf of Sinn Féin, my condolences on the passing of South Belfast MLA, Christopher Stalford, to Christopher's wife, Laura, to his four children, his family, friends and colleagues in the DUP. Our thoughts and prayers are with them as they grieve his loss.

Tá dhá tuairisc a fhoilsíodh an tseachtain seo a chaitheann síos go mór ar fhreagra an Rialtais seo maidir le géarchéim na gcostas maireachtála chun solais. Is í an fhírinne ná nach bhfuil go leor á dhéanamh. Tá páistí ar an líne bhochtaineachta anois mar gheall ar chostais atá ag ardú.

Children face the sharp edge of the cost-of-living crisis. Barnardos Ireland has published a report which states that one quarter of families fear they will not be able to feed their kids as the price of groceries soars. Barnardos CEO, Suzanne Connolly, has stated families are running out earlier due to increasing costs. She has said the situation is now very serious for low- and middle-income families. In its Report Card 2022, published yesterday, the Children's Rights Alliance awarded the Government a grade E to reflect the increasing number of children experiencing homelessness. Extortionate rents that ordinary families cannot afford are a key driver in this scandal.

The package announced by Government does not go far enough. It barely scratches the surface. It is not just me or Sinn Féin telling the Government this. Barnardos, St. Vincent de Paul, Social Justice Ireland and other organisations are all saying the same thing. The Government could have made better choices. It could have acted as Sinn Féin proposed. It could have cut rents and banned increases, but it did not. It could have cut childcare costs. It did not do that. It could have expanded and extended the fuel allowance. It did not do that either. It could have provided a cost-of-living cash payment to individuals. Again, it refused to do so. A one-off energy credit paid in March or April is better than nothing, but it will not make a dent when people are paying thousands to light and heat their homes. Last month, gas demand rose by 11% as temperatures dropped. At the weekend, Sinn Féin activists were out engaging with communities. People were coming to their doors with energy bills that were so high they described them

as the straw that would finally break their backs.

What is the Government response to all of this hardship? First, the Taoiseach is telling people that no further help is coming from the Government and that they will have to wait at least seven months for the budget. You are on your own, is the message from the Head of Government. Then we have the Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar, piping up and talking about increasing interest rates, a measure that would not help any families but would heap additional financial pressure on workers and households. Then, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and his Government colleagues plan to go ahead with a carbon tax increase that will make it even more expensive for families to keep their homes warm. To crown it all off, on Wednesday evening, the Government rolled in here and voted to ensure cuckoo funds continue to pay no tax on rental income and no capital gains tax, the very same funds that are gobbling up family homes, making home ownership unaffordable and helping drive rents up, up and up.

The Government needs a reality check. It needs to wake up and understand where ordinary people are at. The Government is living in dreamland if it thinks that people can hang on and wait until next October, when the Government announces next year's budget. Families and children need a far better intervention from Government to bring down the cost of living, and they need it right here, right now. That is what the call is for. Is the Government going to leave them in the lurch or is it going to do as Sinn Féin has asked and act to support those families and children, who so many organisations are saying are being left behind as a result of its policies?

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I thank the Deputy for raising once again the very real issue of the cost-of-living pressures people are facing. The Government acknowledges that a lot of people are under real pressure because of the rising cost of living. We all know the reasons the cost of living is increasing. There are external international factors. There are also domestic factors, including the really strong rebound in the Irish economy which has exceeded most expectations. On the external front, undoubtedly the increase in wholesale energy prices and the disruptions in the global supply are having a real impact on the ground.

Of course, people are not that concerned about the reasons. They just know it is hurting them, it is affecting them, and they want to know what we are doing about it. We do note that the most recent data from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show a moderation in January in the harmonised index of consumer prices, down from 5.7% to 5%. We cannot take too much comfort from that. It is a slight easing and we do not know yet whether that is going to be part of an improvement in the underlying trend or whether it is a one-off. Time will tell in relation to that.

That is why the Government has acted. That is why we acted in the budget last October, when we had an income tax package of more than half a billion euro in respect of reductions in income tax, the burden of which falls on low-income people and on middle-income people. The Sinn Féin proposal in respect of income tax was to increase it by €800 million in the last budget. This Government reduced it by half a billion euro. That is €1.3 billion of a difference in our income tax proposals in the previous budget alone. In addition, we had a social welfare package in the previous budget of more than half a billion euro, much of which was targeted: at the working family payment, the qualified child payment and the living alone allowance, for example - three payments that are generally accepted as being among the most effective tools any government has to tackle the poverty issues that are undoubtedly there. Of course, it was also coupled with increases in the core rates. We acknowledge there is a challenge with fuel

prices. That is why we increased the fuel allowance in the budget by €5 immediately on budget night last year. The Sinn Féin proposal was not to increase the fuel allowance at all in the budget last October. That is a fact.

Now, of course, we have gone much further. In recent weeks, we have come forward with a package of more than half a billion euro. Some measures are targeted and some are universal. The targeted measures will include the €125 once-off payment to people on the fuel allowance. Almost 400,000 households will get that payment in the next three weeks. By mid-March, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, plans to have that payment transferred to the people who need it most. A number of the measures we introduced in the budget last October have yet to kick in and these will also help many families, particularly working families and middle-income families, who also are feeling the pressure. In autumn, for example, the improvement in the SUSI grant will come in. There is the improvement in the means test and the qualifying threshold for the student support scheme. The extension of the universal childcare subsidy in relation to older children will also kick in in autumn of this year. The extension by two weeks of parents' benefit will kick in in July. In addition, a number of the other social welfare measures, such as the improvement in the means test for carers, for example, will also come into effect in June.

I represent ordinary people. I get elected by ordinary people. This Government represents ordinary people. We are listening to them. That is why we have responded in the best way we can so far with a set of universal measures but also a set of targeted measures, including those introduced outside of the annual budget. That has just been done, as the Deputy is aware.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The people I speak to who live in this city say they cannot afford €2,000 rents and cannot understand why the Minister and his Government continue to vote against rent freezes. They continue to ask me why the Government will not support the Sinn Féin policy that would put a month's rent back into renters' pockets. The people I talk to tell me about the fact that childcare is a second mortgage for many families and that there is a way to cut the cost of childcare but it falls on deaf ears. The people I talk to say the social welfare package the Government introduced in the budget last year does not even keep up with the rate of inflation.

What people want is real action right here, right now. There is a suite of proposals that we put forward. It is a suite of proposals that could help people in terms of the cost of living by giving them direct cash payments. The Government refused to do that. There is the proposal to ban rent increases and put money back into renters' pockets. The Government refused to do it. There is the proposal to cut childcare costs. The Government refused to do it. When it comes to last week's vote, however, there is no tax for vulture funds that are making millions of euro on charging the highest rents in the State. These are the ordinary people the Minister is on the side of, because talk is cheap, but when it comes to action the Government is failing to deliver for these families. The Minister should not just take Sinn Féin's word on this. Barnardos, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Social Justice Ireland, the National One Parent Family Alliance are all saying the same thing. The Government needs to understand where people are at.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael McGrath: We do understand where people are at. The Deputy is right; talk is cheap. He talks about fuel poverty. Sinn Féin introduced an alternative budget last October that did not increase the fuel allowance by one cent.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true. We increased portions of welfare-----

Deputy Michael McGrath: That is the truth.

Deputy Martin Browne: *The Journal* will have more work to do.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Deputy did that in October of last year. His party published its budget proposals in which there was not a single cent of an increase in the fuel allowance. This Government increased it by €5 on budget night in an unprecedented measure because we recognise the genuine difficulties that people are facing.

The Deputy talks about the carbon tax. He is being duplicitous on the carbon tax and highly disingenuous. He gives people the impression Sinn Féin is against the carbon tax. The only thing his party is against when it comes to the carbon tax is the next increase, whenever that is going to be, because it never proposes to unwind or abolish the carbon tax. Tell people the truth. His party is-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We did not say we would. Let us stop pushing up energy prices on families.

Deputy Michael McGrath: His party is in favour of the carbon tax and is only ever against the next increase, and that is typical of the cynical politics that his party is pursuing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are against pushing up prices on families. What do you only understand about that? Push up gas prices. Push up oil prices.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Perhaps Deputy Doherty might tell people where the €412 million I have ring-fenced this year for fuel poverty measures, for retrofitting and for agri-environmental schemes from carbon tax receipts will come from. It is not there.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the vulture funds, Minister?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Shortall.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There were further revelations about the dysfunction at the heart of the health service in the *Business Post* at the weekend. Department of Health officials described a horror of waste in the HSE, criticised recruitment targets as incredulous, and expressed concern at their inability to hold the HSE to account.

Concerns about budgets in the HSE went all the way to the top. The Minister himself was said to have spoken directly to the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, about the €514 million supplementary budget for 2020 and to have expressed doubt as to whether it was needed or indeed utilised as intended. When the *Business Post* sought confirmation on this from the Department, it was told those remarks were hearsay. I am pleased the Minister is in the Chamber today and in a position to confirm whether he had that conversation.

There is a great deal of detail on what has been reported in the past two weeks which raises serious concerns about monumental levels of waste, inefficiency and profligacy within the health service. I want to focus on just one area, which is cancer services. Recently, the Social Democrats introduced a motion calling for hospital charges for cancer patients to be waived and for hospitals to stop using debt collectors to pursue cancer patients for outstanding charges.

The Government did not object to our motion but, crucially, it has not acted and it had the opportunity to do so. In advance of the Government's publishing its measures to combat the cost of living crisis, the Department of Health submitted a proposal that would have seen those charges abolished for everyone. It said it would cost approximately €30 million. The cost for cancer patients would be only a fraction of that figure. The Government opted not to do this and instead made a conscious decision that cancer patients should continue to be charged for chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

How does the Minister think it must feel to be a cancer patient and read what has been revealed in recent weeks about the hundreds of millions of euro going into a black hole in the health service while debt collectors are hounding such patients to repay outstanding debts related to life-saving services?

Did the Minister raise concerns with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, about the €514 million supplementary budget in 2020? Why is it there are hundreds of millions of euro in the HSE budget for fake recruitment targets but the Minister cannot find the relatively meagre amount that would be required to spare cancer patients the financial burden of paying for their care? Will the Minister commit to abolishing hospital charges, if not for everyone immediately, at least for cancer patients?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for her questions. First, to respond to the comments she made and the questions relating to the articles in the Business Post, the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and I have a good working relationship. Officials of the two Departments engage on an ongoing basis. There is a health budget oversight group involving officials from both Departments that meets regularly and, as one would expect, we have occasional bilateral ministerial meetings as well, and sometimes on specific issues. For example, we had one in the middle of last year to review progress on the implementation of the budgetary measures for 2021.

The accounts for the HSE in 2021 are currently being finalised. The Minister gave an update to the Cabinet today that on a cash basis the health Vote was €469 million below profile. They are now calculating the level of accruals that relate to 2021 and it is expected there will be a deficit of perhaps up to €140 million for 2021. Those accounts are due to be finalised by the end of this month and any question of a prior year adjustment relating to 2020 will be dealt with in that context as well. There was a Supplementary Estimate of just over €500 million in 2020. The HSE ended 2020 with cash reserves of over €800 million and over €260 million was ultimately returned to the Exchequer in respect of 2020. The question of any prior year adjustment will be dealt with in the coming weeks as part of the finalisation of the 2020 accounts. The Comptroller and Auditor General has commented on that issue and has outlined what the process is in that regard.

On the issue of cancer care, the central tenet of Sláintecare, and the Deputy knows more about this than most, is that cost would not be a barrier to accessing healthcare. The Government is committed to meeting that goal. We recognise that any form of cost that people face to access vital healthcare is a barrier and must be addressed. We have made significant progress. Recently, we announced a further reduction from €100 to €80 in the drugs payment scheme threshold for medicine. That is an important reform. We have provided €300 million in respect of waiting list initiatives for this year as well. The Government is certainly of the view that when it comes to cancer and other acute conditions cost should never be a barrier to accessing the services people need in our acute hospital system. We are committed to achieving that goal.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am puzzled by the Minister's last comment because, too often, cost is a barrier to people accessing care. For cancer patients, in particular, unless they have a medical card or private health insurance, they are faced with a bill of up to €800 per year just to get life-saving treatment. How can the Minister defend that? It is utterly indefensible. While, of course, Sláintecare calls for the removal of all inpatient charges, this is year five of the Sláintecare plan and no progress has been made on that. That is the reason we are asking the Minister to give a commitment, at least. The money involved is minuscule in the context of a €21 billion budget. We are asking the Government to honour the decision it made a couple of weeks ago on the Social Democrats' motion. The Government did not oppose it so, in effect, it is saying the motion was right. Will the Government honour that now and make provision for the removal or waiving of inpatient charges, at least for cancer patients, for the life-saving treatment and care that they must access? Will the Minister set out a clear timescale for that?

Deputy Michael McGrath: We are committed to tackling the general issue of costs in respect of access to healthcare. We will be extending the free general practitioner, GP, care eligibility to children aged six and seven years across this year. As I said, we have reduced the drugs payment scheme threshold and, recently, there have been reductions in the monthly prescription costs that individuals and families face. We have provided dedicated funding of €30 million to ensure access for patients to new innovative medicines. The Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has been clear that he is committed to addressing any eligibility anomalies or barriers to ensure the health system cares for those who are in the greatest need first. I do not believe there are people out there who need access to our public healthcare system for cancer care who are not getting it because they cannot afford it. That is not-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: That is not true. Listen to the Irish Cancer Society.

Deputy Michael McGrath: It is not a barrier.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: It is absolutely a barrier. They are hounded by debt collectors.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister without interruption.

Deputy Michael McGrath: As a practising politician for a number of years I have never encountered a situation-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Okay.

Deputy Michael McGrath: -----where our public health system refuses to care for cancer patients because they cannot pay a bill. I have never seen that.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: They hound them for the bills.

Deputy Michael McGrath: If the Deputy has any example please bring it to the attention of the Minister and the Government because access to cancer care in our public health system is not dependent on paying.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The establishment of the Tipperary town task force came about at my request following significant protests in Tipperary town. March4Tipp highlighted issues such as long-term unemployment, a lack of industry and employment opportunities, high social deprivation, high levels of vacancy and dereliction in the town centre, a lack of confidence in the Government's commitment to the town and a lack of consensus on what is required to solve issues locally.

Carmel Fox was appointed in 2019 by the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, to lead a task force that would develop a plan and look at addressing many complex issues. A dedicated manager has since been appointed to support this work. The task force was convened in early 2020 and is a multi-stakeholder group that has the active support of local community and voluntary organisations. Despite the global pandemic, the task force set about a broad and deep-reaching community and stakeholder consultation. A 15-year strategy action plan has been developed, which is aimed at arresting the decline in the town and driving socioeconomic recovery.

The task force has had some early successes. The commitment by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to the construction of a bypass to alleviate town centre congestion is a major boost. However the extent of the remaining task should not be underestimated. The scale of the challenge around social inclusion is especially daunting. Parallel to developing an overall plan for the town, the task force has developed a detailed and comprehensive social inclusion plan aimed at addressing a myriad of issues that prevail. These include the fact there is up to 40% male unemployment in areas of the town, there are high levels of welfare dependency, 36% of households are lone-parent households and there are high levels of disability and sickness. Several of the key indicators are more than twice the national average and will require significant multi-annual funding support to achieve meaningful outcomes.

I welcome the recent announcement by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, that funding is to be provided for a social inclusion co-ordinator for Tipperary town for an initial three-year period. This commitment in itself is an acknowledgement of the seriousness of the issue. I ask that the commitment is further underpinned by ensuring the person is giving the appropriate resources needed to deliver the required results. The task force opened dialogue with the agencies that operate in the area of social inclusion and has been met with broad support. However, it is already obvious that as these agencies operate on the basis of an annual programme and budget, it is not possible for them to commit to the multi-annual funding required to implement the plan.

The range and depth of the issues facing the town are extraordinary. It now requires an extraordinary response from the Government. We need a lead Department to take responsibility, such as the Department of the Taoiseach or the Department of Finance, to co-ordinate, fund and deliver the objectives of the plan across a ten-year period.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Lowry for raising Tipperary town in the House, the challenges faced there and the need for the Government to support the efforts to revitalise the town. We are very much aware of the challenges that are undoubtedly there. We continue to provide supports and investment to assist the area to tackle challenges and build a sustainable place to live and work. As the Deputy is aware, last Friday the Tánaiste and the Ministers of State, Deputy English and Deputy Troy, launched the mid-west regional enterprise plan to 2024. The Government has developed nine region-specific plans and we are investing up to €180 million to aid their implementation. The plans show a huge appetite to grow job opportunities and facilitate enterprise development throughout the mid-west region, including in Tipperary. The plan concentrates on measures to encourage innovation, focus on sustainability, enable enterprise growth in regional cities, towns and rural communities, and increase the economic activity for local start-ups, microbusinesses and SMEs. Deputy Lowry has acknowledged the commitment that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has previously outlined for how a bypass of Tipperary town should be prioritised under the proposed upgrade of the Cahir to Limerick Junction roadway. We all acknowledge that this project is badly needed.

The Deputy referred to the task force that has been set up and operational for some time now with regard to Tipperary town. He will be well familiar with a number of the elements of the package that have already been introduced such as funding from the Heritage Council to support the production of a collaborative town centre health check for Tipperary town; funding across 2020 to 2022; ring-fenced discretionary funding sources to support the Tipperary town revitalisation project; and the allocation of €100,000 to Tipperary County Council as a contribution to the cost of recruiting a project manager for a three-year period to drive the implementation of action items arising from the town centre health check.

I acknowledge the point made by the Deputy about the level of unemployment in the town. This is a key priority for the Government to address through the enterprise plans. In addition, the Deputy will be aware that the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, announced funding of €120,000, which the Deputy has acknowledged, for a social inclusion programme co-ordinator for the Tipperary town revitalisation project. We very much look forward to seeing that implemented over the period ahead.

Our Rural Future has also launched, and it provides significant opportunities for Tipperary town and other towns across Ireland. I acknowledge the work of the Tipperary town task force in feeding into the town centre first strategy. There will be a third call shortly for funding under the urban regeneration and development fund. We will be inviting projects that are specifically focused on the implementation of the town centre first policy, and this will provide further opportunities for Tipperary town.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The real issue here is the funding of the task force to allow it to fund its objectives. Is it possible for each agency and the Department to contribute to a central fund, which would be guaranteed in advance and would be available to the task force? This is the key issue.

The most pressing issue in the town at the moment is non-participation and exclusion. Whole communities in the town are living without any sense of hope or opportunity. The Tipperary town social inclusion plan is designed to offer these people a future through education and employment pathways, supports at household level for distressed families, and programmes aimed at assisting young people to remain engaged in education. Without this support, the wider efforts of the task force, in terms of economic development and other improvements to the town, are doomed to failure. We will have history repeating itself in Tipperary town. Is it possible that the Minister would liaise with the chairperson of the task force to discuss the funding situation and give it some funding in order that it can plan ahead, and not be living from month to month and year to year?

Deputy Michael McGrath: We can all acknowledge that revitalising a town such as Tipperary town requires a multifaceted approach. Deputy Lowry touched on the need for investment in educational facilities and infrastructure, and the need to generate employment, especially where we are dealing with a high level of unemployment and intergenerational disadvantage, which has manifested itself in Tipperary town. We acknowledge the need for significant community supports to support the community and voluntary efforts that are being made in Tipperary town and to work with all of the stakeholders in the region. I will commit to taking up the issue raised by Deputy Lowry with the relevant line Ministers to examine their budget lines, to see what support is already there and to examine what further opportunities there may be for us collectively as a Government to provide further support for the revitalisation efforts for Tipperary town.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise the ongoing challenges presented by Ireland's planning laws, and in particular the problems that are being created in the area of planning in rural Ireland. The most recent high-profile incidence of this is the decision by the Supreme Court, rightly, to reject an application to have the proposed Glanbia factory project halted. Some of the Minister's Government colleagues have welcomed this Supreme Court decision, as have many others, including me and my Rural Independent Group colleagues, as a victory of common sense against an overzealous and inflexible attitude towards environmental or emissions targets.

The rush to court and the use of judicial reviews around infrastructure planning is creating paralysis in some areas. In many other less well-known cases at a local level, An Bord Pleanála is simply not fulfilling its statutory obligations, in particular when it comes to section 126 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, which states that every appeal is to be determined within 18 weeks. This is not happening. I have no wish to personalise this matter against the staff of An Bord Pleanála. I am sure they are as frustrated as the rest of us with the growing need to assess even the most minor projects against a library shelf of EU regulations. We need a much more simplified and straightforward system because the one we have is simply not working, is creating frustration and is jeopardising much-needed investment and job creation in many areas.

I will refer to the case of Banagher Chilling in my constituency, a multi-million euro investment that would offer vital price competition to beef farmers. In January 2021, An Bord Pleanála initially confirmed that it was not in a position to determine whether the inspector's report, which was due by 4 January 2021, would be completed. That was bad enough, but the situation became worse. In March 2021, it was confirmed to me that An Bord Pleanála had yet to receive the report despite the new deadline of 1 March having come and gone. Fast forward to September 2021, and An Bord Pleanála was still not in a position to confirm when the inspector would submit the report on the appeal. In January 2022, I was told that the report would definitely be ready within two weeks, yet it is almost the end of February and there is still no sign of the report. That is a far cry from 18 weeks. We must address this urgently because An Bord Pleanála is not upholding the statutory planning timeframe within which decisions are due. This is also creating frustration and jeopardising much-needed investment and jobs.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising these issues regarding our planning system. We all acknowledge the need for a fit-for-purpose planning system in our country for the development of homes, industry and public infrastructure. As the Deputy will be aware, we have now adopted a national development plan out to 2030 that involves public expenditure of €165 billion across all of the main areas, including building the homes we need, building our public transport and road infrastructure, introducing climate action measures and investing in enterprises, etc.

Having a planning system that is fair and acts in a timely fashion is absolutely fundamental to the achievement of those objectives. That is why the Deputy will no doubt be aware of the initiative being led by the Attorney General. It is the first of its kind. He and a team of dedicated experts are re-examining the entire planning legislative framework with a view to bringing forward new legislation that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will bring to the Government over the period ahead.

The idea is to make our system more efficient and reduce the level of legal risk. People are entitled to object and bring judicial reviews, but we certainly do not want major projects of regional or national importance to end up before the courts and have planning permission

rescinded on a legal point of law. The planning system has to be robust and, ultimately, be vindicated in the great majority of instances where such legal challenges are taken.

We also do not want frivolous or vexatious objections to developments across the country that are badly needed and which must take place. Along with the Taoiseach and the Government as a whole, I have welcomed the decision in respect of the judicial review taken in the Glanbia case. People who took that case had a right to bring it. It has now gone through due process. It has been concluded and we welcome it. We all acknowledge that our agriculture industry is on a journey. It is up for that journey. Embracing sustainability, dealing with the climate action issues and challenges with reducing emissions and so on is vital. The Deputy mentioned the issue of rural and one-off homes. The evidence points to the strong delivery of new homes in rural Ireland in recent years. Planning permission has been granted for more than 28,000 rural houses in the five years to the end of quarter 3 last year. About 80% of that number was actually built. The latest CSO figures indicated a 38% increase in permissions for one-off houses in the year to the end of September 2021 when compared with the previous year. It went up by about 5,000 to 7,000. That is not evidence of a system that is completely broken when it comes to building one-off homes. The number is increasingly significantly. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that developments are sustainable, proportionate and suitable to the area in which they take place.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome that the Attorney General is examining the matter. I ask for urgency about it. We need to ensure that we have a robust, fair, balanced system in place as quickly as possible. I have seen first-hand in my own constituency that the delays are impeding investment and indeed could put off future investment coming into Laois-Offaly because of this multi-million factory being placed in the position it is being placed in and the time delays that are involved. The Minister also mentioned rural housing. I have seen first-hand that many of those applicants are being left in limbo because An Bord Pleanála is not coming back in a timely manner with a decision about planning for one-off housing. That issue needs to be dealt with. I am particularly concerned with the lack of balance for enterprise and environment. We need to ensure that there is balance. I can see first-hand that it is tipping one way. I feel that there needs to be more common sense and pragmatism. We cannot stand here and talk about job creation if we are being impeded and obstructed all the time by groups such as An Taisce.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The issues that the Deputy raises are really important when it comes to the Government and the country meeting the objective of balanced regional development. We want to see such balanced regional development. It is core to the Project Ireland 2040 strategy, where the majority of growth in the population of Ireland over the next 20 years, which is estimated to be growth of about 1 million people, will be outside Dublin. Ensuring that we are able to deliver infrastructure in a timely manner is central to that, including flood schemes and other vital public infrastructure. We want An Bord Pleanála to meet the statutory deadlines. I will raise the issue that the Deputy has raised with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Updated rural housing guidelines are being prepared to ensure consistency with current requirements and legislation at national and EU level, subject to requirements for periods of public consultation and ensuring compliance with environmental legislation, which will inform the timeframe. The guidelines will be prepared in draft during this quarter of the current year. In the next month to six weeks, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, expects to be in a position to bring those forward.

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 the week's business agreed to?

Deputy Michael Collins: Not agreed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

Deputy Michael Collins: Two weeks ago, I raised with the Taoiseach in the Dáil the crisis that the residents and landowners of Dursey Ireland are facing with the closure for seven months of the world famous Dursey cable car for repairs. Since this announcement two weeks ago, I have raised the urgency of getting the Department of Rural and Community Development involved with the council and locals to find a temporary solution to aid residents and animal owners. Cork County Council failed to get any response from the Department to date, after trying to communicate with it. This proves to me what I always said, that rural affairs and islands would be thrown under the bus when this Government relegated it to the Department of Social Protection. We need to debate the crisis that people in Castletownbere face without the cable car to Dursey Island. There has been no electricity on the island since Friday morning. Can we have a debate this week in the Dáil to look at urgent solutions to this?

An Ceann Comhairle: I think I have selected a Topical Issue matter on that, so the House will be able to have that debate.

Deputy Michael Collins: I appreciate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not know if the Minister wishes to offer more time to debate the matter.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Two weeks ago Amnesty International produced a devastating report rightly condemning the state of Israel for the crime of apartheid. I and others have asked the Whip that we would have a debate in this House about that report. I note that the Ceann Comhairle and Deputy Carroll MacNeill will hold a briefing with the Israeli Ambassador this week. There is no doubt but that the ambassador wants to trash the Amnesty report. That is his entitlement, but this House has a right to discuss this report and its very serious allegation, with which I agree absolutely, that Israel is an apartheid state. We need to have a discussion about this. It has global implications and very serious implications for our foreign policy and for the well-being of the Palestinian people.

Deputy Denis Naughten: As the Minister will know, the Cabinet made a decision today on the compulsory use of face masks. This is causing a huge amount of anxiety, particularly among older people, who now say they are afraid to go on public transport because face masks are no longer compulsory. Can we have a debate in this House on the matter? Can we have the detail of the evidence provided to the Government and a debate to tease out the issues in this regard? There is a lot of concern out there among people who are immunocompromised and older people and we need to see some clarity on this issue.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I thank Deputies for raising those issues.

Deputy Collins raised the issue of the Dursey cable car, which Deputy Christopher

O'Sullivan has raised with me and colleagues as well, and I see the Deputy has a Topical Issue matter selected in that regard. That is perhaps the most appropriate forum in which to deal with that issue. We all recognise how important that piece of infrastructure is and we will take note of the points Deputies Collins and O'Sullivan have raised.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, there is no opposition to the holding of a debate on that Amnesty International report. Perhaps it might be possible next week. The agenda this week is very full. There are three Private Members Opposition slots. We also have statements on legacy issues in Northern Ireland-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Could we have the debate next week?

Deputy Michael McGrath: -----which we have been asked to introduce, and we do want to advance Government legislation. That is a central purpose of this House. We will liaise with Deputy Boyd Barrett, the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Business Committee to find an appropriate slot for discussing what we recognise is a really important report.

In response to Deputy Naughten, we recognise that for many people the decision on mask wearing is a significant change and that there will be concern among many people, including some older people, some people who are immunocompromised and so on. It is important to re-state that the wearing of masks on public transport remains advised, so it is no longer mandatory but it is still the advice that people should wear masks on public transport. As a Government, we received public health advice that there was no longer a public health rationale for maintaining the mandatory nature of that. On balance, we felt that removing the mandate from next week was the correct course of action, but I expect that many people will continue to choose to wear a mask in many settings, certainly on public transport services.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Business Committee will try to agree a date on Thursday for the debate on the Amnesty report to take place in this House.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): On a point of information, there is a debate scheduled on that report in the Seanad next Tuesday, so it is being debated within the Houses of the Oireachtas-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Good.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: But if we could have the debate-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----but we will bring the matter before this House too.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the proposal for the week's business is now agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have been through two weeks of dreadful weather, most recently with Storm Franklin, with severe weather conditions right across the west coast and elsewhere. For families whose homes are affected by mica and pyrite, it has been a very frightening and anxious time. Their homes are already crumbling. Families and their children are fearful of what they could wake up to. Those of us in safe homes slept in the comfort of knowing we were safe as the storm raged outside but many families and children who went to sleep in mica- and pyrite-affected homes did not have that security. They have described this as a humanitarian crisis and that needs to be responded to with urgency. The legislation for the new scheme still has not been published and we do not know what level of supports will be there for families. When will the legislation be published? Will the Minister commit to 100% redress, which is

needed and demanded?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I can only imagine the recent storms presented a huge amount of extra anxiety for people living with mica in their homes. This is a top priority for Government. We want to deal with this as quickly as possible. We have announced a new scheme with an overall value of €2.2 billion with a number of important improvements and changes from the previous scheme. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is awaiting the final report from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland on the cost per square foot grant rate, which will be based on different house types. That will be set out in the final report, which I understand is expected very shortly. The bringing forward of that legislation and, more important, bringing that scheme into operation are key priorities. We will work with the Deputy co-operatively to get that done as quickly as possible.

Deputy Ged Nash: The convicted serial sex abuser, Michael Shine, will be released from prison tomorrow. He may have served his prison sentence but there is no end in sight for the survivors. Up to 100 men were expected to receive compensation but a legal dispute between the Medical Missionaries of Mary and the HSE over the indemnification of the HSE for legal costs and related matters has thrown the compensation scheme into doubt. This is a case of lawyers differing while survivors continue to suffer. I have worked with the Dignity4Patients group for many years and I know many of the survivors personally. They have suffered more than anyone should. Many of the men feel they are being retraumatised as the legal rows rumble on, completely oblivious to their pain and suffering. Will the Minister intervene with the HSE and urge the religious order to do the right thing by victims and survivors and to deliver on their legal and moral obligations to survivors?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. My understanding is 116 plaintiffs sued the Medical Missionaries of Mary, the congregation, and the HSE arising from damages from Dr. Shine's abusive activities. In the period, December 2019 to March 2020, the 116 plaintiffs formally discontinued their claims against the HSE by serving notices of discontinuance. The plaintiffs continue to pursue their claim against the congregation and its insurance company, Allianz. The HSE and the State Claims Agency, SCA, are seeking to recover the costs they have incurred in defending the claims from the congregation and Allianz. These efforts to recover legal costs are not an impediment to the settlement of the 116 claims brought against the congregation and Allianz. That is a critical point. The HSE and SCA have recently agreed to mediation in respect of the recovery of costs issue with the congregation and Allianz. The key point is that is not an impediment to the resolution of the claims by the individuals.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There is a commitment in the programme for Government to extend the free school books scheme nationwide following the pilot scheme that was run for a number of delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, programme schools in 2020. Moreover, there is a constitutional duty on the State to provide free primary education, which it fails to do every year. The Children's Rights Alliance report card for 2022 was launched yesterday and highlighted the lack of progress towards reaching the goal of free books in every school nationwide. Every year the results of the Barnardos' back to school survey highlights the stress families are placed under due to the cost of school books. One parent stated:

Our education system is way too expensive, the back to school allowance definitely doesn't even half cover the expenses of primary school kids, even with a book rental scheme. I dread this time of year even more than I dread Christmas time.

The funding for the pilot was not continued or extended in budgets 2021 or 2022 and results of the pilot scheme have not been published. Where do we go from here? Will the results of the pilot be published prior to budget 2023? Will the Government commit to providing free school books? They have been estimated to cost €40 million overall, comprising €20 million for primary and €20 million for secondary.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I will raise the issue of the free school books scheme with the Minister for Education. We are increasing the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance from the autumn. We are also significantly expanding DEIS provision from next September, with an increase of approximately 20% in funding. As the Deputy will be aware, the Department is currently going through a detailed process, including consultation, in selecting which schools should benefit from the DEIS status that we are committed to providing the funding for. I will ask the Minister for Education to respond directly to the Deputy regarding the scheme.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have genuinely lost count of the number of times I have asked the Government and successive Ministers with responsibility for housing in successive Governments when we are going to get the decision on the review of the social housing income thresholds. Every week, people are coming to me who have been thrown off the housing lists after ten, 12 and even 15 years of waiting. All that time has gone because those people did the terrible thing of getting a job, with the result that their incomes went a bit over the threshold. They are punished for that by losing all those years they have been waiting. However, there is a benefit for the Government because apparently the numbers in need of social housing go down. I think that is why we are not getting the results of this review. In the longest review I have ever heard of, which has been ongoing for at least five years, I have heard again and again-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: When are we going to get the results of the review? Will all those people thrown off the housing lists over the past couple of years get their time back?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I have heard the Deputy raise this issue on a number of occasions, along with others. It is being actively worked on. I know that because I am a member of the Cabinet committee on housing, where it has been an agenda item. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has presented on it. I will ask him to respond directly to the Deputy with an update on the timeframe for the outcome of that work.

Deputy Michael Lowry: The Covid-19 pandemic blindsided the world and created unforeseen problems for governments all over the globe. Now that we have reached this point in the pandemic, it is time for a full review of Ireland's response to it and to examine closely what we clearly got right and what we undoubtedly got wrong. The Government today announced the unwinding of the national public health emergency team, NPHET. Will there be a review of the decisions taken? NPHET made numerous decisions that had far-reaching consequences for many elements of society. I am thinking about antigen tests and nursing homes, which felt abandoned at an early stage of the pandemic. Will there be a review of how we dealt with Covid-19? If so, what kind of forum will be involved and what form will the review take?

Deputy Michael McGrath: Undoubtedly, there will be a look-back at our experience over the past two years and how the pandemic was handled by the Government, State bodies and others. The Deputy will be aware that the Minister for Health recently announced the establishment of a public health reform expert advisory group that will initially focus on identifying

the lessons to be learned from the public health components of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland, with a view towards strengthening health protection generally and future public health pandemic preparedness specifically. When the full story is told and the scorecard of how different countries fared in handling Covid-19 is published, Ireland will compare well. The data concerning the tragic mortalities that we experienced and so on show that Ireland has compared well, but that is not to in any way understate the loss, grief and trauma that all this has caused to so many families who have been affected.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: My question concerns the impact of the return of so many non-nationals to their own countries. There is a crisis in every industry now. Pigs cannot be slaughtered. There are problems in farming, whether they relate to cows, lambs or agricultural contractors. The hospitality industry is also impacted. Across the board, employees cannot be sourced. They are not there to be got. Many places have closed half time because they do not have the staff, many of whom have returned to their own countries. The Department is too slow in granting work permits to people. Businesspeople are sourcing employees abroad, but it is not possible to get them in. The October applications list is being worked on now. Something seismic must be done to get people who want to come and work here into the country. We must get our Irish people back to work as well. The void exists and it is crippling businesses. It will have a great impact on the economy, as well as on people's lives. The Government needs to act on this to get people back into the workplace and get businesses back up and running.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy McGrath raising this issue. It is something we are all experiencing and all of us are being contacted by employers who are struggling to recruit staff as well as to bring staff in from abroad. We have an internal market within the EU of approximately 450 million people. Even within such a large pool, it is proving very difficult to attract people with the requisite skills into Ireland. We acknowledge that the turnaround times for employment permits are too long, and the Tánaiste and his officials are working on this with a view to improving them. It is the case that if an employment permit is urgently needed, a request to have a specific application expedited can be made. It will be considered in exceptional cases and must be accompanied by a compelling business case that sets out the individual circumstances involved. The number of such applications has increased significantly. Relative to 2019, applications are up by 47%. It is part of the rebound we are seeing after Covid.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Yesterday, I met with postmasters from across County Donegal. These dedicated people, and, indeed, postmasters around the country, are waiting anxiously for the publication of the report by the interdepartmental group, IDG, for the delivery of offline services. It has not been announced on a few occasions. It was supposed to be announced before Christmas and then in January, which have both passed. It has got to the stage where postmasters are thinking that the Government wants many of them to retire or go out of business before any announcements will be made. This is one of the many reports in regard to the post office service. It seems every Government announces it will bring in measures, but nothing ever happens. Will the Government publish the report and provide a proper solution for postmasters and local communities?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the IDG report on offline services for post offices. I am aware of the work of the IDG and I discussed it recently with the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, as well as with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. I expect the Minister of State will publish the report shortly. I do not believe it will provide an immediate quick-fix solution to the problem that a number of post offices face. As the Deputy will be aware, there was an extension to the transformation payments from An Post to post of-

fices, and they will continue to the end of this year. The Government is actively examining the issue to ensure we can protect and safeguard the future of the post offices concerned.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: This week we will debate the town centre first policy, yet we have significant issues with the process to make our towns better. Carlow town received the approval of €15 million under the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which is the greatest investment in the history of the town, but the people of Carlow have seen nothing since it was announced. We are now only in the second of six stages of the project, but the terms and conditions pose a challenge. The approved project for Carlow, which is the regeneration of Carlow town centre, is excellent but red tape is the issue. I understand we have to have a fair process but there are other counties like Carlow. At this stage, we will not see a shovel in the ground for two years. What makes it worse is that if we do not start the first phase under the URDF, we cannot apply for the second phase of funding. Therefore, we are at an absolute loss. I ask that the Minister tries to sort this out. I want to compliment Carlow County Council on working with the Department but there are significant issues and challenges with this.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The allocation from the URDF to Carlow town was particularly welcome. What I am hearing from the Deputy is a frustration about the process and the time it is taking to advance it. Perhaps it is an issue about which we can have a direct discussion. I would be happy to take this up with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to see what we can do to bring about a faster delivery of this vital project for Carlow.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I would like to ask about the medication, Cariban, which is used to treat the condition of hyperemesis during pregnancy. Hyperemesis is a very debilitating condition in which women experience almost constant vomiting and nausea for the duration of their pregnancy. Cariban has proven to be very effective in treating it, but it can cost up to €45 a week, or between €1,500 and €3,000 over the course of a pregnancy, which, I am sure the Minister will agree, is unaffordable. Unlike other drugs that the State pays for partially or completely, Cariban is classed as a supplement and that seems to be the issue here.

3 o'clock

I understand there has been some progress in the past couple of days. Could the Minister give us an update on how we could make this drug more affordable to the pregnant women who really need it?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Higgins for raising this issue, which I know is so important for so many pregnant women all over the country. I am aware the matter has been raised with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, on a number of occasions. He and his officials in the Department have been working with the HSE to bring about a solution. I believe he is optimistic a solution can be implemented. I anticipate he will have something to say publicly about that very shortly.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The dental treatment purchase scheme is on the verge of collapse throughout the State. The scheme has been haemorrhaging dentists for the past two years. We have medical card holders with cancer, kidney transplant patients and people with diabetes who cannot access a dentist. This has gone on for a year now. The Government needs to take responsibility. People are suffering and it is inhumane. In Drogheda there is not one dentist available to take medical card patients. I do not get any sense of seriousness or urgency from

the Government about this situation. I see people at my clinic every single week who cannot access dental treatment. What do I say to those people? Answer me that, because this has gone on for a year. What do I say to those people who are denied access to dental treatment? It is time the Government got its act together. When will this matter be resolved and when will the practice of people being denied access to dental treatment be sorted?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I acknowledge there is an issue here that needs to be addressed. The Deputy referred to the work that has been ongoing for some time now, but that is being intensified. The Department of Health and the HSE have invited the Irish Dental Association to further consultations beginning on 28 February and are currently awaiting a response. As the Deputy knows, the Department of Health in recent days received the report, Improving Access to Dental Care for Medical Card Patients, by Professor Ciaran O'Neill. That is now actively being worked on. I anticipate there will be some further news shortly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to raise the issue of Carlinn Hall in Dundalk, where approximately 200 houses are in a group heating scheme. This was meant to be renewable energy initially, using biofuel or something, but it ended up being gas. Gas is supplied by Energia at the front line. Gas prices have gone through the roof and are not capped as the group heating scheme is seen as commercial. There is an absolute inefficiency in this system. It is about 50%, meaning that for every 100 units we get 50 units of heat. The rules need to be changed so that the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU, has responsibility. I have spoken to Energia. We need to look at capping this on the basis it is residential rather than commercial. We also need to look at regulations. There are a number of these and I think there are major difficulties. A long-term solution needs to be found but at this stage we need to look at capping the gas price, accepting that these are residential.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú. I am not familiar with the specific development in question. The Deputy referred to the group heating scheme and the role of the CRU. I suggest the issue might be taken up with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in the context of housing.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: This morning I met with Inclusion Ireland specifically to discuss the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSN, Act to deliver a better, more inclusive model for children with additional educational needs. That is happening with the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, in the Department of Education. Could I confirm with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform whether his Department is linked in with that review at this stage, to really try to deliver the resources and reform that are necessary over the next five to ten years to deliver a genuinely different, inclusive education model for children with additional educational needs?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Carroll MacNeill. What I can confirm is we as a Government, in the course of the Estimates process for the previous two budgets, have significantly increased the level of resources for special education services across our education system, as is right and proper, including further increases in the number of special needs assistants, SNAs, much-needed increases in the number of special school places and additional supports within mainstream schools. I will examine the specific issues the Deputy has raised and discuss the matter with the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am sure the Minister will agree with me that a commitment made by a senior politician should be delivered on. Almost 18 months ago, Leo Varadkar made a

commitment that he would end the discrimination against school secretaries and caretakers in respect of their pay, pensions and conditions. Talks have again stalled in Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. I spoke to some of the secretaries and caretakers, who feel they are rag dolls being kicked around the place as if they have done something wrong. Will the Minister, as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, ensure the Department of Education engages in a meaningful way in these talks to deliver on the commitment made by the Tánaiste to end the inequality visited on school secretaries and caretakers?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Smith for raising what is a very important issue for so many school secretaries and caretakers throughout the country. As she knows, there is to be a further hearing of the WRC on Thursday of this week. There have been intensive discussions in the lead-up to that. There was a WRC hearing last September at which much progress was made on a public service pay scale, with the clerical officer grade 3 pay scale being applied across the board. At present, we have a patchwork quilt of a system in which some are directly employed by education and training boards, others by schools, others by boards of management, and so on. It is important we bring a resolution to this issue. I am aware of the key outstanding issues and have discussed them with the Minister for Education. I am hopeful progress will be made later this week at the WRC. The Government is very anxious to resolve this dispute. We absolutely respect and admire the work of our school secretaries and caretakers all over the country, and we are actively working on the issue.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, recently launched a tender process for co-operation projects as part of the new €1.5 billion flagship agri-environmental scheme. The detail of this new scheme sets out the locations of areas for 20,000 farmers to earn the highest proposed payment, of up to €10,500, in acting for the environment. I wholeheartedly support this but I am seriously concerned because many areas of high environmental value along our coastline in west Cork are excluded from being eligible for the higher payments. Areas along the coastline such as Kinsale, Courtmacsherry, Kilbrittain, Timoleague, Ballyroe, Union Hall, Baltimore and the whole of the Mizen Head are excluded from the new payment. I have been inundated with correspondence from farmers along the coastline asking me what the Government has against the west Cork farmers exempted from this payment. Two peninsulas have been included — Sheep's Head and Beara — but all the rest have been excluded. Will the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform meet the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to do whatever is necessary to amend the maps published by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine so that they include many of the coastal areas where there are struggling farmers?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Collins. Fair play to him for managing to mention very many of the coastal communities of Cork South-West in his contribution. I will raise the issue he brought up today with the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, and he will revert to the Deputy directly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cahill. I apologise to him because I should have called him earlier. I missed him behind the mask.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: That is no bother. Last week the Supreme Court upheld An Bord Pleanála's decision on Glanbia's plant in Belview. Unfortunately, the continuing objections to the plant have cost farmers countless millions of euro. I would like an update on the meat plant proposed for Banagher, Offaly. Offaly County Council granted permission for it in July 2020. When will a decision be made on that? Will farmers again have to spend countless sums

of money on endless appeals in respect of this meat infrastructure, which would bring greatly needed competition and an independent operator into the industry? I hope the Banagher plant will receive permission sooner rather than later.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Cahill. Again, I very much welcome the Supreme Court decision on the Glanbia plant. It is very good news for the region, farmers and country. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy directly with an update on the Banagher meat plant in County Offaly.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to raise the issue of the National Driver Licence Service. In Carrick-on-Shannon, I have been contacted by people who are trying to renew their driving licences but who cannot get into the office; the place is closed. They have to ring. A woman I spoke to yesterday said she was three quarters of an hour on the phone waiting to get an answer. She cannot get through to anyone. They have to do that or book online. When they book online, they have to use their public services card. Some people do not have a public services card. We were led to believe that it was not compulsory to have one and that it was only to be used for the Department of Social Protection. This is a serious issue. I know of people who are commercial drivers and who cannot get their licence renewed. If they have an accident, there will be severe repercussions. Action needs to be taken to ensure that these services, not just in County Leitrim but across the whole country, are open and functioning to their full capacity. There is a long backlog of people who are trying to get their licences renewed. As we know, Covid has thankfully moved off the stage. We are now in a situation where we cannot use that excuse anymore. Adequate provision must be put in place so that people can renew their licences.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which is a serious one for the people who are impacted. Those who qualify for a driving licence should have access to one in a timely manner within a reasonable period of time. It is important that there is good quality customer service in all of our State organisations and across the wider public sector. I will ask the Minister for Transport to respond to the Deputy directly with an update on the National Driver Licence Service.

Redundancy Payments (Amendment) Bill 2022: Instruction to Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 187, it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the Redundancy Payments (Amendment) Bill 2022, that the Committee has the power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill, in relation to the Companies (Corporate Enforcement Authority) Act 2021 in order to make a technical correction to a cross reference in that Act.

Question put and agreed to.

Dáil Éireann
Estimates for Public Services 2022

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 1 — President's Establishment (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €4,750,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Secretary General to the President, for certain other expenses of the President's Establishment and for certain grants.

Vote 2 — Department of the Taoiseach (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €38,025,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Department of the Taoiseach, including certain services administered by the Department and for payment of grants.

Vote 3 — Office of the Attorney General (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €33,286,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Attorney General, including a grant.

Vote 4 — Central Statistics Office (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €103,485,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Central Statistics Office.

Vote 5 — Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €47,832,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Vote 6 — Office of the Chief State Solicitor (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €49,658,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Chief State Solicitor.

Vote 7 — Office of the Minister for Finance (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €42,900,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Finance, including the Paymaster General's Office, for certain services administered by the Office of the Minister and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 8 — Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €9,365,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €441,102,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, including certain other services administered by that Office and that a sum not exceeding €1,350,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 10 — Tax Appeals Commission (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €3,443,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Tax Appeals Commission.

Vote 11 — Public Expenditure and Reform (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €46,525,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, for certain services administered by the Office of the Minister and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 12 — Superannuation and Retired Allowances (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €274,428,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for pensions, superannuation, occupational injuries, and additional and other allowances and gratuities under the Superannuation Acts 1834 to 2004 and sundry other statutes; extra statutory pensions, allowances and gratuities awarded by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, fees to medical referees and occasional fees to doctors; compensation and other payments in respect of personal injuries; fees to Pensions Authority and other professional fees, miscellaneous payments, etc.

Vote 13 — Office of Public Works (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €581,480,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of Public Works; for services administered by that Office and for payment of certain grants and for the recoupment of certain expenditure and that a sum not exceeding €20,700,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 14 — State Laboratory (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €10,836,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the State Laboratory.

Vote 15 — Secret Service (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for Secret Service.

Vote 16 — Valuation Office (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €19,441,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Valuation Office and certain minor services and that a sum not exceeding €325,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 17 — Public Appointments Service (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €19,484,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Public Appointments Service.

Vote 18 — National Shared Services Office (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €67,092,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the National Shared Services Office.

Vote 19 — Office of the Ombudsman (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €12,288,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office of the Commission for Public Service Appointments, the Standards in Public Office Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Information.

Vote 20 — Garda Síochána (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €1,956,354,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Garda Síochána, including pensions, etc.; for the payment of certain witnesses' expenses, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 21 — Prisons (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €391,726,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Prison Service, and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention, and for payment of certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €3,601,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 22 — Courts Service (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €129,333,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for such of the salaries and expenses of the Courts Service and of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, the High Court, the Special Criminal Court, the Circuit Court and the District Court and of certain other minor services as are not charged to the Central Fund and that a sum not exceeding €3,648,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 23 — Property Registration Authority (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €34,471,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Property Registration Authority and that a sum not exceeding €100,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 24 — Justice (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €422,890,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Justice, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cash limited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €5,122,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 25 — Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €7,533,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 26 — Education (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €8,964,335,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Education, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants.

Vote 27 — International Co operation (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €603,902,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for certain Official Development Assistance, including certain grants, and for contributions to certain International Organisations involved in Development Assistance and for salaries and expenses in connection therewith.

Vote 28 — Foreign Affairs (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €251,395,000 be granted to defray the charge which will

come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and for certain services administered by that Office, including grants and contributions to International Organisations.

Vote 29 — Environment, Climate and Communications (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €858,018,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €57,917,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 30 — Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €1,461,862,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants and subsidies and for the payment of certain grants under cash limited schemes and the remediation of Haulbowline Island and that a sum not exceeding €29,900,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 31 — Transport (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €3,409,032,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Transport, including certain services administered by that Office, for payment of certain grants and certain other services and that a sum not exceeding €161,100,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 32 — Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €841,429,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, including certain services administered by that Office, for the payment of certain subsidies and grants and for the payment of certain grants under cash limited schemes and that a sum not exceeding €79,660,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 33 — Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €969,814,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for

the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies and grants and that a sum not exceeding €18,400,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €5,872,038,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, including grants to Local Authorities, grants and other expenses in connection with housing, water services, miscellaneous schemes, subsidies and grants and that a sum not exceeding €275,800,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 35 — Army Pensions (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €265,650,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for retired pay, pensions, compensation, allowances and gratuities payable under sundry statutes to or in respect of members of the Defence Forces and certain other Military Organisations, etc., and for sundry contributions and expenses in connection therewith; for certain extra statutory children's allowances and other payments and for sundry grants.

Vote 36 — Defence (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €812,211,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Defence, including certain services administered by that Office; for the pay and expenses of the Defence Forces; and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 37 — Social Protection (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €11,893,148,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Social Protection, for certain services administered by that Office, for payments to the Social Insurance Fund and for certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €1,200,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 38 — Health (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €21,752,408,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Health and certain other services administered by that Office, including grants to the Health Service Executive and miscellaneous grants and that a sum not exceeding €104,000,000 be granted by way of the appli-

cation for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 39 — Office of Government Procurement (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €19,429,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of Government Procurement and that a sum not exceeding €35,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 40 — Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,059,017,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, for certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants and that a sum not exceeding €3,200,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 41 — Policing Authority (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €3,856,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Policing Authority.

Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €325,298,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Rural and Community Development including certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants and that a sum not exceeding €16,860,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 43 — Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €43,302,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer.

Vote 44 — Data Protection Commission (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €22,949,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Data Protection Commission.

Vote 45 — Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,935,879,000 be granted to defray the charge which will

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come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants and that a sum not exceeding €37,200,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Votes put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, 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 Housing, Local Government and Heritage, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

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

Minister for Defence

Minister for Education

Minister for Social Protection

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Minister for Foreign Affairs

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Census of Population

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plans of the CSO for Census 2022. [6394/22]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plans of the CSO for Census 2022. [6397/22]

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Taoiseach the changes that will be included in the information being sought in Census 2022. [8040/22]

4. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plans of the Central Statistics Office for Census 2022. [10083/22]

5. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plans of the Central Statistics Office for Census 2022. [10085/22]

6. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plans of the Central Statistics Office for Census 2022. [10087/22]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, together.

The process to decide on the questions for the new census form began in October 2017, when the CSO launched a public consultation on the content for the next census. Suggestions for new census questions and changes to existing ones were invited as part of this consultation. Following the receipt of over 400 submissions, the CSO convened the Census Advisory Group, CAG, to assist in selecting questions to be tested for potential inclusion in the census. The CAG membership was drawn from Government Departments and agencies, community, interest and religious groups, academic and research organisations, the social partners and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. A pilot census was conducted in September 2018 to test both new questions and revisions to questions used in Census 2016 recommended by the CAG following an examination of the submissions. The CAG was reconvened in March 2019 to review the outcome of the pilot and to make recommendations to Government on the content for the census questionnaire. The recommendations were approved by Government in July 2019. Based on this process, the Census 2022 questionnaire will contain eight new questions. These questions are on the following topics: renewable energy sources, Internet access and devices, smoke alarms, smoking, working from home, volunteering, childcare and travelling home from work, school or college. There will be changes to a further 25 questions. These changes range from substantial to minor. Substantial changes were made to the following 11 questions: number of rooms, country of citizenship, ethnic group, religion, Irish language, disability, difficulties, carers, level of education, present principal status and employment status. The questions on fertility, field of study and dwelling type were dropped. However, data will be collected on dwelling type using a new digital enumerator application developed by the CSO, and data on field of study will be produced using administrative data sources.

The census form will also contain a time capsule section for the first time. This optional section of the form will enable householders to complete a message of their choosing. These messages will be stored securely with the census forms for 100 years, when they will be released to the public, in line with section 35 of the Statistics Act 1993.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is the first time that I have heard about the time capsule section. I think that in the time capsule section on my form, I will ask the people who are still here in 100 years whether 100 years of Government has managed to sort out the housing crisis. I fear we may well find that it has not. I wonder if the Government will have even managed the review of the social housing income threshold. Indeed, the reason I asked the question is because of the more immediate issue of the housing crisis. When I submitted a question before Christmas on the issue, the Minister of State informed me, if I understand him correctly,

that in the questions to be asked in the census, we will still not get a count of derelict buildings in the country. I was unaware of that previously. That seems to me to be an extraordinary waste of an opportunity to ascertain the facts on one of the biggest issues facing this country that is directly related to whether we can actually solve the housing crisis in any sort of serious time-frame. It is a scandal beyond scandals how many derelict buildings there are in towns, villages and cities the length and breadth of this country and for us not to have a count of them. I know that in the last census there was a count of vacant buildings, but we need a count of derelict buildings. If I understand the Minister of State's answer correctly, given that the questions were set and finally signed off in 2019, surely the severity of the housing crisis and the importance of establishing the number of derelict houses means we should put a supplementary question into the census to help get that information.

Deputy James O'Connor: I want to acknowledge the point made by the Minister of State on the time capsule. I think it is quite fascinating that it will be done and I welcome it. It will be interesting to see what each of us will put into our individual time capsules. I look forward to that measure. We are watching the census with real interest in Cork, particularly from a democratic and political perspective, due to the rapidly growing population. I live in one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the country. We are seeing significant growth in the population there. My concern is around the Electoral Commission and the statutory and constitutional obligations that are under that function. In addition to what is happening with the census, I ask the Minister of State to provide us with details on that particular issue. I think the Ceann Comhairle is immune from that particular issue, as he does not have to stand for election. I am sure many of us envy his position. It is quite interesting to consider the impact it will have on Dáil Éireann and what the projections may be, given the population growth. If the Minister of State could provide us with details on what may happen subsequent to the census, it would be much appreciated.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister of State for that update. The census is due to be conducted on Sunday, 3 April. Can he provide us with an update on its preparation? The census will provide a snapshot of post-Covid Ireland at the start of the 21st century. If arrangements have not been finalised, I ask the Minister of State to consider introducing indicators and questions in respect of the impact of climate change and biodiversity. Perhaps questions regarding the use of pay-as-you-go meters could be obtained as it is a strong indication of financial strain on households.

While we are discussing census 2022, I ask the Minister of State to consider accelerating the publication of the 1926 census. This is an issue I have raised previously in the Chamber. It has the potential to drive an interest in Ireland from diaspora. I take this opportunity to thank the visitors from the US who are in the Public Gallery today. The early publication of the 1926 census could be a boost for Irish tourism.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I note the views of Members on the time capsule. It will be fascinating to see what views Members of this House put into the time capsule to be opened in 100 years' time. I hope things are a lot more positive than Deputy Boyd Barrett's negative disposition.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: So do I.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why the Government is absolutely committed to delivering on housing, giving that hope and ensuring the progressive delivery of social and affordable

homes for many people.

As regards the Deputy's point on dereliction, I sent him a letter in recent weeks with the factual position on that. I will ask my officials to send him an updated note on that again, but I did follow up on it. I am not sure whether the Deputy has seen it, but I wrote to him in recent weeks with the factual position on dereliction and vacancy. I will ask my officials to send that to the Deputy again.

There is no space for a supplementary question. The census forms are printed and ready to go. As I stated, there is a process through the census advisory group which, obviously, concluded in 2019. There will be scope in the following census for any additional questions people might have.

On the point raised by Deputy O'Connor, I know the Ceann Comhairle takes a keen interest in Kildare South, notwithstanding his re-election to this Dáil. As regards the statutory and constitutional obligations the Deputy mentioned, it is expected that the delay of one year will result in a similar delay to the report of the next boundary commission. The deferral of the census by a year has the effect of delaying the establishment of the constituency commission by one year, until July 2022. The most recent constituency commission was established on 14 July 2016 following the publication of preliminary results of the census of population. The commission was required to present its report not later than three months after the publication by the CSO of the final result of the 2016 census. Final results for census 2016 were published on 6 April 2017.

Deputy Devlin asked about preparation. The CSO is employing 5,500 temporary field staff to carry out the next census, which will take place on 3 April 2022. This includes six census liaison officers, 46 regional supervisors, 466 field supervisors and 5,100 census enumerators. The census liaison officers, regional supervisors and field supervisors have taken up their posts. Offers of employment will issue to census enumerators at the end of next week. Since the pandemic began, the CSO has implemented full online interviewing for the recruitment process and online training of new staff.

As regards his point on the publication of the 1926 census, I understand work is under way to digitise that. That work is being carried out in conjunction with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which has responsibility for the National Archives. I do not expect it to be published in the interim period but work is under way to meet the current deadline.

Citizens' Assemblies: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann:

approves the calling of two Citizens' Assemblies to consider the following matters and to make such recommendations as it sees fit and report to the Houses of the Oireachtas:

(1) a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, with a total of 100 members including an independent Chairperson and 99 randomly-selected members of the public, to examine how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss, and to bring forward proposals in that regard; the Assembly shall consider, *inter*

alia:

- the international, European, national, regional and local dimensions to the biodiversity emergency;

- the threats presented by biodiversity loss and the opportunities to reverse this loss;

- the main drivers of biodiversity loss, their impacts and the opportunity of addressing these drivers;

- the perspectives of the general public, representative groups, advocacy groups, experts and policy makers on biodiversity loss, and its impact on Ireland;

- opportunities to develop greater policy coherence and strategic synergies between biodiversity policy and other policy priorities including, but not limited to, economic development, climate action, sustainable development, agriculture and tourism;

- opportunities to promote greater public understanding of, and support for, urgent action in response to the biodiversity emergency; and

- opportunities to improve the State's response to the challenge of biodiversity loss, how that response can best be resourced and implemented in a strategic and coordinated manner, and how progress can be measured;

(2) a Citizens' Assembly, to be known as the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, with a total of 80 members, including an independent Chairperson, 67 randomly-selected members of the public living in Dublin City and County, and 12 Councillors selected from across the four local authorities, to consider the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin, and to bring forward proposals in that regard; the Assembly shall consider, *inter alia*:

- the strengths and weaknesses of the current model of local government in Dublin;

- the potential benefits, risks, challenges and opportunities associated with a directly elected Mayor for Dublin;

- that functions could be transferred from central government to regional or local government in Dublin, and how this should be funded;

- the appropriate structure for local and regional government, councils and authorities, looking at models in other capital cities (e.g. a single elected Dublin authority with a mayor and no local councils, a two-tier structure like London or Paris with a mayor, regional assembly and local or borough councils, or a mayoral structure like Greater Manchester with a 'super' mayor sitting above the existing local authorities);

- the perspectives of the general public, representative groups, advocacy groups, the sitting Councillors of the four local authorities, the Dublin *Teachtaí Dála* and Members of the European Parliament, local authority senior officials

and staff, experts and policy makers; and

notes that the Assemblies shall:

— commence and run in parallel;

— hold their inaugural meetings in April 2022;

— adopt work programmes designed to allow for the completion of consideration of the topics within an eight-month period;

— conclude their work and submit their reports ideally no later than nine months from their respective dates of commencement, and sooner if possible;

— have authority to determine a revised timeline for completion in the event of unexpected disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic or other extraordinary circumstances;

— implement continuous improvement and adopt innovative working methods informed by learnings from previous Citizens' Assemblies and international best practice, including in relation to the methodology for member recruitment, to the running of Assemblies subject to public health measures, and to developing internal capacity to ensure the quality of the deliberative process;

— preclude from membership of the Assemblies any individual who is either:

(i) a politician currently serving in either House of the Oireachtas or the European Parliament;

(ii) a lobbyist as provided for under the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015; or

(iii) a person unwilling to commit to adhering to public health measures as prescribed by Government and public health authorities from time to time;

— have separate Chairpersons appointed to each Assembly, each for a period of up to twelve months, with scope to extend the term should circumstances warrant, and that an honorarium should be paid to each Chairperson based on a per diem rate to be sanctioned by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform;

— make payment of a nominal honorarium to Assembly members to recognise their civic commitment;

— have staff assigned to provide a Secretariat to the Assemblies and to support the Chairpersons;

— agree their own rules of procedure and work programmes to enable the effective conduct of their business in as economical and efficient a manner as possible;

— determine all issues by a majority of the votes of members present and voting, other than the Chairperson who will have a casting vote in the case of an equality of votes;

— operate in an open and transparent manner, including by live streaming public proceedings; and

— make a report and recommendation(s) to the Houses of the Oireachtas on the matters before them; on receipt, the Houses of the Oireachtas will refer each report for consideration to a relevant Committee of both Houses; the Committees will, in turn, bring their conclusions to the Houses for debate; furthermore, the Government will provide in the Houses of the Oireachtas a response to each recommendation of the Assemblies and, if accepting some or all of the recommendations, will indicate the timeframe it envisages for implementing those recommendations.

This is the fourth occasion in the past decade for a citizens' assembly to be established to consider matters of public importance. Citizens' assemblies have become an important part of the Irish democratic system, with previous forums making recommendations on a variety of matters, including marriage equality, the eighth amendment to the Constitution, climate change and, most recently, gender equality. The views expressed by citizens' assemblies have on a number of occasions led to constitutional change and significant enhancements to the State in which we live and the way in which we live our lives. Ireland is considered by many to be a world leader in deliberative democracy and we have had dozens of international visitors to our shores in the past ten years, keen to learn from our experience. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the many hundreds of everyday citizens, the academic community and the Members of the Oireachtas who played a central role in the previous assemblies, for their hard work and their commitment to public service. Maith sibh.

The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future committed to progress the establishment of a number of new citizens' assemblies, including assemblies on biodiversity loss, drug use, the future of education, and the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin. The most recent Citizens' Assembly, on gender equality, concluded its work and published its report in June 2021. In the intervening period, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that it has not been possible until now to arrange for the establishment and running of further assemblies. The easing of public health restrictions announced on 21 January means it is once again possible to plan for the running of citizens' assemblies with in-person meetings.

On Tuesday, 8 February, the Government agreed to the establishment of two citizens' assemblies - one dealing with biodiversity loss and the other with the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin. I am pleased to bring forward to this House the motion approving the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and a Dublin Citizens' Assembly. The issues to be considered by these assemblies are very important and the Government wants to move with some urgency to get both assemblies up and running. It is envisaged that the inaugural meeting of the assemblies will take place in April this year, with the assemblies concluding their work and submitting their reports ideally by the end of the year at latest, and earlier if possible. This will be the first time that two assemblies will run concurrently. Naturally, it gives rise to logistical challenges, but it can be also seen as an important opportunity to design an operational model that can allow for a greater number of citizens' assemblies to be run in the future.

The motion before the House proposes that the assemblies should, like their predecessors, report to the Houses of the Oireachtas, which, on receipt of the final reports from the assemblies, will refer those reports to the relevant Oireachtas committee for consideration. In addition, it is proposed that the Government will provide, in the Houses of the Oireachtas, a response to the recommendations of the assembly and an indication of the proposed course of action, where appropriate. The Dáil will debate the reports of each assembly and the response of the Government.

Eligibility for membership of the assemblies is wider than before and, for the first time, will go beyond those enrolled on the electoral register to include all residents in the State. This new initiative opens up membership to non-Irish people and those normally hard-to-reach groups who, for a variety of reasons, are not on the electoral register. All residents in this country are affected by the issues to be considered and I am certain these new representatives will add to the diversity of the group and make a valuable contribution to the proceedings.

The use of polling companies to recruit the assembly members on the three previous occasions in the past ten years posed significant logistical and administrative challenges and occasionally resulted in suboptimal outcomes. In line with best international practice, it is proposed that on this occasion recruitment will be done by a mailing campaign, with 20,000 randomly selected households invited to apply to participate in the biodiversity loss assembly and 14,000 in the Dublin assembly. From those who respond indicating a willingness to take part, members will be selected on the basis of gender, age, geography and several other factors to ensure they are broadly representative of wider society. We have learned much from the experience of previous Assemblies and I am confident the change in approach will enhance the quality of the random selection methodology.

The Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss will include an independent chairperson and 99 members of the general public selected using a stratified random selection process based on the GeoDirectory of households across the country. The Dublin Citizens' Assembly will include an independent chairperson and 67 members of the general public selected using a stratified random selection process based on the GeoDirectory of households in Dublin city and county. It will also include a total of 12 councillors from across the four local authorities in Dublin, bringing the total membership of that assembly to 80. I am sure the inclusion of councillors will add to the quality of deliberation and that the other members will benefit greatly from their strategic and operational experience at all levels of local government. Similar to the first Constitutional Convention, where the membership comprised one third politicians, every effort will be made to ensure equality of voice among the membership.

On foot of a recommendation from the chair of the most recent citizens' assembly, the terms of reference for each assembly have been designed so that they are sufficiently well-defined to provide a clear focus for the assembly, while at the same time not being so prescriptive as to inhibit the scope of the assemblies to define their work programmes as they deem appropriate.

The terms of reference for the citizens' assembly on biodiversity derive principally from the resolution passed by Dáil Éireann on 9 May 2019 which declared a climate and biodiversity emergency and called for the 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 deliver on a commitment in the programme for Government to establish a citizens' assembly to consider the type of directly elected mayor and local government structures best suited for Dublin.

The Government is keen to make progress on establishing all four of the citizens' assemblies committed to in the programme for Government. Therefore, it is envisaged that a citizens' assembly on drug use will follow these two assemblies, with the intention of running it concurrently with an assembly on the future of education.

Any decision on the establishment of the citizens' assemblies on drug use and on the future

of education will, of course, be subject to a separate Government decision and resolutions of Dáil and Seanad Éireann at the appropriate time. The question of running those citizens' assemblies concurrently will be informed by the experience of jointly running the citizens' assemblies on biodiversity loss and a directly elected mayor for Dublin.

The decision to move ahead with two new assemblies and, for the first time, to run them concurrently, underscores the fact that citizens' assemblies are no longer merely an interesting experiment in deliberative democracy. Successive assemblies have amply demonstrated how the process enhances Ireland's democratic system. Engaging members of the general public in considering and proposing solutions to complex societal challenges not only makes a unique and valuable contribution to the deliberative processes for Government and the Oireachtas, but it also enhances the public sphere, where matters of public importance are debated, in turn raising public awareness and understanding of the matters under consideration.

Molaim an tairscent seo don Teach. I commend this Motion to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh is sharing with Deputies Mitchell and Gould.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. At the outset I welcome both of these citizens' assemblies. We need to take stock of the previous assembly that we had on gender equality. It is of concern that despite Covid-19, there were 45 recommendations that crossed a number of areas and I share the concern of my own colleague, Deputy Clarke, that because of the inaction from that citizens' assembly, it may result in people being less inclined to participate in future assemblies. We have a citizens' assembly report and now have a Committee on Gender Equality in place and yet the importance of that work has to be made by a decision of Government. I would appreciate if that was expedited.

The destruction of biodiversity and the measures to strengthen local democratic accountability are of great importance. The destruction of biodiversity is accelerating at an alarming rate. Immediate action needs to go alongside this citizens' assembly and it is important that we do not put everything on hold. Agriculture will no doubt be a vitally important theme in that discussion. Our family farmers stand ready to deliver the substantial change we need but they cannot do so without support and clear guidance.

Sinn Féin will always defend and support agriculture and rural economies across the entire island. We know the importance of this industry to our national economy and the role it has to play in delivering high quality food while contributing to Ireland's ambitious targets on biodiversity and climate change. They need, however, a clear plan and real financial backing.

Can the Minister of State ensure that, unlike the two previous agri-environmental schemes, enclosed lands with heather are not included from low-input permanent pasture measures because we all know that peatlands are of the utmost importance in the carbon store?

Again, organic farming, while only one aspect of how we address biodiversity, is a very important one. One of the major drawbacks of promoting organic farming is the amount of bureaucracy attached to organic production. Working from a base of 2% we have a huge amount of ground to make up. I welcome the citizens' assembly on biodiversity although the Government needs to do more in parallel with the discussions being held.

When we talk about citizens' assemblies we cannot continue to ignore the urgent need for a

citizens' assembly on Irish unity and reunification. The Good Friday Agreement provides for the democratic pathway to Irish reunification. The power to call the two concurrent referendums, however, North and South, is in the hands of the Secretary of State of the British Government. Legally the British Government is obliged to call a referendum on Irish reunification when it appears likely that a majority would express a wish that the North should cease to part of the UK and form part of a united Ireland.

The timing of the calling of referendum still resting with the British Government and the ambiguity over the criteria to determine when a likely vote could be won means that we need to be ready. The debate on Irish reunification is growing nationally and internationally and the momentum for constitutional change on the island has never been stronger. Questions around healthcare, education, governance arrangements, taxation, pensions, public services and the place of unionists within a new Ireland are among the many important issues that a citizens' assembly could discuss in an informed environment. People deserve to be voting in a situation where we have full information. There has been extensive civic leadership in the constitutional conversation. Grassroots movements such as Think 32, Shared Ireland, Ireland's Future and the Constitutional Conversations group, among others, have demonstrated a commitment to innovation in their approaches to ensure debate. Indeed, universities on both islands are debating and discussing the issue.

We and the Government are failing in not setting a citizens' assembly to discuss these really important matters. We saw what happened on Brexit in not being prepared. The Government is speaking out of both sides of its mouth. In one sense it says that we cannot have a referendum on Irish unity until we are prepared. We fully agree with the Government on that in Sinn Féin but there is a responsibility on the Government to ensure that a citizens' assembly is set up, amongst other things, to discuss the challenges and opportunities that reunification presents. We cannot continue to ignore the elephant in the room when so many people are demanding this to be done.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the Government's announcement of a citizens' assembly on a directly elected mayor for Dublin. It is an issue that has been discussed many times over the years and is something that I think there is support for. Sinn Féin has made the case for directly elected mayors previously and we will be following the discussion of the assembly closely. To be effective local government needs to be reformed to serve the people it represents properly. A directly elected mayor is a step towards that. The office will need to be properly resourced. Powers related to transport, major roads, waste management, public spaces and tourism all need to be considered by the assembly. It is an opportunity for the people of Dublin city and county to reclaim ownership of local government and have a real stake in the running of our city.

A directly elected mayor would bring accountability instead of having someone who is unelected making decisions which might not be in the interests of its people.

One concern I have is on the selection process for the 12 councillors. We need to have the voices of all parties and none included and it needs to be gender balanced and to have at least a reflection of the councillors we currently have. This is a real opportunity for Dublin and I will be interested to see the suggestions that come from the assembly. I really hope that the Government will engage constructively with whatever comes of it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We welcome the news of progression of citizens' assemblies and

particularly the view that these can be held concurrently. It is extremely disappointing that the Minister of State has once again pushed back the citizens' assembly on drugs until next year.

Ireland currently holds its place as the third highest in the EU for drug-related deaths. Over the past 25 years, there has been a staggering 225% rise in the number of drug deaths. The mid-term review of the national drugs strategy was published in November 2021 and we are still waiting for a new comprehensive plan. The last action plan expired in 2020. The Keltoi unit was closed to be used as an isolation facility at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and it has not reopened. A review of the task force handbook was established and was due to report last year, but we are still waiting for the report. In August 2019, the then Government announced a health diversion approach. We are still waiting for the full implementation of this policy.

While none of these issues directly relates to the citizens' assembly on drugs, they show two things clearly - Fine Gael does not prioritise addiction or drug-related issues, and it has no shame about missing the deadlines it sets. This is why there is serious concern that the promised citizens' assembly on drugs will drag on and on. To give people confidence, the Minister of State must publish the work he has done to date, the proposed running time and the date for establishment. I am not sure I believe any of this work has been done, but if it has this must happen. People are dying and people are being wrongly criminalised. Communities are suffering under the growing burdens of heroin, crack cocaine and crystal methamphetamine. We must listen to them. These communities and individuals need action now. They cannot wait for years.

There is conflicting rhetoric from the Government, with the Taoiseach saying that there will be a citizens' assembly this year and the Minister of State saying it will be next year. Does the Government know how confusing and disappointing this is for the communities that are directly affected? The Minister of State undermines task forces and local community groups. The Taoiseach speaks at their conferences saying the citizens' assembly will be held this year. The Government has shown its attitude towards addiction by only allocating an additional €4 million in the budget. Sinn Féin, in its budget submission, advocated a tenfold increase to €40 million because that is the type of support those communities need.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, on behalf of the Labour Party, I welcome the establishment of these two citizens' assemblies. We are glad to see this being carried out, but we are also anxious to see progress being made on the citizens' assemblies on drugs and on the future of education. Indeed, my colleague, Deputy Ó Ríordáin, has been to the fore in seeking clear indications from the Government and particularly the Taoiseach on the timeline for the establishment of a citizens' assembly on drugs. We know what a serious and severe problem drug addiction and the current policies for dealing with drug addiction have created. The Government could look to save lives by kick-starting the process of convening a citizens' assembly on drugs. We want urgent work to be done on that, and on the citizens' assembly on the future of education.

In my role as Chairperson of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality, I appreciate the enormous engagement and the massive levels of commitment that citizens have given to assemblies over the years. In particular, I pay tribute to the citizens who were involved in the citizens' assembly on gender equality, chaired by Dr. Catherine Day, which gave rise to such an impressive report with 45 recommendations, effectively a blueprint for achieving gender equality in Ireland. I look forward to working cross-party with colleagues on ensuring that the blueprint is implemented through our work in the committee. We will commence our public

hearings next week, but we have already been involved in a great deal of work.

I am mindful, however, of the point made forcefully by both Professor David Farrell and Ms Ursula Quill in *thejournal.ie* recently that there needs to be a clear impact from a citizens' assembly. The recommendations of citizens' assemblies have to be implemented. Citizens who engage and give their time and commitment so willingly have to see that what they have recommended is taken up and moves issues further, as we saw with the Convention on the Constitution, which I was privileged to be part of, and the referendum on marriage equality and the referendum on the eighth amendment, which again followed a citizens' assembly. There must be meaningful engagement by the Government. Indeed, I asked the Taoiseach to commit to that last week in the context of the gender equality recommendations. We must see the recommendations made by citizens' assemblies being taken seriously and being brought into effect. That is crucial.

With regard to the two assemblies being discussed today, the Dublin citizens' assembly is an important and valuable one. I look forward to the deliberations there. I am grateful to my colleagues, Labour Party councillors and our Lord Mayor, Ms Alison Gilliland, for their insights and the feedback they have given me on their views. Many of our councillors, and other councillors too, have expressed concerns that their ability to carry out work on behalf of their electors is stymied by the absence of real executive power at present. We all are conscious that, by European standards, Ireland has a much less effective tier of local government. There are insufficient powers at local government level. We might contrast that with the type of city powers we see in cities such as London, where the mayor, Mr. Sadiq Khan, has exercised real power, and in cities in the US. A city diplomacy unit is now being established by the US State Department. We must look at models elsewhere to ensure we have meaningful and effective local government, and that the issue of a directly elected lord mayor is taken up and brought forward, but the mayor must have sufficient power to make it an effective office.

I am conscious that there is already draft legislation to introduce a directly elected mayor, which was brought forward by the Green Party the last time it was in government. My colleague, Councillor Dermot Lacey, has pointed out that this legislation could be reintroduced to avoid delaying local government reform any longer. I am sure the citizens' assembly will look at this. I hope it will be an inclusive assembly because many of those who live in Dublin are not from Dublin. It is vital that all residents in Dublin city and county are included. I note it is proposed to have 12 councillors participating. We need to hear why that number was considered. I am aware there is a proposed Seanad amendment to include a higher number, but we must be mindful that a citizens' assembly should primarily comprise citizens. There must be a clear balance there on membership.

I also welcome the proposed citizens' assembly on biodiversity. As spokesperson on climate for the Labour Party, I am conscious that we have not only a climate emergency but also a biodiversity emergency in Ireland. We have tragic levels of extinction of species worldwide. There are approximately 31,000 species known to occur in Ireland, yet the conservation status of only about 10% has been assessed. There is a fundamental knowledge gap in how we tackle biodiversity in Ireland, how we protect species and how we ensure against further loss of biodiversity. I implore the citizens' assembly on biodiversity to look at these issues, in particular, and to address that knowledge gap.

I welcome this motion and offer the support of the Labour Party for it, but I ask the Minister of State to move urgently to establish the other two promised citizens' assemblies on drug use

and on education.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Government's decision to establish two citizens' assemblies, one on biodiversity and one on a particular priority for me, local government in Dublin. I served for ten years as a member of Dublin City Council and had the great honour of chairing that body. On many occasions during my time in this House I have missed the fantastic opportunity that being a local councillor gives a person to impact his or her community in a real and tangible way. That said, our system of local government is broken. It is a system we inherited from Victorian England. Despite that jurisdiction reforming local government, like many other countries across Europe, Ireland remains stuck with that Victorian model, which is further limited by increasing centralisation. This is demonstrated by the frustration and powerlessness of councillors and citizens alike.

Dublin needs a new model of local government and it must draw on the expertise of its current practitioners, the elected members, and those it serves, the people of the county. Yes, Dublin needs a new model and, yes, the people of the county must have an input, but councillors, who know the current system inside out, must have an input into the reform process. This is not the first rodeo for local government reform in Dublin. I served as a member of the funnily named colloquium on local government established by the then Minister, Mr. Phil Hogan, and I watched as different councils brought that process to a halt. Some say it was a process that was designed to fail but, either way, it delivered nothing. This assembly cannot fall into that category. The new citizens' assembly must deliver local government reform that empowers councillors and better serves the people of the county. The debate on a directly elected mayor has not been well teased out. The idea that it is a panacea for poor, short-term decision making is over-simplistic. I welcome the citizens' assembly because I believe, as we saw with other issues, it will help to build a consensus. It will ensure an informed and detailed debate and focus minds on what the real challenges are in local government.

The time I have to address both topics to be dealt with by the assemblies is limited. However, I must take time to address one issue, which is that a citizens' assembly will not deal with legal reform of illegal drugs this year. I am bitterly disappointed it will not form part of this year's work programme. It is a complex legal area. It requires expert-led civic debate. It will require brave decisions by politicians. It is an ideal candidate for a citizens' assembly. Without prejudice to my comments on the Dublin issue, it would be my number one priority for a subject matter to be dealt with by a citizens' assembly. I regret every day that is added to the process of reform arising from the decision not to deal with it in 2022.

Communities such as Ballymun and Finglas live every day with the impact of the illegal drugs industry and with those people with addiction who are exploited by it. This industry has so much money and firepower that no level of decision-making or enforcement could be immune to the bribery and intimidation it can inflict. Any delay in dealing with the issue will cause further suffering. It will delay treatment and intervention. It will lead to further violence.

I welcome the Government's commitment on the issue. I welcome that people from the top down, including An Taoiseach, have dealt with it in my constituency. I welcome the intervention of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O'Brien, to tackle disadvantage. I welcome the intervention of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to provide additional money. If the citizens' assembly is not to come until later this year, what work must we do now as a Government to shatter the grip the illegal drugs industry has on my community? This work remains. It is in our power to do something now in advance of a citizens' assembly setting.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I am grateful to have an opportunity to speak on this. I welcome the citizens' assemblies on these two very important topics. It is one of the innovations that Ireland has successfully introduced into policymaking. I do not need to remind the House of its path-breaking role in helping constitutional change to occur in this country and introducing climate legislation that puts us very much to the forefront in how we have changed legislation to create a framework for addressing the climate. I hope we do the same in the context of gender equality.

Biodiversity is a very important subject. One of the fears I have, and the citizens' assembly will have to look at this, is that there is a danger in the way we segment climate, waste and biodiversity as if they are different topics that need different solutions, different plans and different strategies. The reality is that the supply chain of our lives is what has caused all of these three crises. They are interlocking crises. We need to see them in an integrated way rather than in a piecemeal way. We get insights and begin to see where the trade-offs arise if we avoid siloing these three crises into separate arenas.

The circular economy is really about how to remove from the supply chain of our lives all of the environmental damage we do, whether in the extraction of materials, the generation of pollutants into the atmosphere, emissions that affect our climate, creating waste we discard and throwing away valuable materials that are irreplaceable. These things need to be seen in an integrated way. It is only then we will protect our atmosphere, natural environment, waterways, climate and the scarce resources we have the fortune to have and minimise waste. As a House, when we hand over the issue we ought to emphasise that it should be seen in an integrated way.

I welcome the evaluation of what is best governance for Dublin. It is very timely. Over the years we have struggled in Dublin with how to strike a balance between the need for local government to be closer to the people and the coherence needed for a capital city to work effectively. In my lifetime I have seen it move from having two councils to four councils. There is far greater representation but in this process we have lost some of that coherence. A capital city needs interconnected parts. It needs to be thinking in a more coherent way about big issues in its economic, social and cultural future and in its infrastructural needs. To some degree we are falling between stools. Often our dispersed authorities in Dublin do not have the capacity to deliver some of the bigger infrastructural asks imposed upon them, whether it be with regard to housing, climate or the other demands we place upon them. It is timely to see how we can strike a balance with having important local representation, which we all recognise is essential. Local government has to be close to its communities. It has to be responsive. People have to feel part of it. At the same time, they have this bigger role.

One of the much undervalued elements of political representation in Ireland is holding bodies to account. In Dublin we have not effectively held to account through our local authorities bodies such as Dublin Port, Dublin Bus or the Dublin elements of the health services. Part of the role of local political representation is to run things that are appropriate to it and hold to account bigger bodies that have a wider mandate. They should ensure there is the holding toes to the fire that political bodies can do very effectively.

An all-powerful elected mayor may not be the answer for Dublin. We may need something a bit more like the governance we have at national level, with people who are elected politically and chosen from within authorities but have combined governance. This would be much like our Ministers, with people responsible for different elements of managing the affairs of a big city such as what Dublin has become. I admit this is a prejudice because it is my view of the

world. The success of our democratic institutions has shown that having individual political executives embedded in a wider political family brings strength to it. I am grateful for the opportunity to address this very important topic. I wish the Minister of State well in the work he is taking on.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the commitment to a citizens' assembly on the biodiversity crisis. Campaigners have been calling for the assembly to be convened as a matter of priority to address the growing biodiversity crisis that has been caused by habitat loss, overexploitation and climate change. These factors have caused a rapid acceleration of animals and plants becoming extinct. Measures to restore biodiversity could have a significant impact if implemented properly.

The State's record is not good. For example, almost half of Irish rivers have unsatisfactory water quality levels. We will plan for development in our oceans without identifying marine protected areas. Derrybrien wind farm was built in breach of environmental regulations and is now in legal limbo having been refused retrospective planning consent. It has already cost the State €17 million in European Commission fines, with the total rising to €15,000 a day as its status remains unresolved.

Last week it was reported on the back of freedom of information data obtained by my colleague, Senator Boylan, that the OPW was investigated for breaches of wildlife regulations over refurbishment works that threatened a protected bat. The OPW was advised of this but ignored the advice and carried on regardless. We hear similar stories on a daily basis.

The 2019 global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services warned that an unprecedented loss of species will continue to gain pace unless countries take urgent action to tackle it. The citizens' assembly is a step in the right direction but it needs to move to action. When we have it, we should heed its findings. It cannot be tokenism, greenwashing or a fudge.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Citizens' assemblies have proven themselves as being sometimes more useful at delivering action and seeing viable solutions than in here and beyond. With many others I am utterly disappointed a citizens' assembly on drugs has not been timed properly. The Taoiseach spoke about the end of 2022 but the Department of Health and the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, state it will be 2023. We need to find out exactly when this will happen. This State has a long history of failing communities. We are failing with regard to addiction. We are failing in that we have allowed criminal gangs to harangue communities. We have not put in family supports, community supports or addiction supports. We require this to go to the people so that people can look at novel ideas. We are chasing ourselves on this.

4 o'clock

Do not get me wrong, we need policing. We need policing at this time to be concentrated on those criminal gangs. We need the Criminal Assets Bureau to be concentrated on these criminal gangs. We need this assembly to happen as soon as possible. This is a failure on top of many failures, and it is not good enough for the communities across Louth, Dundalk and Drogheda and across this State and country. It is an issue that impacts on all. It is not good enough. Very simply, when we called for an Irish unity citizens' assembly to allow for that conversation, which is necessary and which is happening, the Taoiseach stated that he does not believe it is the forum. The Taoiseach needs to come up with the goods for a forum. If that is to be an expanded shared island dialogue, then it needs to be expanded and we need not to worry

too much about those we will offend. Unionism is in a cul-de-sac. It knows this is coming and we need to get ready.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I join with others in saying that I am deeply disappointed that the much-needed citizens’ assembly on drugs has not been given the urgency it needs and has not been started, as it should be now. There is an absolute urgency in the area of drug use and addiction as everyone in this House knows. Over the past 25 years we have lost 10,549 people to drug-related deaths. There is an absolute urgency about this and there should be a citizens’ assembly launched right now by the Government on this. There is no time for any delay on this. There is no justification for that whatsoever.

Shamefully, as a country, since addiction and drug addiction came to our shores from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the State has always been on the back foot in terms of responding. When the drugs task forces were set up initially they were given a good deal of prioritisation, but since then we have seen the priority continuously down scaled and they have not been given the resources that they need. It is not far from here where the communities initially faced the problems of addiction and drug use. They are very close to here but they could be miles away with regard to the slow political response over the years. It is sad to see that four decades on the State is still being slow and non-urgent in its response. While great work has been done by many people and many communities, clearly the strategies to date have not worked as we need them to. This is why a citizens’ assembly in this area is absolutely urgent. If I had to choose between that and a citizens’ assembly on a directly elected mayor for Dublin, I would definitely choose to deal with the issues around drugs, now and urgently.

I have long been an advocate of a directly elected mayor for Dublin and these areas need to be looked at. The lack of powers for local government and local democracy in Ireland does impact on people’s daily lives. Consider how far behind we are as a country in dealing with issues around housing, childcare and transport. We are surrounded by countries where these issues are effectively tackled at a local level because local democracy is well resourced, well organised and has the proper structures in place. They either have directly elected mayors in place or mayors that are in place for a five-year term but indirectly elected. These places have one or the other, and it gives those local authorities leadership. It means that the local authority members are able to hold the non-elected leadership of the councils to account. There is a balance there, and that balance is completely and utterly lacking at the moment. Because of the highly centralised nature of government here we have suffered hugely from not devolving powers, not just to local authorities but also in empowering local communities and local people. This is really what a citizens’ assembly should be about. It is about how we structure things politically in the local authorities but ultimately it is about how we can give power back to communities so they can be involved in the decision-making to solve the problems that they face. This is really what that citizens’ assembly needs to be about.

Deputy Mitchell referred to a very good point about how those 12 councillors are chosen. It would be a huge mistake if this is to be done as three per local authority, in which case we would end up with representation just of the larger political parties. There must be representation that reflects the diversity on the four Dublin local authorities and this would include the smaller parties and people from no parties at all. This must be done and not be a stitch up by the larger political parties. That would not be acceptable.

I very much welcome the proposed citizens’ assembly on the biodiversity crisis. This is absolutely crucial. It cannot be an excuse for government inaction in this area. We need to see

urgent action in beefing up the National Parks and Wildlife Service straightaway. The targets for 30% of marine protected areas should be advanced quickly and urgently. Biodiversity and tackling biodiversity issues is absolutely key to furthering our efforts in tackling climate change. A lot of Ireland's biodiversity and marine life is absolutely key for carbon capture and while it has a massive intrinsic value itself, it also has a massive value in combatting and fighting climate change. I welcome that there will be citizens' assembly on that but really I would like to see the Government get on with a lot of the actions we know it could be taking now to tackle the biodiversity crisis we have.

Deputy Seán Haughey: Before we consider the two issues to be examined by the two new citizens' assemblies we should take a minute or two to consider the role of citizens' assemblies and the justification for them. It has been put to me by some constituents that citizens' assemblies are not required and that they are of no value, pointing out that the Houses of the Oireachtas, Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, are the real citizens' assemblies. That may be so, but in my view citizens' assemblies have an important role to play in a modern democracy. Deputies and Senators have a huge workload and may not always have the time and resources to consider in depth a particular complex issue, to consider expert opinion, to determine the views of the public, to engage with representative groups, to consult advocacy groups and to hear the views of other policy makers. The same applies to Ministers and their civil servants. They too can get caught up in the day-to-day pressures of policy formulation, decision-making and policy implementation and do not always have the time to think outside the box. Ireland's practice of using citizens' assemblies has been commented on favourably internationally. The concept is evolving, however, and the Irish model needs to be updated regularly to ensure that it is innovative and follows European best practice. Yes, citizens' assemblies have an important role to play, provided that the subject is an important one, that the terms of reference are clearly focused, that they report back in a timely manner and that their recommendations are implemented.

More citizens' assemblies are planned on drug use, on rural youth and on the future of education. We need to be careful not to commit too many issues to this process and to be selective in this regard. Implementation is the key. The deliberations of the citizens' assemblies cannot be a wasted exercise. We as Deputies must continue to take an active interest to ensure the implementation of their recommendations.

I am delighted that we are now establishing a citizens' assembly on biodiversity loss. Various international reports, including the Global Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services, have highlighted the critical position around biodiversity loss. There has been an unprecedented loss of species, habitats and ecosystems. Many animals and plants are on the verge of extinction. This is being caused by over exploitation and by climate change, which in turn is caused by human activity. Urgent action is needed. Ireland declared a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019. That was a start. Our climate action plan was published last year but the biodiversity crisis now needs our particular attention. There is huge public support for action to be taken on this issue. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people discovered the joys of nature. I believe there is a new awareness and a desire to protect our fragile biodiversity before it is too late.

I also welcome the establishment of a citizens' assembly on a directly elected mayor for Dublin and on the local government structures for Dublin. I am a supporter in principle of a directly elected mayor. I believe, however, that the office must not turn out to be just another layer of bureaucracy actually delaying decision-making. The cost of the office must be reasonable and kept under control. A directly elected mayor would provide direct responsibility, give

leadership on key issues and would be accountable. If we are to achieve this then a worthwhile reform of local government will have been brought about.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Notwithstanding the remarks of Deputy Haughey on citizens' assemblies, with which I tentatively agree, the citizens' assembly model has proven its worth over the past number of years. Some of the questions that have been asked, in particular on the social side of things, may not have come about as quickly had we been left to deal with them in these Houses.

That being said, biodiversity is probably one of the key elements on the list of citizens' assemblies outlined in the programme for Government. I am pleased to see it included relatively early following the Covid pandemic. It is necessary to mention that when we declared a biodiversity emergency in 2019, the climate action plan, which was updated just last year, followed shortly thereafter. A committee on which I serve, along with Members of all parties and none, did a huge amount of work on improving legislation around the climate action plan. There is an opportunity for us to take on board the views of the public and expertise that was perhaps not available to the Houses of the Oireachtas during the pre-legislative processes, as well as opportunities for us to take on board international expertise that, again, may not have been available to us.

Therefore, I welcome the opportunity presented by this particular citizens' assembly. Approximately 30% of plant and wildlife species in this country is at extreme risk. Unfortunately, that risk is accelerating at an alarming rate, which must be addressed by the State in terms of what actions we take and what restrictions we impose on certain sectors and industries in order to attempt to stop that dramatic increase in biodiversity loss. We have a particular responsibility to recognise that habitats are not just on land or in rivers but are also in our seas. The greatest example of something like that occurring is the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, but we do not have to go too far from these Houses to see biodiversity loss on our seabeds and in our aquatic wildlife that play a significant role in biodiversity and are a major carbon sink for the planet. Approximately 1 million species are at extreme risk across the planet, which I mentioned in terms of the numbers in Ireland. It is important that we learn from initiatives such as the restoration of our bogs and the carbon sink that they provide us with so that when we engage with them further, in particular in the coming decade, we implement best practice, as experienced in the midlands.

Reporting back to us within nine months means that we should deal with this issue in the early part of 2023. There is an opportunity for us collaboratively. Heretofore, at the very start of the citizens' assembly process Oireachtas Members had an input into the process. I was a layperson – a reserve, if you will – in that particular model. I would not rule out the opportunity for a selective group of parliamentarians to participate in that process or to at least be advisers.

Regarding the question of a Dublin mayor being put a citizens' assembly, I very much support the idea behind it, but I come from a local authority that declined the opportunity to have a directly elected mayor on the latest occasion, and that was provided for in legislation. We need to know what powers would be removed from the local authority management system before anything can happen. Like my colleague, I believe there is no point in creating a directly elected mayor if it is simply a talking shop and has no real authority.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the recently announced citizens' assemblies on a directly elected mayor and biodiversity. However, the Government has failed to prepare for a

Border poll, just like the British Tories failed to prepare for Brexit.

I would like to focus on the issue of the citizens' assembly on drugs. Deputy Gould outlined the stark statistics regarding how drugs affected another generation of young people. People in our communities are dying every day and the so-called war on drugs has failed miserably. For decades, our communities, through Concerned Parents Against Drugs, CPAD, the Coalition of Communities Against Drugs, COCAD, CityWide and professionals in the area of drug use and misuse, have said that we need a fundamental, root-and-branch change to our drug strategies.

The reason that a citizens' assembly is important is there is no clear and accepted analysis of the way forward. The delay is sadly going to kick the problem down the line for years. However, our communities, parents and young people do not have that time. I ask that the preparatory work for the citizens' assembly on drugs to be started now and that we do not delay any further. Maybe we will then finally move away from criminalising young people who use drugs and have to deal with the nightmare of drug addiction and use.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In the short time I have available I want to raise two issues around citizens' assemblies. I agree with the concept, but the real citizens' assembly is those of us in this House. We cannot dodge stuff that is difficult; we need to deal with that ourselves.

The first issue I wish to raise is Irish unity and the Border poll we look forward to in a couple of years. We have to prepare for that properly so that we are ready and do not mess up the referendum as happened with the Brexit referendum in the UK. A lot of people there regret that the referendum was not held properly. The outcome is something a lot of people have a problem with, and they are dealing with the consequences of that and will be for generations.

The second issue I want to focus on is drugs and the failure to progress the citizens' assembly on drugs. Drug addiction and its outcomes have a devastating affect on families and communities. There are particular problems in my city, Limerick, which are replicated in many urban and, unfortunately, rural areas across the State. We need a citizens' assembly on drugs. I heard the statement from the Minister of State and I am deeply disappointed that we will not have a citizens' assembly on drugs until at least 2023. That decision needs to be speeded up if possible. If that does not happen, the preparatory work for it should be ready. Communities are waiting for it and we cannot hide behind the citizens' assembly not being ready or able to deal with the issue of drugs. We can do that ourselves. I plead with the Government to come forward with some sort of solution.

How we have dealt with the issue of drugs has been a failure for generations, and that has been reflected in our communities. The statistics show that Ireland has the highest rate of drugs-related overdoses in Europe, with hundreds of people dying every year. If that is not a wake-up call for us, what will be? Like the Minister of State, we deal with communities and families who feel abandoned and that there is no hope for them. Addiction services are not funded properly. Criminals flaunt their wealth and rub peoples nose's in it. People cannot prove where they got that money from. We need to enhance the Criminal Assets Bureau. I urge the Minister of State to establish a citizens' assembly on drugs and if the Government cannot do that, it should at least prepare for it.

Deputy Gino Kenny: The decision by the Government to delay a citizens' assembly on drug use is an affront to the debate. How any Government can prioritise a directly elected mayor over the urgent debate on drug use is beyond comprehension. Let us provide the context.

This issue has been delayed for decades while thousands of people die and rot. The assembly that should be in the dock is not the citizens' assembly, but rather this assembly. This assembly has for decades let communities rot. Thousands of people would be alive today if it was not for the antiquated laws around drug use.

Most of those people do not have a voice, but we are giving them a voice today. They have been denied a voice. We are so frustrated. Many of us who want to bring debate further on have been left very frustrated, to say the least. A different approach to drug use has worked in other jurisdictions. We are talking about people who should be alive today. A model that saves lives is in place in Portugal. It has taken a different approach to drug use since 2001. Why would we want to criminalise people who want to use drugs? It is like sending people to jail because they have a dependency on alcohol. It does not make sense. We need a different approach. There are elements in this Government that do not want any progress at all. There are elements that want progress, but there are backward elements in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil who have no interest in this issue at all. They want to see people rot, die and be decrepit because they are happy with the *status quo*. I am cynical about this. Even if recommendations come back from the citizens' assembly, I do not think this Government has the stomach to change the laws on drug use.

Deputy Mick Barry: There is a citizens' assembly for 2022 to elect a mayor for Dublin but no citizens' assembly for the drug issue. It shows how out of touch the Government is. In my constituency, Cork North-Central, we have communities absolutely plagued by drug-dealing. We have people whose lives have been wrecked or even lost due to drug misuse. The war on drugs strategy has clearly failed. There is a clear need for alternative strategies and a real debate about them. If the Government thinks that an elected mayor for Dublin is more important than this, then it is simply living on another planet. Why are there no community-based drug and alcohol services for under-18s in Cork city? Under-18s continue to be referred to Matt Talbot Adolescent Services for treatment, but since Coolmine took over the contract for drug and alcohol services in the city, with services being centralised at the start of the new year, community-based work with under-18s on the ground has effectively stopped. This is a serious mistake and I want to bring it to public attention. The Government's priorities on these issues are all wrong. Its choices regarding the priorities for citizens' assemblies this year absolutely show it.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I acknowledge the contribution of Deputy Gino Kenny. He has a strong record of campaigning in this regard, which deserves to be acknowledged. There are elements in this Government who will push this forward. It matters to us too. I respect his record on this issue in particular.

This matters to the Green Party. We care about it deeply. The principle of subsidiarity, with decisions being made at the lowest effective level, is baked into our DNA. We believe in the wisdom of crowds and in the power of inclusive and deliberative democracy to tease out some of the issues that either Deputy Paul Donnelly or Deputy Quinlivan referred to. Not all the answers to this issue are available already. If we put people in the room, with expert advice, we will get answers that help us move towards a more inclusive society. This kind of informed debate can be an important counterweight to the populism that we see, which is often driven by social media platforms and which is about an instantaneous, quick, easily digested response rather than people with different points of view from different backgrounds sitting together and listening to one another to have a collaborative approach. The scale of challenges is significant, including climate, biodiversity, the drugs issue, the remaking of our local democracy and how we remake education for the 21st century. It is important that we engage in meaningful discussion in this making and remaking of society through that collaborative act of imagination.

In some ways, Ireland has led the way on this. We have been a trailblazer with citizens' assemblies. Much of my work revolves around well-being indicators. The OECD framework shows that this indicator for civic engagement is the one that we do worst on in Ireland. Much of that is down to how we have debased and stripped out local government over decades. For the citizen, that has broken the connection between local democracy and the subsidiarity I mentioned, and how decisions are made by the Government. Citizens' assemblies are an important way to remediate that damage. I would like to see them at a more local level so that citizens within counties or local areas really get to engage in this discussion.

I refer to a study by Torney, Brereton and Coleman, which indicates that both bottom-up approaches such as deliberative forums, including citizens' assemblies, and top-down political leadership and coherent policies have to combine to tackle that level of existential threat that we see within the climate emergency and the pernicious problems that have bedevilled our society for a long time, including drugs and access to education. They acknowledge that deliberative forums can facilitate societal buy-in for tough policy decisions by including the concerns of citizens in policymaking and increasing the legitimacy of decisions and actions taken.

We have to be mindful that when we get these recommendations, we must action them in a meaningful way. If we allow citizens' assemblies to turn into talking shops where people talk around the issue, issue recommendations and then do not see them implemented, we will undercut the trust that we have in what is a valuable institution. We have tough decisions ahead, but talking about those decisions together makes us stronger.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I welcome the news that the Minister of State delivered in his opening statement that the first two citizens' assemblies will be concurrent. That will allow us to get on with the third and fourth citizens' assemblies as soon as possible, as per the programme for Government. It is also welcome that we will open access to citizens' assemblies to broader and more diverse groups. I think everybody in the House will agree with that change.

At the risk of stating the obvious, we live in a representative democracy. This is a popularity contest to a great extent. It is also true that the electorate knowingly and willingly put us here to make difficult decisions, to do what is right and to resist the impulse of the popular path. The popular path is perhaps the easier way to be elected but it is often in conflict with doing what is right and responsible. As politicians accountable to the electorate, we live with that conflict daily. Our system is not perfect, by any means. It is far from perfect. The many problems we have in society are evidence of this. At the risk of irking my Sinn Féin colleagues, I will quote Winston Churchill who said, "...democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried...". Our system, as imperfect as it is, has given us relative stability and prosperity, but we should always strive to reform, and sometimes to reform radically, which we should do carefully. We have seen enough in our recent history and even currently to know the risks in indulging of the impulse to follow what is popular.

Citizens' assemblies are an appropriate step into radical reform. They are an important interface. As my colleague, Deputy Ó Cathasaigh said, in an era of polarisation driven by social media, where it becomes difficult for politicians to be brave and do what is responsible, that interface with the public through citizens' assemblies is extremely important. We have seen significant success in this regard. Laura Devaney, an academic who examined this, said:

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly was an exceptional experiment in democratic governance and engagement. Comprising 99 citizens, it afforded participants the time, space and struc-

ture to deliberate on complex public policy questions, including climate change.

It afforded politicians the space to do what is right. That citizens' assembly led to the citizens' climate research project, the Oireachtas special committee, the programme for Government, and the climate action legislation last year. We would not have that Act and the ambition in it if we did not have that citizens' assembly.

I agree with Deputy McAuliffe that our system of local government is broken. In many respects what happened in Salthill in Galway last week is a testament to that. It could be argued we need citizens' assemblies at a very local level to solve some of these problems. I welcome the citizens' assembly on a directly elected mayor for Dublin. I am disappointed Limerick's venture into that area will not inform that citizens' assembly because we have not advanced the relevant legislation through the House.

I join my colleague Deputy Ó Cathasaigh in paying tribute to Deputy Gino Kenny, across the House, who has done extraordinary work in the area of drug policy. He is certainly a champion in that area. I hope we will be able to bring forward a citizens' assembly on drug use as soon as possible.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I welcome the Government motion to convene these two citizens' assemblies to examine biodiversity loss and the direct election of a Dublin mayor. Citizens' assemblies enrich our democracy. They are a powerful mechanism of direct deliberation and influence by the public on matters of social and economic importance. Our party believes it is essential the issues of the day be given space to be scrutinised and democratically debated. Holding assemblies on both climate change and its impact and on measures to strengthen local democratic accountability is the right way forward. Biodiversity is essential to our entire ecosystem. Every day we lose part of our biodiversity is a day we are closer to an unsustainable future for our children and the planet. Nature does not belong to us; we belong to nature.

Constitutional reform and the future progression of the island of Ireland in the 21st century form another area where a citizens' assembly could play a vital role, and I encourage the Government to strongly consider that. Brexit has made this a seminal goal of our generation. The debate on Irish reunification grows daily. People from all walks of life are talking about ideas for a new health service, a new public service, a new tax system and the rightful place of unionists within the new Ireland. These are among the many important issues in which a citizens' assembly could play its part.

I look forward to the work of the two entities being established today on the very important issues of biodiversity loss and the direct election of a Dublin mayor. I urge the Government to consider the timely and important matter of a citizens' assembly on the future of our island and its reunification. We must remember democracy is best served when it is closest to the people.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister of State for his opening statement, which was very useful. I listened to it in great detail. I am delighted to be in the Chamber to make a contribution to this very important debate on establishing two citizens' assemblies, one on a directly elected mayor for Dublin and the other on the biodiversity crisis. As a Deputy representing rural and regional Ireland, I will focus my comments on the citizens' assembly on biodiversity. That is the most appropriate focus for me to take. I welcome the fact there was a commitment on citizens' assemblies in the programme for Government, I welcome the recent Cabinet decision in that regard, and I welcome the fact that both assemblies will be commenced in April. I

note no specific date is mentioned in the opening statement for the launch of these assemblies. If the Minister of State does not have the specific date, he might mention whether it will be in early April or late April. That would be useful. I also welcome the fact there will be a very quick but responsible turnaround time. Within the next nine months - before Christmas, it is to be hoped, if not earlier - we will have a very detailed and thoughtful report.

I have just three points to make. First, a citizens' assembly is a very good forum through which to explore these issues. They have an excellent track record in recent years of tackling sensitive and complex societal issues. It is appropriate that they focus on these matters. From the point of view of biodiversity in particular, a citizens' assembly would have a lot to offer. I would be keen to see whether it would recommend a referendum to enshrine environmental rights in the Constitution. That will probably be a big takeaway point from that perspective.

The second point I wish to make is one that has not really been made in the Chamber yet. It is the most important point I wish to get across. I very much welcome the change in the eligibility criteria as outlined in the Minister of State's opening statement. Confining citizens' assemblies and their membership to those on the electoral register was very limited. I agree the new Irish and the non-Irish should be included, but there is a cohort of people who are utterly deserving of inclusion on the citizens' assembly on biodiversity, namely, those under the age of 18, who cannot vote. This is a wonderful opportunity to include them and to widen the franchise in that regard. Transition year students are a classic example of a cohort of people who could be recruited and make an active contribution to a citizens' assembly. They could make a meaningful and valid contribution to progress in society. I urge the Minister of State and his officials to consider that.

The third point I wish to raise relates to biodiversity itself. As a person who grew up on a farm, every time I return home to the family farm, it is obvious there is a wildlife crisis and a biodiversity crisis. There are not as many bees, butterflies, birds, rabbits or foxes. It is absolutely apparent that, even in my one generation, a transformation is taking place and our habitats and our ecosystems are under severe and sustained pressure. A citizens' assembly is a wonderful opportunity to inform the Government response to this in order that we not only promote and protect our ecosystems but look to restore them and to reverse biodiversity loss.

I very much welcome the establishment and the creation of these two citizens' assemblies. I urge the Minister of State and his officials to look favourably on the inclusion of people below the age of 18. Let us remember this is the cohort of people who awakened us adults, as we call ourselves, to the climate crisis. This is the group of people who are most passionate about it and the group of people who will suffer most the consequences or otherwise of our actions. They should certainly be included. I wish the members of the citizens' assemblies well in their hugely challenging but noble undertaking.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the first move today in establishing the two citizens' assemblies, one on the loss of biodiversity and the other on a directly elected mayor for Dublin. I will focus first, if I may, on the citizens' assembly on the loss of biodiversity. Citizens' assemblies have served the country very well. That does not mean we cannot develop hybrid versions of them or continue to look at them to see how they can continue to serve us well. They were certainly ahead of politicians, or maybe in a better place to take more courageous and clear-cut decisions than were politicians, and read the mood of the nation when it came to three previous citizens' assemblies on climate action, marriage equality and termination of pregnancy. That then enabled politicians to consider they broadly had a cross-section of the will of the people

and to legislate accordingly.

As for biodiversity, I wish to talk about my constituency and how far ahead of politicians the public are already on actions on the ground regarding biodiversity. When I think of my constituency, I think of groups such as Ballyboden Tidy Towns and Dodder Action, individuals such as John Kiberd, in Tallaght, the Stepping Stone Forests initiative and Tallaght Community Council. I was fortunate to join the two latter groups recently when they were planting new forests in Killinarden Community School and in Old Bawn Community School. The number of students who were involved in that and the volunteers from groups such as Dodder Action were truly inspiring to witness. I refer to the enthusiasm, the money invested by sponsors, the general goodwill, the openness to the issue of biodiversity and the understanding that it is a crucial and critical theme in our modern days. I think of South Dublin County Council, my local authority, and the work it is doing on wildflower planting in parks such as Dodder Valley Park and Tymon Park and on pollinating roundabouts. I think of a very recent initiative on behalf of residents in Woodstown Village, in Knocklyon. There is a pollinator trail in Woodstown Village, adjacent to the M50 motorway. As recently as last week, an orchard was planted along the line between that estate and the M50. It was truly inspiring.

To Deputy Berry's point, the number of under-18s involved in this initiative was inspiring and outstanding. I share his view that stakeholder contribution and input to this citizen's assembly needs to be broadened. The under-18s who have, as previous speakers said, most to fear from climate catastrophe and are most alert and aware of what can be done can truly inspire us. We saw that when we had a parliament of young people in the previous Dáil and the challenges they put up to Government. I agree their voice must be heard. I also think of all the schools and residents associations doing Trojan work, as is evidenced in my constituency. They lead the way in this.

Rather than the citizens' assembly, as has been the case before, informing the public of what it needs to do, the citizens' assembly on biodiversity needs to have open ears and invite as broad a range of people as possible to hear what they are doing on the ground, reinforce that work and ensure that is part of any recommendations that emerge.

One of Sadiq Khan's first moves as Mayor of London was to designate that, by a particular year, he wanted London to be a national park city. That is an incredible concept. I mentioned it when I was an Opposition Front Bench spokesperson for Dublin. Can the Minister of State imagine if we in Dublin began to reimagine our city as a park, how differently we would treat it and how much more respectful we would be of it? We could conceptualise our city space as park space to be treasured, cultivated, nurtured, respected and protected, but a park in which people live. Rather than an industrial or residential complex, all of these would be situated within the concept of a park.

The Minister of State will be well aware of my views on the directly elected mayor going back over a number of years. I am intrigued as to what the citizens' assembly comes up with. There is a need for Dublin to establish its place among the cities of the world with one voice and with one go-to person to serve as champion and point of reference for all things Dublin for people overseas or nationally. The downside, given our electoral system, is that if we pursue that course, an indirect consequence may be to imbue that politician with powers substantially above what we want him or her to have. That person would become a powerful voice in political Ireland, probably the second or third most powerful voice, given the mandate he or she would receive from a Dublin electorate. That has to be tempered. My view is that, on local

election day, as citizens go to elect the councillors in each county and ward in Dublin, they should also elect one person per ward they want to sit on a Dublin regional assembly. That would give a 30- or 40-member regional assembly, to which the directly elected mayor would be answerable, and counterbalance any fears people may have about a directly elected mayor having unfettered power. It would also ensure the voices from the four Dublin local authorities and each ward in each of those authorities would be represented accurately.

This would cost money but Dublin needs someone to speak on particular topics with one voice, including such issues as drugs, policing and transport. That person would seek a mandate, go before the public on that mandate and, four or five years later, go again before the public and seek its response as to whether the mandate has been fulfilled. As a member of a local drugs task force, I would like to see one voice championing the needs of disadvantaged communities in our city and county and pulling together all the myriad and scores of threads in relation to the provision of public transport in the city into one body to make decisions. In the area of policing, people are crying out and a directly elected mayor would have a powerful mandate in speaking on matters of policing, security and safety of people in our capital city and county.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State. The number of issues coming up that would be of focused interest to the assemblies include biodiversity, local government, the directly elected mayor for Dublin, local government structures for Dublin, drug use, which is an important issue, and the future of education. When we talk about assemblies, we have to be fair, frank, honest and open. How can the Dáil and the public be certain that the citizens' assemblies will operate within the scope of their respective mandates?

The final report of the Citizen's Assembly on gender equality, chaired by Catherine Day, states that the assembly deliberately went beyond the mandate provided to it by the Oireachtas. That assembly decided that restricting its work under the terms of reference to women, men, boys and girls, as decided by the Oireachtas resolution, was unacceptable and could be seen as excluding non-binary and transgender people. According to the final report, the assembly took a broader view and determined that gender should refer to any and all options in terms of gender identity. The Oireachtas resolution which created the assembly on gender equality states that the assembly was mandated to "challenge the remaining barriers and social norms and attitudes that facilitate gender discrimination towards girls and boys, women and men". Undoubtedly, some will take that expansion of the assembly's remit as a positive step, while others will take it as an attempt to minimise sex-based rights. The important point, regardless of one's view on the matter, is that beyond doubt that assembly deliberately and materially decided to move outside the clear and unambiguous limits placed on it by the Oireachtas. That move was a violation of the terms of its work and, crucially, an undermining of the democratic Chambers of the Oireachtas.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am opposed to citizens' assemblies. We are elected into this Chamber by the people. I understand these assemblies will be appointed, as they have been before, by Government or parties in government. What credentials do they have to have? We know from the last assembly that at least nine of them did not meet the criteria to be on that so-called assembly. The local authorities and county councils do so much work on the ground listening to people's problems and complaints. Is this to sideline all those people who are elected? What will the people appointed to these assemblies cost? Who are they responsible to? They can go outside the Government remit or whatever criteria they were supposed to follow. Is this another ploy to satisfy former Government supporters and henchmen or women? Is it about giving them jobs and recognition and letting them come up with schemes and reports

that may hurt farmers and working-class people? Our farmers are the custodians of the land. They have done right by their land all the time and always. I know them. They want to hand it down and on in a better state to the youngsters coming after them and whom we hope will be farming in future. Our farmers are the custodians of the land, in case anyone else tries to claim rights over it.

We cannot hurt working-class people. These assemblies can and they are not responsible. Those people will never be looking for a vote. For Deputies here to say, like they did a short while ago, that we would not do the right thing because we were elected and we would be looking for votes is unfair and wrong.

Deputy Joan Collins: I support the citizens' assembly on biodiversity loss. It is a serious issue and I fully support that forum taking place. Biodiversity loss is not just an issue in Ireland but internationally. Here at home, we are losing a great deal of biodiversity that will have an onward impact on insects and animals alike. Therefore, I have no problem with that assembly.

I do, however, have a problem with the Dublin citizens' assembly. I support the amendment that will be moved by Senator Lynn Ruane in the Seanad tomorrow. She is raising the issue that, technically, citizens' assemblies are made up of citizens. Including 12 councillors in that forum dilutes the citizens' assembly aspect. Those councillors should not be on it. Citizens should make up the total membership, and I agree those aged under 18 should be included. Additionally, it is astounding to put the Dublin citizens' assembly, including a focus on a directly elected mayor, ahead of the proposed citizens' assembly to deal with the drugs issue. I ask the Government to reconsider this or else have three citizens' assemblies being held concurrently.

The Taoiseach himself said on 9 February:

As regards drugs policy, it is our view that we will have a citizens' assembly in the latter part of this year. However, that does not mean there is nothing happening with drugs policy. [I agree with him on that; there is a lot happening]. It is an urgent and serious issue that has to be dealt with in the context of a community-up approach, with multidisciplinary supports going into the communities most affected, along with a health-based approach. In any event, we are very seized of the serious situation in many communities as a result of drug abuse.

The Taoiseach was also a guest speaker at the Fergus McCabe Memorial Conference in November last year. He re-emphasised the points concerning the social and economic issues in our communities and the need for effective local drug and alcohol task forces. He made particular reference to the Drogheda review of March 2021 and the report of the Tallaght local drug and alcohol task force, which highlighted the issue of the links between disadvantaged communities and problem drug and alcohol use.

The Government has now kicked this citizens' assembly on drug use into next year. This is a clear failure on the part of the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and the Department to negotiate a citizens' assembly on a vital part of his brief. Pushing the citizens' assembly on drug use into 2023 will mean the assembly will sit for at least nine months and therefore will be looking at going into 2024. The Government would then have to consider the issues raised in the recommendations of that citizens' assembly and try to implement them before the Government falls in 2025. The Green Party's insistence that a citizens' assembly on drug use be part of the programme for Government now looks like it may go into the programme for Government for

2025 and onwards after the next election.

This is a disappointing situation for the people in our communities. People are dying and the local drug and alcohol task forces need support. This has to become a public health issue. There is also the question of people in communities getting attacked and the criminality impacts of drug use in our communities. This is just too big an issue to let it rest until next year or be kicked back that long.

Senator Ruane's proposed amendment will request the creation of a citizens' assembly on drug use this year as a matter of urgency. She is also raising the point that the Dublin citizens' assembly should consist of 80 members who are citizens, including an independent chairperson. If necessary, the 12 councillors should go to the assembly and express their opinions to the citizens regarding a directly elected mayor or else have their own councillors' assembly. Having the councillors constitute part of this Dublin citizens' assembly, however, contradicts the concept. If the Green Party is serious about wanting to have its base in the community at local level, it should be insisting this citizens' assembly on drug use be held this year and that there should be three citizens' assemblies in all.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank Deputies for their insightful contributions, many of which were supportive. I listened carefully to the Members' views and I will convey their valuable suggestions to the Government and the assembly secretariat as appropriate.

Clearly, there is considerable support and enthusiasm from the majority in this House for the work of citizens' assemblies. Many Members wanted more of them and for them to happen concurrently. It is important for the citizens' assemblies that the Members of this House explicitly recognise and value the contribution the assemblies can make to the deliberations of the Legislature. That is the value of having a debate such as today's and the importance of the House supporting this motion. As I said in my opening remarks, citizens' assemblies serve to enhance the quality of Ireland's democratic system. Members of the public have an important contribution to make in addressing complex societal challenges and, as a nation, we have all benefited significantly from the work of the three previous assemblies.

As the legislative branch of Government, the Oireachtas has the responsibility to contextualise, design and enact legislation to meet the evolving needs of a modern state. To do that to the best of our ability, the elected representatives of the people have always sought the views of and listened to their constituents and the public at large. The high-quality deliberative process that takes place within a citizens' assembly should be considered as complementary to the practice that has always been at the heart of the democratic system in this country.

That said, there are clearly some differences of opinion across the floor of the House about the best sequence of citizens' assemblies. The Government has decided to establish and run the assemblies on the directly elected mayor of Dublin and on biodiversity loss, to be followed as quickly as possible by assemblies on drug use and the future of education. The sequencing of these assemblies does not indicate or imply a hierarchy of importance. It is, however, a recognition that all of the four assemblies committed to in the programme for Government need adequate time, space and resources to allow them to operate as the high-quality deliberative forums they are intended to be. It simply would not be feasible to run more than two assemblies in parallel. Indeed, much remains to be seen about the benefits of and downsides to running two assemblies consecutively. It is the first time this has been attempted.

As I said, it is the Government's intention that the first two assemblies be established at the earliest opportunity. The terms of reference for the assemblies indicate they should have their inaugural meetings in April - Deputy Berry raised this point - and then report to the House by the end of the year at the latest, and earlier if possible. That is an ambitious timescale but one that allows for the establishment of assemblies on drug use and the future of education at the earliest opportunity.

To respond to some of the points made, Deputy Conway-Walsh raised the issue of gender equality. We have established a cross-party Oireachtas Joint Committee on Gender Equality to mould the recommendations from within this House and to take many of the recommendations transferred to it from that citizens' assembly.

Regarding the issue of agriculture, it is important to say there will be an opportunity for all sectors to engage. In particular, farming and rural communities have much to offer in this debate. That is why the scientific process of selecting members will involve a broad spectrum from across society in respect of age, other demographic measures and professions.

The Taoiseach has been clear about the importance, for example, of the shared island unit, the work of putting flesh on the bones of the Good Friday Agreement and underpinning the work of the agreement in building cross-Border collaboration and co-operation.

5 o'clock

We are seeing excellent work from that and from the funding provided by the Department of the Taoiseach. The Government is committed to building a shared island.

I take the sincerity of Members on Opposition and Government benches who raised issues around the importance of the debate on drugs. I was a drugs spokesperson a number of years ago. The programme for Government sets out, across the three parties of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, a health-led approach on the issue of drugs. That is why one aspect of that is a citizens' assembly on drugs, which we reinforce our commitment to today. This is in addition to addressing issues of harm reduction, which is an important operational matter in the HSE; strengthening rehabilitation; having a ground-up and community-based approach, which the Taoiseach referred to regarding drug and alcohol task forces; and addressing other issues such as drug-debt intimidation and a spectrum of issues that we know have impacted on all communities across the country. The work on that is continuing within the Government, as well as addressing the broader issue of drug policy. The pillar within the programme for Government is clear on strengthening that health-led approach, trying to help families and communities affected by the scourge of addiction and supporting people across our communities by having a community led-approach.

Deputy Mitchell suggested that the nomination process for councillors should be on the basis of party strengths. It is hoped that parties will also give consideration to gender balance when putting forward their nominees. It is important that we uphold that principle, which is reflected in this House where we have measures on gender quotas and so on.

Deputy Gould raised the issue of the citizens' assembly on drugs, which I have addressed. The Government understands and agrees with the importance of this issue. There will not be an undue delay in getting this forum under way and we will strengthen the approach to drugs policy more generally.

Deputy Bacik also raised the issue of citizens' assemblies on drugs and on the future of education. They will be established at the earliest opportunity on the conclusion of these citizens' assemblies. The role of councillors will be considered in depth by members, including international comparators.

Deputy McAuliffe spoke about local government reform and the need to have a root-and-branch review of local government structures within government.

Deputy Bruton gave his perspective on the need to look at local government in the round and the lessons we can take from the architecture of national government. I am sure that will also be taken into consideration.

Deputy O'Rourke spoke about the importance of biodiversity, which will be reflected in the citizens' assembly on that matter.

Deputy Ó Murchú also raised the issue of the citizens' assembly on drugs commencing as soon as possible. As I said, this will be the first time that two citizens' assemblies will run concurrently and it will be established as quickly as possible.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan referred to the process of selection for councillors. They will be selected across all four Dublin councils and will include smaller groups and Independents, which is important.

Many other Members raised the issue of the citizens' assembly on drugs, which I have addressed. They raised some sincere points on the need to have a health-led approach to drugs. That view is shared by many Members throughout the House.

Deputy Berry spoke about ensuring the voices of young people will be heard. While people under 18 years of age cannot be members of an assembly, every opportunity will be given to allow them to speak directly to the membership.

Deputy Lahart referred to his experience as a Dublin spokesperson. He is well researched in this area and he is looking forward to the debate and the citizens' assembly.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae raised the issue of the scope of the mandate. The members of the citizens' assembly will have the opportunity to design their own work programme within the terms of reference from the Oireachtas resolution of this House. The Government and the Oireachtas will be entitled to determine their view on any recommendations beyond the assembly's remit. As I said, that is the case with other citizens' assemblies.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae raised the issue of cost. That is yet to be fully determined based on the number of meetings, etc. Members will be randomly selected and there will be a spread of voices from across society, including those from rural Ireland.

It is the Government's view that the terms of reference, as set out in the motion before the House, are sufficiently well defined in that the assemblies have been provided with a clear remit and direction of travel. As the chairperson of the most recent assembly noted, it is not always helpful for the Oireachtas to be overly prescriptive in the terms of reference. It is better that the chairs and members of the assemblies have sufficient opportunity to determine the content and prioritise the sequence of issues they will consider in detail.

I fully expect that the chairs and the secretariat to the assemblies will have due regard to

today's debate and the contributions made by the Deputies. In due course, the assemblies will report directly to the House and to the Seanad, at which point the appropriate committees will have the opportunity to consider, debate and respond to the recommendations of the assemblies.

I am sure the Members present will join with me in wishing the members of the two assemblies every success with the work ahead. I very much look forward to seeing the fruits of their deliberations. Beir bua agus beannacht sa toadhchaí, a chairde.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we put the question to the House, I understand there is a typographical error in the motion. Paragraph 2, bullet point 3, which reads “that functions could be transferred” should read “what functions could be transferred”. The Minister of State may ask for leave of the House to make that change.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I move that leave be granted.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Carbon Tax: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tairgim:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— workers and families face a cost-of-living crisis;

— inflation and rising prices disproportionately impact the living standards of lower-income households, with low- and middle-income households spending a higher proportion of their income on food, electricity and home heating than higher-income households;

— in the 12 months to January:

— the price of gas has increased by 28 per cent;

— the price of home heating has increased by 50 per cent;

— the price of petrol has increased by 30 per cent; and

— the price of diesel has increased by 32 per cent;

— increases in the cost of fuel are a cause of financial hardship for many households;

— the planned increase in carbon tax on fuels used to heat homes on 1st May, 2022 and transport fuels on 12th October, 2022 will increase fuel prices even further; and

— the Government has failed to establish an expert advisory group on energy poverty to review the existing data on energy poverty levels, examine research both domestically and internationally on the causes, impacts and remedies to address energy poverty, and propose an appropriate energy poverty measurement and tracking methodology to inform public policy; and

calls on the Government to scrap the planned increase in carbon tax on fuels used to heat homes on 1st May, 2022 and transport fuels on 12th October, 2022.

The Irish people are in the grip of a cost-of-living crisis. It is an issue we have raised time and time again. In past year, prices have risen by 5% with workers and families facing a drop in living standards as they are forced to cut back on spending. Many people are facing very difficult choices. Two weeks ago, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul released a survey which found that two out of five people had to cut back on essential heating and electricity use. By the time many families pay the bills, there is very little left to provide for the essentials. The Irish people needed the Government to act. They needed the Government to have their backs. They needed the Government to protect them from the sharp edge of the cost-of-living crisis, but that did not happen. The Government announced a package that barely scratched the surface, including an energy credit that provided the same level of support to a millionaire as it did to a worker on the minimum wage.

We in Sinn Féin repeat our calls on the Government to act now and implement the proposals we brought forward. As we know, inflation and rising prices have largely been responsible for the spike in energy prices. Households are seeing this in their domestic energy bills. The price of electricity went up by 22%, petrol by 30%, diesel by 32%, gas by 28% and home heating oil by a staggering 50%. These energy prices are reducing living standards. It should be noted that the Government will make matters worse by rising these prices further. Every price rise has a VAT charge attached to it. Therefore, this year's VAT receipts will be higher than expected. Despite these energy price hikes, the Government is determined to plough ahead with carbon tax hikes in May and October, in spite of the reality that hundreds of thousands of hard-pressed families face. This is a Government that is out of touch and out of time, and does not get it. We are asking the Government, at this late stage, to take a common-sense approach, be aware of the financial difficulties people face and scrap the planned carbon tax hikes. The carbon tax is known to be regressive, hurting low-income, lone parent and rural households hardest. Carbon tax is not progressive but a flat consumption tax. Without alternatives it will not change behaviour but only make people poorer.

The Government has made the carbon tax its silver bullet in response to the climate breakdown. It is time to face some facts. Inflation does not impact everyone equally. Low and middle-income households spend more of their income on energy than the top 10%. Those in the bottom 10% spend three times more of their income on energy than those in the top 10%. In the same way, not everyone bears the same responsibility for carbon emissions. A recent study by *Nature Sustainability* journal found that half of the world's carbon footprint is caused by the top 1%. In Ireland, it found that the carbon footprint of the top 10% is eight times greater than that of the bottom 10% and almost twice that of middle-income households. The wealthiest in our society bear the greatest responsibility for climate breakdown but the Government plans to hike the carbon tax, which hits low-income households the hardest. We could not make this up. It does not make sense and it is not a just transition. The Government's climate action policy fails to reflect this. More than this, the unveiled retrofit plans will transfer wealth upstream to the wealthiest in our society. Increasing the carbon tax will make the cost of energy and the cost of

heating one's home more expensive. That is the fact of it. At a time when so many families are already stretched at the margins of their pay packets with the rising cost of living, this should not be happening. With the cost of home heating oil already gone up by 50% and still rising, this should not be happening. At a time when there is further risk of energy increases as a result of increased tension in eastern Europe, where is the sense in pushing these prices up further?

This motion calls on the Government to recognise the financial difficulties that households are facing, particularly with regard to energy prices. We are calling on the Government to take a common-sense position, not to make matters worse or push up the price of oil and gas, which it is planning to do in less than three months. This is the time when the Government can finally say that it understands the concerns, pleas, anguish and anxiety of people out there who have faced skyrocketing energy bills and that it is not going to make things worse for them. This House needs to stand up and say it will not make it harder for people to heat their homes this year as they face these price increases. Now is the time to support this motion.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I will deal with the issue of the carbon tax as a mechanism for delivering on our climate obligations. Listening to Government spokespersons, we would be led to believe that the carbon tax is the be-all and end-all; no carbon tax, no climate action. However, we have had carbon taxes for 13 years now and emissions have increased year on year. Sinn Féin is firmly of the opinion that tinkering with markets or creating new ones will not deliver the type of systemic change that is needed.

The Government will say that in Ireland the carbon tax is ring-fenced for climate action but that is not really true. In 2021, €652 million was raised in carbon taxes while just €130 million was ring-fenced. Some €77 million of that was for residential and community energy efficiency, about 50% of which is going to retrofit the homes of the better off. It also included €15 million for the agriculture programme which is not being spent yet. There was €37 million spent on social protection but that is not climate action, it is climate mitigation, giving people money to buy fossil fuels because the Government is increasing the price of fossil fuels. Out of every €100 raised in carbon taxes, about €14 is going on actual climate action.

The Government will say carbon taxes are redistributed to protect those on the lowest incomes. In saying this, they very selectively cite an ESRI report from 2020. In fact, the calculations in that report are based solely on increases in carbon tax, nothing beyond that. They do not, for example, take the increased price of oil and gas on the international markets into account. The report does not support the Government's claim. The Government will also say it is a long-term commitment over ten years that will raise €9.5 billion for climate. That is very questionable. Just today at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action we had a response to our reasoned opinion on the EU's Fit for 55 package. The Commission remains absolutely intent on introducing a new emissions trading system for fuels used in transport and buildings. That would equate to around 80% of carbon tax revenue possibly lost. We cannot and should not depend on carbon tax to deliver climate action. The evidence shows it does not work. In the context of rising energy costs and a failure to provide an alternative, it is punitive and unfair.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The carbon tax increase is unjustified. It will increase costs on working people and families at the worst possible time. Some will say during the course of this debate that the increase is modest or that it is not the biggest contributor to fuel and energy cost rises. I have to say that these arguments simply miss the point. It is one of the few factors that

the Government can control and any increase in fuel and energy costs at this point is simply wrong.

Defenders will say that an increase in carbon taxes is necessary to combat climate change. This has become one of the most unquestioned dogmas of our time. It is the latest example of a groupthink defence of a policy in the absence of any credible evidence. It is no surprise that right wing parties would pedal such market-based measures. What is more surprising is for the Green Party to have been so captured by this neoliberal economic orthodoxy. Carbon taxes emerged in the 1980s, as we know, in strong opposition to Government regulation to tackle climate. The claim was that carbon pricing would allow the market to adjust itself but anybody looking at the market knows that it never adjusts itself.

Thankfully, there is now a growing body of independent academic research to prove this key point. The most comprehensive meta-analysis of the existing literature on carbon pricing and emissions trading was published by the University of Toronto in 2020. Its findings are really significant. It states that carbon taxes have little impact on emissions reductions even when they are at their very highest levels such as, for example, in Sweden. In the main they are not behaviour changing and where they are, the change in behaviour is very modest. If we are to meet the scale of emissions reductions required to avoid climate catastrophe, it is clear that they are the wrong tool. They are a distraction from the necessary regulation required to reduce emissions significantly. They impose real financial hardship on struggling workers and families. Crucially, they generate real public resistance to the other more important policies that are going to be required if we are to tackle the challenge of climate change and the biodiversity crisis. On those grounds I am happy to support the motion.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The charge has been laid that the Government is out of touch and simply does not understand the lived reality for many people. Writing today in the *Irish Examiner*, Caitriona Redmond, a food blogger, writes:

When you're on a tight budget you juggle your money from one crisis to the next. You allocate set amounts for rent or mortgage, energy, household bills, and then food.

People on a tight budget are already juggling.

I will talk briefly about Geraldine, a woman who lives in my constituency. That is not her name because, frankly, she is ashamed of what is happening at the moment. She has worked for 65 and a half years. When she is not in work, she goes to her local shopping centre so that she might be able to keep herself warm because she cannot afford to heat her home. She has juggled, saved and tried her very best. She works damn hard but she cannot afford to heat her home all day when she is on a day off, so she walks around her local shopping centre just to keep warm. To Geraldine and others who are juggling and struggling and who really cannot face a hike in the cost of heating their home, Sinn Féin says the Government should adopt a common-sense approach. It must acknowledge that carbon tax increases where there are no alternatives are unfair. This woman has no alternative and all the carbon tax increases do is make sure she will be cold or she will go to her local shopping centre just to stay warm. What we are asking for with this motion is that the Government is fair to people who simply cannot afford another increase in the cost of heating their home because people will be cold. It is an issue of fairness; this is not about climate change. The Minister of State knows it is not about climate change because Geraldine, just like everybody else, wants to play her part and do her bit, but she does not want to be cold. Therefore, we are asking the Minister of State to defer yet

another increase because she is already struggling.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. The costs of energy and fuel have been front and centre of the spiralling price increases in the past year or so. The Government is giving the energy companies a payment on behalf of all households in the State but it is not addressing the root cause of the price increases. Given the scale of the price hikes, it will not be enough.

Carbon tax is a regressive and unfair tax. The Government claims it will encourage people to change their behaviours but we all know that this is not the case for so many people. Many are not in a position to change their behaviours no matter how much they would like to. People living in rural areas with little or no public transport cannot choose the bus over the car. People who cannot afford to choose cleaner ways to heat their homes are stuck with oil and gas. Most people cannot afford to retrofit their homes, even with the Government's new plan. These measures are just so out of reach for so many people. It is not the carbon tax that will change behaviour but the huge increases in the cost of fuel. People will not be able to afford to heat their homes. Everyone is seeing their bills increase and people are paying more and more for energy in their homes and also at the petrol pump.

The cost of home heating has increased by 50% in the past 12 months. In May, the Government will increase the carbon tax on fuels to heat homes. The price of gas has increased by 28%, petrol by 30%, and diesel by 32%. The plan is to hike up the carbon tax on transport fuels in October.

We urgently need to see the establishment of an expert advisory group on energy poverty. We need to consider current and projected energy poverty levels, address the causes, both in Ireland and internationally, and find remedies to address energy poverty and onerous energy bills. We need the Government to acknowledge that the research behind its carbon tax regime does not take these huge price hikes into account and that the tax needs to be revised to reflect the reality on the ground. In the meantime, we need to scrap the planned carbon tax increases immediately.

Deputy Réada Cronin: In north Kildare, too many people are being put to the pin of their collar to pay the rent if they can find somewhere, pay for childcare if they can manage to get a place, pay to fill the car to go to work because the only area they can find work has no public transport, keep the family warm and put food on the table, all with wages worth less with everything costing more. My niece, who works at a supermarket till, tells me people are lining up the very basics at the front of the row and asking her to remind them when the cost reaches €50, €70 or whatever their budget is. They leave the rest if the budget is exceeded. A mother in the north Kildare town of Prosperous — forgive the irony — is going without a meal herself in order to feed her children. People have no more to give. They are on the floor because of the cost-of-living emergency.

The Government talks about ring-fencing the carbon tax, which sounds like a great idea. Regardless of the fact that it is not doing so, it has come up with a retrofit plan that sounds more like the SSIA scheme in that the more money you have, the more money the Government will give you. The Government is lashing out money on the wealthy so they can retrofit their first home and the holiday home they drive to in their electric SUV, while leaving ordinary people literally in the cold.

The Government talks about carbon taxes as if they are going to save the planet, yet there is no offer of an alternative for people. For example, there is no strategy for green hydrogen. The reality is that people on ordinary incomes have no choice as to how to heat their homes, cook their dinners or get to work or school. The tax is unethical because all that the Government is ring-fencing is hot air. When the Government was introducing property tax, it said it would be ring-fenced for libraries, parks and amenities. Any councillor who has worked in a local authority will state the vast majority has been used for roads and footpaths because the Government has cut local authority funding. Ring-fenced, my eye.

People are being hammered. In 12 months, the price of gas has risen by 28%, home heating by 50%, petrol by 30% and diesel by 32%. People need to take a breath. The Government's job is to protect the people. They need a hand from the Government, not a beating. The hike is due in May. The Government should not let it become a Mayday for people, including workers and families, across the State.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Workers and families are facing a cost-of-living crisis. As people in this State face what are among the highest rents, mortgage interest rates, insurance costs and childcare costs in Europe, they are also burdened with ever-increasing electricity, heating and fuel costs. Rather than supporting families to meet these burdens, the Government has responded by increasing them further through the imposition of carbon taxes. Bizarrely, the package to address the cost-of-living crisis — a package that was discussed for months but fell far short of what is required — will be followed by a Government-imposed hike in home heating costs in the next few weeks. It is madness and maddening. This is an action of a Government that is completely out of touch with the lived reality of those it is supposed to represent. It is as if there is no understanding that this is not simply a case of people not wanting to pay additional carbon taxes. They cannot afford further price hikes.

What is worse, Ministers will stand in this Chamber and try to defend these price hikes. They will actually go so far as to patronisingly claim the increased costs are in people's best interest. For example, we will hear Ministers repeat the lie that farmers are going to receive €1.5 billion in carbon tax receipts. What they will not say is that this is actually a three-card trick because the €1.5 billion is actually less than what the Government negotiated away from farmers in an EU budget. Farmers will actually be asked to pay more in carbon tax while getting less in supports and being asked to do more for the environment. How is that for a just transition? The same is true for all other families and workers. Carbon taxes simply penalise those who have no option but to drive their own cars and who cannot afford to retrofit their homes. They are unfair at the best of times. However, to increase them right now is simply an attack. There is no other word for it. It is an attack by parties and Deputies who are blind to the struggles faced by those who simply cannot make ends meet.

I commend this motion to the House. History will judge very harshly those Deputies who reject it because the carbon tax increase must be scrapped in recognition of the hardship that too many citizens of this State are going through.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I move amendment No. 2:

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

“notes that:

— the annual rate of consumer price inflation, as measured by the European Union's (EU) harmonised index of consumer prices, has picked up sharply in recent months, reaching a multi-decade high of 5.7 per cent in December before moderating somewhat to 5 per cent in January;

— the recent increase in inflation is partly a result of temporary factors related to the pandemic, which are expected to ease gradually over time;

— the key drivers of inflation in recent months are 'base effects', the imbalance between global demand and supply that has emerged as economies re-opened, and increases in global energy prices;

— Budget 2022 contained a large range of measures to protect households from the rising cost of living, including a personal income tax package worth €520 million and a social welfare package of over €550 million;

— the fuel allowance was increased by €5 per week to compensate lower income households for the additional energy costs they are likely to incur;

— in addition to the Budget 2022 measures announced in October last, the Government has this month approved a further package of measures to the value of €505 million to mitigate the cost of living, including an increase in the energy credit to €200 including VAT, estimated to impact just over 2 million households;

— a lump sum payment of €125 on the fuel allowance will be paid to 390,000 recipients;

— there will be a temporary reduction in public transport fares of 20 per cent from the end of April to the end of the year, and this will impact approximately 800,000 daily users of Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann, Dublin Bus, Go Ahead, Luas, Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) and Local Link services;

— the reduction of the Drugs Payment Scheme from €144 to €80 will benefit just over 70,000 families;

— the Budget increase to the Working Family Payment will be brought forward from 1st June to 1st April; and

— there are reduced caps for multiple children on school transport fees to €500 per family post primary and €150 for primary school children; and

recognises that:

— carbon tax is a key pillar underpinning the Government's Climate Action Plan 2021 to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050;

— the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future committed to increasing carbon tax and the Finance Act 2020 provides for a 10-year trajectory for carbon tax increases to reach €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide by 2030;

— a significant portion of carbon tax revenue is allocated for expenditure on targeted welfare measures and energy efficiency measures, which not only support the most vulnerable households in society but also in the long term provide support against fuel price

impacts by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels;

— analysis undertaken using SWITCH - the ESRI tax and benefit model, to simulate the impact of the carbon tax increase and the compensatory welfare package, has confirmed that the net impact of the combined measures is progressive and households in the bottom four income deciles will see all of the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures; and

— in the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them, and we will achieve this through the progressive decarbonisation of Irish society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050."

I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter in the House. Last year, most parties in the House, including Sinn Féin, voted for the historic Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 with the objective of reducing emissions by 51% over a decade. I am grateful that everybody came together because this is not something we can do in a divisive or polarised way; it is something we must do together. We must work with everybody to do it. Most members of the public agree with that.

Last year, Sinn Féin produced an alternative budget while the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, was producing his mainstream budget. I read Sinn Féin's budget, just as I read the budget from the year before, and was glad to note the party was not proposing to abolish carbon tax in it. It was proposing to retain it and use it to fund its programme. I know that is what is going to happen in the future.

This motion calls out a 50% increase in the price of home heating oil. This increase is really shocking. The motion also proposes to remedy that with a 2% cut from the carbon tax. How can an increase of 50% be remedied with a 2% cut? That does not add up, and it is not something that will help people.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It will not make it worse.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The answer to a 50% increase is not a 2% cut.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is definitely not a 2% increase.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Deputy Doherty said the retrofit scheme is a transfer of money to the rich. I heard that from another Deputy also. I really take issue with this. Our scheme will see an historic amount, €352 million, being spent to make people's homes warmer. That will reach nearly 30,000 families. Of the €352 million, €203 million is being given to families who are either living on welfare or in local authority housing. It is directly targeting people living in energy poverty. Indeed, 58% of the money is going to people who are in energy poverty. That is coming from general taxation. How is that a transfer to the rich? I cannot see how that statement is being made again and again.

Carbon tax alone is not the answer. It has to be done in co-operation with other policies. The Deputy knows that there are many other policies. He knows that we have a massive retrofit programme. He is aware that we have cut the price of public transport fares and there is significant investment in public transport. He knows that there is massive investment to provide

people with the alternatives of walking and cycling. The Deputy knows that there have been significant increases in welfare-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: There are no alternatives in County Monaghan. There is no public transport-----

Deputy Ossian Smyth: -----and massive increases including in the fuel allowance and the living alone allowance, and so on. He knows that those payments have been introduced. He knows that it is part of a package. He is also aware that carbon tax has to be there. He shows that in the purest way that he can, by retaining it in his party's alternative budget and paying for its programme with carbon tax. I am glad to see that.

I want to stress that the Government is acutely aware of the pressures being faced by households in light of the inflationary trend in energy prices. The current trend in energy prices are not unique to Ireland. They are, in fact, part of the global trend. The final retail price of fuel is determined by a number of factors, including the cost of production, distribution, global market factors, international exchange rates, taxation, wholesale market contracts, as well as individual retail pricing policies. If the price of home heating oil has gone up by 50%, is the Deputy really putting forward the idea that that is the result of carbon tax? It is not. His solution of cutting carbon tax by 2% is not going to work; it is not the answer. Demand for oil and other energy products, such as natural gas, has increased sharply following the reopening of many economies in the second half of last year. Currently, the wholesale price of oil is broadly in line with the average pre-pandemic prices. However, the level is much higher than the abnormal levels that prevailed during the first wave of the pandemic. That boosted the annual comparison. Additionally, the increase in international gas prices is more complex and relates to increased demand from certain parts of the world, in part as a result of extreme weather events, lower than expected gas supply and low gas reserves. Unfortunately, Ireland, along with the rest of the EU, is a net importer of gas, and as a result, is a price-taker on international markets. More broadly, energy prices globally have also risen due to rising geopolitical tensions. I do not need to explain to the House the fragile political situation that exists to the east of us. That has had, and is having, an impact on prices paid by consumers in Ireland. However, while this is a global issue, the Government is very aware that this is of little consolation to Irish businesses and households who are feeling the financial impacts of rising prices. In the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them. We will achieve this through the progressive decarbonisation of society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government commitment to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Ireland's taxation of fuel is based on EU law, as set out in the European tax directive, ETD. The ETD prescribes minimum tax rates for fuel which all member states must comply with. Ireland applies excise duty in the form of mineral oil tax to fuels used for motor or heating purposes. Mineral oil tax comprises a non-carbon and a carbon component. The carbon component is also referred to as the carbon tax. Deputies will be aware that the 2020 programme for Government committed to increasing the amount that is charged per tonne of CO₂ to €100 by 2030. The Minister of Finance followed through on this commitment by introducing a measure in the Finance Act 2020 to provide for a ten-year trajectory for carbon tax increases to reach €100 per tonne of CO₂ by 2030. This measure is a key pillar underpinning the Government climate action plan to halve emissions by 2030 and to reach net zero by no later than 2050. For context, it must also be noted that changes to carbon tax rates are having a relatively small impact on current energy prices. The budget 2022 carbon tax increase, which came into effect

in October 2021, added approximately 2 cent per litre in tax to petrol and 2.5 cent per litre to diesel. The increase in rates for home heating fuels, such as kerosene, gas and solid fuels, was delayed until 1 May 2022 to mitigate against the impact during the winter heating season. It is clear that the carbon tax is not the cause of the current energy price inflation. Delaying the carbon tax increase will do little to ease the pressure that people are under. It is important to point out that a key element of the Government's carbon taxation policy is the hypothecation, or ring-fencing, of revenues. This is to put the funds that have been raised into just transition measures. The money raised is ring-fenced so that it goes back into people's pockets to help them reduce their fuel bills. This is done through compensating those on low incomes to prevent fuel poverty and to ensure a just transition for displaced workers and through financing climate-related investment, particularly in the area of agriculture and supporting farm families.

A specific portion of carbon tax revenue is allocated for expenditure on targeted welfare measures and energy efficiency measures that not only support the most vulnerable households in society, but also, in the long term, provide support against fuel price impacts by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels. To this end, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications recently announced an ambitious national retrofitting programme that will slash the cost of energy-proofing people's homes. This is the type of long-term solution we need. It will result in warmer homes and lower bills for 40 years, not just the year ahead. However, people also need support now.

I will turn to the Government's response to the recent spike in energy prices. Of course, the Government is acutely aware of the increase in consumer prices in recent months, especially the increase in fuel and other energy prices. For this reason, we designed a package of measures to alleviate the impact of increased energy prices on households. In designing a support package, the Government was conscious of the need to target high energy prices as the main underlying programme while operating within the fiscal framework set out in the summer economic statement of 2021. The suite of measures was announced this month, and strikes the appropriate balance. This package provides support for every household via the electricity credit, but also provides specific supports for more vulnerable households through targeted welfare measures. The package of measures worth €505 million includes an increase in the energy credit of €200, including VAT, estimated to impact just over 2 million households. That will be paid in April. A lump-sum payment of €125 on the fuel allowance will be paid in early March to 390,000 recipients. To reduce the burden on people returning to the workplace and people using public transport, there will be a temporary reduction in fares of 20% from the end of April until the end of the year. This will impact approximately 800,000 daily users. The original Sláintecare report proposed a reduction in the monthly threshold for the drugs payment scheme from €144 to €100. The Government has decided to reduce this further from €100 to €80. This will benefit just over 70,000 families. The working family payment budget increase announced on budget day will be brought forward from 1 June to 1 April, and there are reduced caps for multiple children on school transport fees to €500 per family at post-primary level and €150 for primary school children. The package of measures comes on top of measures announced in budget 2022. In formulating budget 2022, the Government carefully considered the cost-of-living pressures confronting households. For this reason, it contained a large range of measures to protect households from the rising cost of living.

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 Rose Conway-Walsh - a number of group water schemes in County Mayo are waiting for Irish Water to take them over. Because of the ageing piping infrastructure continuous leaks are causing debt to escalate on these schemes. I ask the Minister for Housing, Heritage and Local Government outline the measures Irish Water are taking to take control of these schemes in County Mayo and elsewhere in rural Ireland; (2) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss procedures for children's school absences of more than 20 days due to Covid-19; (3) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, following the opening of public consultation last week; (4) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss with the Minister for Health the lack of dental services for children and the current difficulties with the dental treatment services scheme in counties Laois and Offaly; (5) Deputy David Stanton - to ask the Minister for Rural and Community Development to discuss the need to support and encourage schools to make their facilities available to local community and youth groups and organisations outside of school hours; and if she will make a statement on the matter; (6) Deputy Claire Kerrane - to discuss with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Department of Health the staffing of the new e-mental health hub in Castlerea, County Roscommon; (7) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the urgent need for extra Garda resources to be put into Finglas to combat the escalation in drug- and gang-related violence; (8) Deputy Catherine Connolly - the severe reduction in respite beds from 25 pre-Covid to two post-Covid in Galway city and county; (9) Deputies Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae and Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the lack of connectivity from Dursey Island to the mainland; (10) Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú and David Cullinane - to discuss the imminent difficulties for healthcare workers selected by the RCSI Hospital group for a nursing training programme run by Hibernia College where it has still not been agreed whether these workers will be funded to take up the course on 1 March, despite funding promises being made. The course would train healthcare workers to be nurses at a time when there are serious retention and staffing issues in hospitals; (11) Deputy Marc MacSharry - that the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media immediately directs Fáilte Ireland to maintain a regional tourism office in the gateway city of Sligo and reverse plans to replace manned offices nationwide with automated tourism information points alone; and if she will make a statement on the matter; (12) Deputy Matt Carthy - to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made on the implementation of the working paper to address challenges related to peat supply; (13) Deputy Chris Andrews - to ask the Minister for Justice to address the growing public safety concerns in Dublin's inner city; to outline what strategies are in places to restore public confidence in the safety of the inner city; and to make a statement on the matter; (14) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to ask the Minister for Health for an update on progress that has been made to address the overcrowding issues at numerous Irish hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter; (15) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for a disability officer on Cork City Council and the need for local authorities to undertake accessibility impact reports in advance of all public space planning; (16) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the significant delay in getting the children's disability network teams in Cork up and running, and the subsequent delays for children accessing assessments and therapies; (17) Deputy Mairéad Farrell - to ask the Minister for Health for an update on progress that has been made to address the overcrowding issues at hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter; and (18) Deputy Brendan Griffin - funding for the south Kerry greenway following the recent positive Supreme Court ruling.

22 February 2022

The matters raised by Deputy Conway-Walsh; Deputies Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae and Christopher O’Sullivan; and Deputy MacSharry have been selected for discussion.

Carbon Tax: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pearse Doherty:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— workers and families face a cost-of-living crisis;

— inflation and rising prices disproportionately impact the living standards of lower-income households, with low- and middle-income households spending a higher proportion of their income on food, electricity and home heating than higher-income households;

— in the 12 months to January:

— the price of gas has increased by 28 per cent;

— the price of home heating has increased by 50 per cent;

— the price of petrol has increased by 30 per cent; and

— the price of diesel has increased by 32 per cent;

— increases in the cost of fuel are a cause of financial hardship for many households;

— the planned increase in carbon tax on fuels used to heat homes on 1st May, 2022 and transport fuels on 12th October, 2022 will increase fuel prices even further; and

— the Government has failed to establish an expert advisory group on energy poverty to review the existing data on energy poverty levels, examine research both domestically and internationally on the causes, impacts and remedies to address energy poverty, and propose an appropriate energy poverty measurement and tracking methodology to inform public policy; and

calls on the Government to scrap the planned increase in carbon tax on fuels used to heat homes on 1st May, 2022 and transport fuels on 12th October, 2022.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

“notes that:

— the annual rate of consumer price inflation, as measured by the European Union’s (EU) harmonised index of consumer prices, has picked up sharply in recent months, reaching a multi-decade high of 5.7 per cent in December before moderating somewhat

to 5 per cent in January;

— the recent increase in inflation is partly a result of temporary factors related to the pandemic, which are expected to ease gradually over time;

— the key drivers of inflation in recent months are ‘base effects’, the imbalance between global demand and supply that has emerged as economies re-opened, and increases in global energy prices;

— Budget 2022 contained a large range of measures to protect households from the rising cost of living, including a personal income tax package worth €520 million and a social welfare package of over €550 million;

— the fuel allowance was increased by €5 per week to compensate lower income households for the additional energy costs they are likely to incur;

— in addition to the Budget 2022 measures announced in October last, the Government has this month approved a further package of measures to the value of €505 million to mitigate the cost of living, including an increase in the energy credit to €200 including VAT, estimated to impact just over 2 million households;

— a lump sum payment of €125 on the fuel allowance will be paid to 390,000 recipients;

— there will be a temporary reduction in public transport fares of 20 per cent from the end of April to the end of the year, and this will impact approximately 800,000 daily users of Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann, Dublin Bus, Go Ahead, Luas, Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) and Local Link services;

— the reduction of the Drugs Payment Scheme from €144 to €80 will benefit just over 70,000 families;

— the Budget increase to the Working Family Payment will be brought forward from 1st June to 1st April; and

— there are reduced caps for multiple children on school transport fees to €500 per family post primary and €150 for primary school children; and

recognises that:

— carbon tax is a key pillar underpinning the Government’s Climate Action Plan 2021 to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050;

— the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future committed to increasing carbon tax and the Finance Act 2020 provides for a 10-year trajectory for carbon tax increases to reach €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide by 2030;

— a significant portion of carbon tax revenue is allocated for expenditure on targeted welfare measures and energy efficiency measures, which not only support the most vulnerable households in society but also in the long term provide support against fuel price impacts by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels;

— analysis undertaken using SWITCH - the ESRI tax and benefit model, to simulate

the impact of the carbon tax increase and the compensatory welfare package, has confirmed that the net impact of the combined measures is progressive and households in the bottom four income deciles will see all of the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures; and

— in the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them, and we will achieve this through the progressive decarbonisation of Irish society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050."

Deputy Claire Kerrane: First, it is important to say that nobody on these benches has suggested that the carbon tax has led to the current energy cost hikes. I would have thought that was quite obvious. However, what we are saying quite clearly is that heaping additional costs from 1 May, when people are already struggling and going cold in their homes, is not the right thing to do. Whatever way it is put, including the package and the measures from the budget last year, people's energy bills are going to increase from 1 May. That is a simple fact.

The Minister of State has taken issue regarding, as he put it, the remedy for the 50% increase in the cost of home heating oil not being the removal of the carbon tax increase. What is his remedy? The vast majority of the package announced a couple of weeks ago is going to everyone. The fuel allowance measure will only go to those who currently receive the fuel allowance. Those who are seriously ill and on illness benefit cannot get the fuel allowance. Low-income households that rely on the working family payment to top up poor wages do not get the fuel allowance either. The fuel allowance is not a silver bullet in the context of the current energy crisis. Aside from the electricity credit, the vast majority of workers and families will receive no assistance with their heating costs moving forward.

At a time when people are going cold in their homes, are we supposed to tell them there is retrofitting coming soon? We do not know when it is coming but it is coming. There is public transport investment that is more or less irrelevant to those of us who live in rural constituencies. There is investment in walking. I cannot even get a footpath in a local town in my constituency extended so that older people living on the edge of the town can walk in safely on a main road, yet the Government is talking about walking. It is utterly irrelevant and it does not hit the nail on the head in the context of the issue that is being raised here.

Recent ESRI reports have shown that carbon tax increases have an impact on low-income households and retrofitting is not enough for them right now because it does not work for the people who are cold in their homes today. Nothing the Minister of State has said here will help. What Sinn Féin is saying is that the Government should not go ahead with the carbon tax increase on 1 May because to do so would add to what is already a really difficult situation.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fuel prices have risen by one third in the past year, with heating oil up by more than 50%. Every week, we hear of another rise in the price of electricity, fuel and food, and rents. The fact is the Government is completely out of touch with the lived experience of all these people. The experts on the ground, such as Barnardos, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Social Justice Ireland and others, have warned about the impact the increase in the cost of living is having on ordinary people. Two weeks ago, the Taoiseach vowed to help people who are suffering on low incomes in particular but, instead of helping people, the Government is going to increase bills. Worst of all, it is going to increase the bills of those who are

living in older homes, those with less money and those who are already struggling.

Everywhere I go now, people raise with me the cost-of-living crisis. This crisis is now so extreme that people who work hard all week, have never had to worry about paying bills and have had disposable income are now looking at their bank accounts at the end of every week, worrying about what they have left. The Government is telling them it is going to increase their living costs with a carbon tax in May. How is that showing an understanding of what people are going through in this crisis? ESRI statistics released previously show that one in ten people in the State lives in fuel poverty. There is no doubt in anyone's mind now that this figure has worsened.

The Taoiseach is not listening to ordinary people. He is definitely not listening to ordinary people in Cork because they are telling me they are struggling. How can you remedy a 2% cut for people who are on a tight budget, as the Minister of State said? For people who are struggling, that 2% increase means a lot. We are just asking for the Government to show some common sense and give a fair deal to ordinary people. We need to tackle climate change and Sinn Féin completely supports that. However, although we need to address the climate crisis, climate justice without social justice is no justice at all.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The people of Dublin Bay North whom I represent are at the end of their tether. Week after week, more families are living hand to mouth. By the end of a working week, mothers and parents are struggling to put food on the table to feed their children. After they pay their bills, there is no money left. We are in a cost-of-living crisis and there are simply not enough targeted supports available for families and children who need them most.

Food banks, school meals and voluntary groups are filling a serious poverty gap, the extent of which the Government does not realise. It has made some minimal moves to help people. I acknowledge the energy bill support payments that will be coming down the line, but it must recognise the irony of this move. What it is giving with one hand, it is taking away with the other. Working families have to heat their homes and be able to get to school, work and other places. We all want to play our part in addressing climate change. We all know we have to do so. This move, however, is punitive, especially on older people. Can the Minister of State genuinely tell the older woman who has to buy gas for her Superser heater or the family whose 20-year-old car is barely passing the NCT that there are no options but to tax them more and drive them further into poverty? The Government is taxing the wrong people. The huge corporate businesses can play a much bigger part. I call on the Government to scrap this unfair carbon tax increase and, please, do the right thing by the people.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The carbon tax as it is designed is an unfair tax. It is punishing ordinary workers and families who lack disposable income to pay the extortionate costs of retrofitting their homes or purchasing an electric car. The point is that you cannot tax people to stop them doing something if they do not have an alternative or cannot afford the alternative. Why are grants not being made available to buy second-hand electric cars, for example? It is difficult to imagine a better example of how out of touch the Green Party and the Government are with the needs of ordinary people at the moment.

Last Saturday, I had a conversation with a constituent, one of the many who are finding it difficult to cope with how the Government has been playing its part in escalating and driving up the price of essentials. I accept that not all of it is down to the Government, but a large part of it is. The constituent told me it is now costing between €70 and €80 a week more to heat their

home. There are families who have a clear choice between food and heat. Eat or heat; which is it? The Minister of State need not take our word for it. He should ask the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Its representatives will tell him what the situation is. I have spoken to people working for that organisation and people working in food banks.

The cost of fuel for a car to travel to work is now at its highest level in 30 years. It is getting close to €2 per litre. I want the Minister of State to hear this point as it is important. People in rural areas such as Laois-Offaly are being hit hardest. There is no DART, Luas or bus service there. That is the simple fact of it. In some places, the roads are not great. Some people living in Laois-Offaly who commute to work are now paying €150 in fuel to do so. Much of the responsibility for the cost of fuel in this country, though not all of it, lies with the Government. This is the part it can do something about. Well over one third of the cost of every litre of motor fuel is accounted for by tax. That is even before the carbon tax is introduced in May. This is folly.

I am a supporter of climate action. This is not climate action; it is penalising poor working people, as well as disproportionately penalising people in rural areas. It has gone way beyond politics; it is impacting on people's health and welfare. The planned increase in carbon tax in May needs to be halted. Before somebody gets up to give us a lecture about climate change, Sinn Féin has put forward many proposals relating to climate change in the 11 years since I came into this House but it received a very poor response to a lot of those proposals to move to a more sustainable society. We put forward measures that would create jobs and generate power without using fossil fuel. That is where we need to be going, rather than punishing people who are least able to play. In addition, the Government needs to start taxing the large corporations that can play a bigger role here as well.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad to speak on behalf of the Labour Party in a debate that purports to address twin crises - the climate crisis and the cost-of-living crisis. I have indeed spoken previously about these twin crises that we are all facing in society. All of us across the House are hearing from constituents, families and individuals about the astronomical increases in the cost of living and the bills that everyone is experiencing, in my constituency of Dublin Bay South and elsewhere too. People are telling me about the increases that they are seeing in the cost of their rent, childcare, fuel bills and groceries. Inflation is at a 20-year high and that this is really hitting hard. We heard today from Barnardos regarding the impact on child poverty that this is also having.

The Labour Party takes the cost-of-living crisis seriously. Just recently, on 26 January, we tabled a motion offering real solutions to address the crisis. The motion called for the transformation of the national minimum wage to a living wage, increases in social welfare payments linked to the rate of inflation, and a windfall levy on excessive profits in the energy, transport, housing and food sectors due to rising prices. Unfortunately, the motion was opposed by the Government and did not pass. Despite the record tax take in 2021, we believe that insufficient action has been taken by the Government both in the latest budget, and indeed in what was recently a mini-budget in all but name. The measures introduced simply did not go far enough to address the very serious cost-of-living crisis being faced by so many in this country.

That is why we cannot support the Government amendment to this motion. However, we in the Labour Party, as with all of those on the left or green-reds, take the climate crisis seriously too. We recognise the urgent need for measures to tackle the climate emergency, reduce our climate emissions and tackle the biodiversity crisis that we also face. That is why we support

measures to tackle climate, including measures introduced by this Government such as the establishment of a citizens' assembly on biodiversity, which we debated earlier, together with the climate action plan targets that we have welcomed. We also supported, with some reservations, the Government retrofitting plan. That is why we have also supported the introduction of a carbon tax.

That is also why we disagree with the Sinn Féin position on carbon tax and support the Social Democrats' amendment to the motion. The reality is that Sinn Féin does not take climate seriously. For them, climate can wait, apparently. The party does not see the urgent need to introduce measures to tackle emissions and the party cannot be trusted on climate. We believe that parties that profess to be serious about climate do not oppose carbon taxes just as parties professing to be socialist do not oppose taxes on wealth and property taxes. Green-reds believe that properly targeted carbon taxes can reduce emissions and redistribute wealth in accordance with the principle that the polluter pays.

I was proud to stand earlier with the Not Here, Not Anywhere group of activists campaigning on green issues and to hear their arguments in support of more urgent measures to tackle climate. For them as for us, carbon tax is patently not the only mechanism to tackle the climate emergency. In conjunction with wealth taxes, carbon taxes can deter harmful patterns of behaviour, can ensure that the biggest and wealthiest emitters pay the most and can ensure redistribution of wealth to transfer benefits to those who would otherwise not have the ability to meet the cost of retrofitting and other necessary measures.

Carbon tax is clearly not the only mechanism to tackle the climate emergency, nor is it in any way the only reason for an increase in the cost of living, or even an increase in the cost of fuel. I have spoken already about the increases that we are all aware of in the cost of living, where it is not just fuel and energy. We are talking about increases that people are facing in their rent and childcare costs, and in their food and grocery bills. Carbon tax is not the reason for those increases.

We know that in the fuel increases and energy price increases that we have seen just today, the primary cause for these is Russian aggression in Ukraine. Those are international causes that we accept. We do not say that the Government can or should be blamed for all of the increases in the costs of living or in inflation. Government, however, should act to ensure the more equitable redistribution of wealth and a more equitable and effective introduction of a carbon tax that would include a windfall tax on big emitters and on energy companies that are experiencing supernormal profits during a time of such real hardship for so many people.

In the context of the crisis we are experiencing, there is clearly an urgent need to ensure ring-fencing of carbon tax revenues in order that there is a just transition, and as socialists and social democrats are arguing across Europe, that targeted measures are introduced to address these twin crises for so many.

In budget 2022, we in the Labour Party called for a new, targeted carbon tax credit. Combined with targeted increases in the fuel allowance and social welfare payments this would have addressed the cost of living for those at risk of fuel poverty. Our carbon tax credit for 2022 would have been set at €200, would be refundable and allocated on a household basis. It would be available up to an income limit of €50,000 and to those living in homes with a building energy rating, BER, of less than B2. Over time, the credit would be phased out as homes are retrofitted and renewable energy generation is increased. I have spoken previously about how a

very ambitious and targeted retrofitting programme can address both of these crises and I know that there are people across the floor of the House who recognise that.

We in the Labour Party have also called for the introduction of a penalty-free derogation on VAT applied to energy. Our motion on 26 January included that measure. The Government must examine the need to reduce the VAT wedge on energy and fuel bills. This is eminently achievable and is an approach that is being adopted by EU member states led by socialist and social democratic governments. This needs to happen in a time-limited way and we in Labour have done the maths on this. A six-month drop in VAT on fuel and energy would cost approximately €200 million. This will cost less than the €200 energy bill rebate to be given in April but will be more impactful and targeted for those in society who need it most. Again, we recall the record tax take for 2021, with VAT raising €1 billion more than was projected. We must see how best to target that and to return some of that windfall to people who are most experiencing hardship at present.

We support the updating of the strategy to combat energy poverty, as well as the initiative to establish a cross-departmental task-force on energy poverty. It must be genuinely cross-departmental to achieve its targets.

Finally, we believe that the retrofitting programme must be more carefully targeted. In the constructive criticism that we have offered of the national retrofitting scheme, while very much welcoming its introduction, we have expressed concern that it may not make enough of a difference in tackling both cost of living and climate change for many households. It is insufficiently targeted at those households that cannot afford the deep retrofit, that do not have the savings of €25,000 and that cannot afford to borrow the cost. It must, therefore, be reviewed to see how it can be targeted in a better way.

Just as we did during the Covid-19 pandemic, we must trust the science. The mantra when we hear about climate change is based on the fundamental principle that we must be honest about the nature of this crisis. As Extinction Rebellion has said, politicians must tell the truth. We must, therefore, be honest. The carbon tax must form part of our national strategy to incentivise climate friendly behaviour and to fund necessary infrastructure to aid that transition. The polluters must pay but that argument does not exempt us all from this responsibility. We must all recognise, those who are serious about climate, that Ireland continues to be far too reliant on fossil fuels. Wind energy accounts for only 40% of our renewable energy and we need to reach a target of 80% in eight years. We still do not have a national strategy to scale up affordable hydrogen production.

We also know that private equity companies with operations in Ireland are profiteering from the climate crisis by investing in fossil fuels. We need to see much more decisive action on this, on the importation of fracked gas and on so much more. Lending voices to these matters would be far better use of parliamentary time than seeking to convince the constituents and citizens that any sort of moratorium on the carbon tax would solve their problems. I reiterate that carbon tax, properly targeted, can reduce emissions, redistribute wealth and have a place in the package of measures that we need take to tackle the climate crisis. We also need to see very serious actions by Government along the lines that the Labour Party proposed on 26 January to tackle the cost-of-living crisis that is causing such real hardship for so many families and households and I know that all Members are hearing this.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion, even though the Social

Democrats do not agree with it. In fact, we believe the motion is disingenuous and dishonest and I will spend a large part of my contribution explaining why. We need to discuss why we need a carbon tax and why it is important to retain it, even in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. We need to discuss what we are going to use the carbon tax revenue for and to discuss what would happen in the absence of the carbon tax. While there has been a great deal of noise during this debate, the two issues that everybody in this Chamber should agree on are, first, that we have a climate emergency and, second, that there is a cost-of-living crisis. Last August, we were told by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that: "The climate crisis is [so acute that we are facing] a code red for humanity."

6 o'clock

The United Nations Secretary General said:

The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil-fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk. Global heating is affecting every region on Earth, with many of the changes becoming irreversible.

If that warning was not stark enough, a group of eminent scientists earlier this year warned that the planet is facing a ghastly future of mass extinction, declining health and climate disruption upheavals that threaten human survival.

We cannot divorce those warnings from the discussion we are having here, even though Sinn Féin and some other Opposition Deputies would simply like us to do so. We have to act to mitigate the worst effects of the climate crisis, if not out of concern for the planet then out of a self-interested concern for our survival and that of our children. We know what is killing the planet and threatening our survival. It is the greenhouse gas emissions caused by burning fossil fuels. As a country, we are far too dependent on fossil fuels. We are addicted, and breaking that addiction will not be easy. No political party should claim there is a simple or pain-free way to do so. Equally, no political party should claim we have time to postpone making difficult choices. The time to dither and delay has run out. We must have a carbon tax because, as a State, we want to signal we understand fossil fuels are a threat and must be phased out. We want to signal to the business community that it makes more sense, from both an environmental and a financial perspective, to invest in cleaner energy. We want consumer choices to be informed by the knowledge that fossil fuels are expensive and will remain so.

The odd thing, given the motion tabled this evening, is that Sinn Féin seems to agree with all this. If it did not, it would call for the carbon tax to be scrapped in its entirety. However, it has not. Instead it has called for the increase in the carbon tax due in May to be scrapped. It is also interesting that Sinn Féin outlines in very precise terms in its motion the increases in the costs of gas, home heating oil, petrol and diesel at 28%, 50%, 30% and 32%, respectively. These massive increases are undoubtedly causing massive hardship for many workers and families throughout the country, but given Sinn Féin's precision in itemising the cost increases for different fossil fuels, it is notable it does not include precise figures for the impact of the carbon tax. I will give those figures.

An increase of €7.50 per tonne of carbon was introduced on budget night for petrol and diesel. On 1 May, that increase will apply to all other fuel. That change increased the cost of petrol and diesel by approximately 2 cent per litre in October and it will mean energy bills increasing

by an average of €17 per annum. To put this in further context, according to AA Ireland, motorists today are paying an average of €1.77 per litre for petrol as opposed to €1.33 in February 2021. Over the same period diesel prices rose to €1.67 per litre from €1.24 per litre. Petrol and diesel, therefore, have increased in price per litre by an average of approximately 43% in a year, a massive hike, but just 2 cent of that can be attributed to increases in carbon tax. Sinn Féin is playing a dangerous game and it will come back to haunt the party. The constant focus on the increase in carbon tax would lead any reasonable person to conclude it must account for a huge portion of the rising cost of energy, but it does not. It is clear from AA figures that the recent price spikes have nothing to do with the carbon tax increase, which is a fixed amount and does not change even as the price of oil fluctuates.

The inference of the motion is also that scrapping the planned increase in carbon tax would go a long way to helping the public withstand the cost-of-living crisis, but it would not go nearly far enough, unless Sinn Féin believes reducing bills by an average of €17 per year is enough to save people from fuel poverty. Why are we devoting valuable Dáil time to debating this motion? Even if this motion was passed, it would do nothing to change petrol and diesel prices at the pump and the net impact would be a saving of approximately €1.40 per month on energy bills from May. What is going on? Regrettably, there appears to be an attempt to play politics with the carbon tax. It is using the cost-of-living crisis and the genuine hardship being endured by so many to whip up public anger about the carbon tax and use that as a means to attack the Government. That is why I believe this motion is both disingenuous and dishonest.

Sinn Féin does not need to use the carbon tax as a battering ram to try to damage this Government. If it wants to accuse the Government of being out of touch and failing to act quickly or adequately enough on the cost-of-living crisis, it has many other weapons in its arsenal to do so. Turning the carbon tax into some type of environmental bogeyman may earn some cheap political points now, but what will the long-term cost be? After the next general election it is expected that Sinn Féin will likely be leading the Government. What will it have to say about the carbon tax then? Will it vote to scrap it, or any future increases? If it does, how will it replace the revenue that is generated by the carbon tax? If it does not, how will its supporters feel about that? Many will feel conned. The Irish public is not stupid and does not like hypocrisy. Opposition parties claiming from the Opposition benches that they will do something and then failing to do it in government has been costly for many political parties. This motion has created a hostage to fortune for Sinn Féin and one it will have to answer for at the next general election.

It would be easy for me and other Opposition parties to join in the chorus to scrap the increase in carbon tax and cynically pretend that doing so would provide help to those who are desperately trying to make ends meet, but we will not do that. Instead, I will explain why the Social Democrats have tabled an amendment to the motion, which I will move. What we want are ironclad assurances that every cent raised by the carbon tax is funnelled back to the public in targeted climate action support. The carbon tax should not be regressive and it is important those most at risk of fuel poverty are provided with meaningful support using this revenue. We want to see regular and detailed accounts of the spending of the carbon tax so there is transparency about the manner in which the total revenue is spent. We want the Government to engage with the European Commission to extend a penalty-free derogation on the VAT applied to energy on a temporary basis while we are in the midst of this massive hike in prices, in line with measures outlined in the European Commission toolbox. We want the Government to publish an up-to-date strategy to combat energy poverty and to establish a cross-departmental task force to address energy poverty.

Carbon tax is the only tax we have that is going to be used for specific purposes. Everything else goes into general Exchequer funding. The Government has said it will spend every penny of the carbon tax on climate action measures. These are the measures we must implement if we are to have any hope of meeting our legally and morally mandated target of reducing carbon emissions by 51% by 2030, eight years hence. We want full transparency and the commitment to use that funding in that way. We want the public to be able to see where the money is going and to be sure it is used appropriately. We also recognise there is a cost-of-living crisis for which global energy prices and the wider geopolitical situation are responsible. We therefore recognise this is an emergency situation and emergency responses are required. The EU also recognised this when it suggested member states could make changes to their VAT regimes temporarily to cushion the blow of these price hikes. A temporary reduction in VAT would have a far more significant impact on prices than what Sinn Féin is proposing in this motion. It is simply incredible the Government has failed to date to engage with the EU on its capacity to do this.

The strategy to combat energy poverty was published in 2016 and is now hopelessly out of date. The Government must publish an updated strategy and establish a cross-departmental task force to combat energy poverty as a matter of urgency. Our recent proposals to address the cost-of-living crisis include increasing the pension and other core social welfare rates by €5, doubling the exceptional needs payment to create a hardship fund quickly, introducing a €300 tax credit for individuals earning less than €50,000 per annum, and extending the fuel allowance and increasing the time period for which it is paid. These are targeted measures we believe would make a significant difference for people. Many people are seriously concerned about the cost-of-living crisis and their ability to feed their families and heat their homes. Regrettably, the measures contained in Sinn Féin's motion would make no difference to them.

I also urge the many people who are concerned about the environment and the slow progress on our climate action plan to consider this motion and its impact on Sinn Féin's commitment to addressing that crisis. I represent a constituency that is impacted by a huge level of respiratory problems. Constituents are at the coalface of the climate crisis and the cost-of-living crisis. We need genuine proposals that will impact on and benefit their lives, and I do not believe this motion will do that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I must advise the Deputy his amendment cannot be moved until the Minister's amendment is disposed of. In the event the Minister's amendment is defeated, he can move the amendment at that point.

The next speakers are from People Before Profit, although I do not have details of the speakers.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will speak first, followed by Deputies Boyd Barrett and Barry.

I think I am the only Deputy here who sat for months on the Committee on Climate Action in 2019. We looked at this issue for weeks. We heard from all sorts of experts and witnesses and we received all sorts of data on the question of carbon tax. I was particularly struck by the witnesses from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They appeared before the committee to give us evidence about the level of energy poverty in the country. Such was the level in 2019, before this cost-of-living hike, that the society was at that point spending an extra €4 million per year in fuel subsidies, in many cases to people who were already on a fuel subsidy from the State but also to others who were not on a fuel subsidy from the State. One of the things their research

showed us was that the level of energy poverty throughout the country was much greater than the measure, which is who gets to have fuel allowance, shows up as the reality for people.

Parking all this aside, my party and group have been against the carbon tax from the get-go. This is not because we do not take the climate seriously. We have tabled some of the most radical Bills before the House, including ending the extraction of oil and gas in this country, stopping the proliferation of data centres and banning liquefied natural gas, LNG, which the Minister and Minister of State sitting in front of me voted against not so long ago. We take the question of climate and the crisis very seriously.

The point about carbon taxes and ordinary people, however, is they are built on an extremely false premise. This premise is that imposing them helps people to change their behaviour. For example, they move from driving a dirty old diesel car onto a nice bus that passes by their house every half an hour, or they buy an electric vehicle, or indeed they retrofit their homes to the tune of €30,000, €40,000 or €50,000 because they will spend less on dirty old oil or gas that might heat their homes. This is a nonsense. For the vast majority of people, not only in this country but on the planet, carbon taxes do not help to change their behaviour. Their behaviour is embedded in what people here call the twin crises.

The twin crises of climate and cost of living are linked. They are not separate. They are linked by the fact we live on a planet that is propelling the market forward as the only answer to everything. That same market is propelling the climate crisis and the inequality and poverty in which people live. To support carbon tax is to be delusional. It is like sitting on the *Titanic* as it sinks and moving the deckchairs this way and then that way. The *Titanic* keeps sinking. To use a more modern analogy from the movie “Don’t Look Up”, it is like throwing stuff at the comet that continues to hurtle towards the earth to blow it apart.

The climate crisis is extremely serious but what are needed are radical measures that tackle the fossil fuel industry. I will finish with an example of where this is best understood. This is the example of the two countries that are wheeled out always as having done a wonderful job on carbon taxes. They are Norway and Canada. All of the research is wheeled out on both of them. Norway is one of the biggest polluters in terms of fossil fuels. It has a massive oil and gas industry. Canada has the Alberta oil sands, which is one of the dirtiest forms of producing gas on the planet. They are not good examples of how to deal with the climate crisis. How we deal with it is by going after the big polluters. These are the oil and gas industry, the plastic industries and those related to them. It is not going after ordinary people who cannot afford to change their behaviour. Instead of this, the Government should go after the guys at the top, the 1% dirtying the planet, and give the rest of us a break.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Supposedly one of the central pillars of the just transition we need to address the climate crisis is the idea that it will be a just transition. I do not know how many times I have heard the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and other Ministers in the Government wax lyrical about how if we seriously address the climate crisis, it can be a win-win situation. This is what it should be. If we address the climate crisis, and the biodiversity crisis I might add in, people could have warmer homes and lower bills. They could have better public and cheaper transport systems. They could have more biodiversity and a better environment if we met our afforestation targets. This is what it should be but it is not what actually happens.

In the process the Government is not willing to challenge the logic of the market system, the way it is responsible for wrecking the environment and the way it simultaneously makes

its money through exploiting ordinary people. The elephant in the room about who should pay for the just transition to a better climate future is the absolutely extraordinary rising, staggering and obscene profits of the energy companies. The Government does not want to do anything to cut or cap their profits or to call out the obscenity of their profits while people are being hammered with increased energy bills. The Government does not say a word about this. It thinks it is perfectly okay that they make a fortune. Then the Government comes in here and lectures ordinary people about how they have to take the pain to deal with the climate through increased carbon taxes and other forms of regressive taxation on their energy such as VAT and the public service obligation, PSO, levy. All of these hit hardest those who can least afford them and who have least control over the amount of energy they use in their homes or the access they have to public transport, or that they do not have, as is more likely the case.

If the Government continues to punish ordinary people who are least responsible for the climate crisis, they will turn people away from the climate agenda. Why not turn its attention to the obscene, and disgusting in the context of the current inflation crisis, profits of the energy companies such as the ESB, Energia, Shell and BP? They are making a fortune by wrecking the world's environment and crucifying ordinary people with the bills dropping through their doors. Unless the Government addresses this problem it will not get a just transition or any transition to a better climate future.

Deputy Mick Barry: To listen to the Government speak about the cost-of-living crisis, we would swear it was an act of God and it did not have any hand, act or part in it itself. The reality is it is adding to the cost-of-living crisis by increasing carbon tax on home heating oil on 1 May and taxes on auto fuel on 12 October. The €200 credit on electricity bills will be severely eaten into and in some cases wiped out by these increases. Where will the money go? The Government states more than 50% is going on retrofitting. However those in rented accommodation will not be able to avail of the retrofitting grants. Neither will people in council accommodation and neither will those who cannot get their hands on €10,000 or more to match the State grants. We say “No” to the carbon tax increases. We also say “No” to the carbon tax. We are in favour of a polluters tax. We are in favour of a tax on the big business carbon polluters. Over the past 30 years, 71% of all carbon emissions in the world can be traced back to 100 large corporations. They are the people who need to be gone after.

It is like the cost-of-living crisis is an act of God. There is profiteering going on in front of our eyes. When it was last recorded, Musgrave, the owner of Centra and SuperValu, had €98 million in profits. Is anyone seriously telling me there is not an opportunity being taken to increase prices? What about landlords? There are increases of 10% year on year, as shown in the fourth quarter last year.

This is in a situation where workers have no alternative but to act. They cannot rely on the Government. It is part of the problem and not part of the solution. Workers need to rely on their own power. They need to organise and submit wage claims. Those wage claims need to be in double digits. Workers need to ballot for industrial action. They need to set a deadline, perhaps 1 May. If employers settle by that time, well and good. If they do not, there should be strikes that are co-ordinated across industries and across the economy with full support. They deserve and need full support from their unions. At this stage this is a necessary step for working people to combat this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Carbon tax is supposed to be an environmental tax to drive behavioural change when it comes to the use of fossil fuels. In such circumstances the most ef-

fective tax is the one that brings in little revenue because it is doing what it should do, namely, driving behavioural change. Consider the plastic bag tax. It was so successful that it soon became a problem because one of the key concerns of the Government was what to do to get more revenue. The focus of environmental taxes should never be on revenue, it should be motivating behavioural change. The current carbon tax model is flawed in this regard, because the goal is about bringing in more taxes that, sadly, are being used at least in part to replace spending lines across government.

If we are serious about moving away from the dependence on fossil fuels then we need a model of carbon taxation that is actually fluid. I mean this to be a model that takes into consideration the ever-changing cost of a barrel of oil. Carbon taxes should vary with the cost of a barrel of oil because even if carbon taxes increase significantly but the price of oil collapses, then it will not bring about the type of step change that we actually require. For example, a decade ago it was believed that the carbon taxes then introduced would drive the type of change needed in our economies. That was based on a projected increase of the price of a barrel of oil before shale fracking technology and other factors distorted the market. So, the price of Brent crude oil went from \$114 per barrel in June 2014 to just \$20 per barrel in January 2016, undermining that policy tool. At the opposite end of the spectrum, when the price of a barrel of oil increases sharply this has a direct impact on the cost of living for families, as well as having a devastating impact on a small open economy. We are seeing that impact today because Ireland is more exposed than most EU countries to oil price volatility.

Carbon taxes should be fluid. For every increase in the price of a barrel of oil the carbon tax should be lowered to lessen the impact of that increased cost to consumers and families, providing a practical measure to address the impact of inflation. The opposite scenario should apply. For every decrease in the price of oil the carbon tax should be increased by a defined amount. Yes, we should have a clear trajectory to ensure that we have a carbon tax rate of not less than €100 per tonne by 2030, but I believe this is best given effect by setting a minimum effective floor price for a barrel of oil at €210 per barrel in 2030, with an associated trajectory developed from now out to 2030. We should ask the OECD to develop such a model in conjunction with the Government.

We have introduced minimum pricing of alcohol so why not introduce it for oil? On this occasion, let us not hand the additional money back to the oil companies. By setting a floor price for a barrel of oil that increases incrementally up to 2030 we can decouple production from the retail price of oil and its resulting impact on inflation. Moving to a minimum floor price for petrol, diesel, home heating oil and gas ensures that such taxation measures are less vulnerable to short-term volatility in commodity oil prices, thus are less likely to place undue financial hardship on Irish families when oil prices spike. This would also act as a powerful signal for private sector investment decisions, orientating them towards decarbonising options rather than just hedging against oil price volatility.

The novel approach I am proposing would also address the risk of falling fossil fuel prices that can undermine the policy move away from fossil fuels. This will achieve our policy objective of driving behavioural change and importantly will also reduce our global economic reliance on fossil fuels.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Utility bills are going through the roof right across the country. People are seeing gas bills coming through the door of €600 and €700. People are paying well over €1,000 to fill their oil tanks at the moment. These are eye-watering figures. These are

amounts of money that people simply do not have. Many people are going into debt to try to cover these costs. I know of one woman in Meath who saw her natural gas bill travel from €187 to €628 in the space of two bills. I saw one SSE Airtricity bill leap from €209 to €864 from one bill to the next. If we add this to all the other costs that people are experiencing including childcare - I know one couple who are spending €1,300 per month on a child minding service in Dublin - most families are really suffering with regard to their income and their ability to spend. In real terms, spending power has fallen by €2,000 in the space of one year. People's incomes have fallen by about €2,000 in real terms in the space of one year. I know people who have to change the way they are living at the moment in order to deal with this. I know people who are going without showers, people who are going without food and people who are going without heat. I was speaking to an elderly gentleman a few weeks ago who is getting rid of the land line from his house to be able to make sure that he can make ends meet for himself.

The Government states, on a regular basis, that external factors are at the heart of the price increases. If we compare Ireland to other European Union countries, Ireland is an outlier with the costs that people are spending. Ireland is now the sixth most expensive country in Europe in which to live. With rent, Ireland is ranked the third most expensive, with only Switzerland and Luxembourg ranking ahead of us. Dublin is the fourth most expensive city in terms of price in the whole of Europe. Three Swiss cities beat Dublin at the top of the most expensive list. Right now, again, this Government is presiding over a State that is at the worst element of the measurements for the real experiences of people's lives.

There are many levers the Government has in its own hands. We have spoken about these levers. We have spoken about child care and public services. I thank the Government for listening to one of Aontú's proposals some weeks ago when we asked for a reduction in the cost of public transport. Again, it was a meagre reduction when it could have been game changing in getting people onto public transport and reducing costs for people. I have asked the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, a number of times if he will go to the European Union to seek a derogation with regard to VAT rates on fuel in the State. The Minister and the Taoiseach have refused to do that.

Carbon tax is another element where the Government has a lever in its own hands. Carbon tax is one of the most blunt tools that a Government can use. The Government sets a carbon tax years in advance of actually knowing the circumstances in which people will be living. I ask the Department to think about this. The Government is completely oblivious and completely blind to the actual cost of fuel and energy in people's lives in two, three and four years' time, and yet it has already set the tax that will be imposed then. Fuel could actually double in price and the Government would still plan to increase the carbon tax on that fuel in a number of years' time. In any measure of fairness in tax, and in any measure of a tax to implement at a time, that has to be wrong. There is a problem there.

I agree with Deputy Naughten that there needs to be a ceiling on market price, plus a carbon tax ceiling, beyond which we do not go, to make sure there is not a negative effect on the way people are living their lives at the moment. We are told that the whole purpose of a carbon tax is to move people from that product, through price, to an alternative. But, if the market has already achieved that price, adding to that price is purely punitive at that stage and is not actually having any effect in moving people away. People are still paying that price because they do not have an alternative and because they are locked into that fuel source or that energy source. It is punitive and it is hurting those families. It is reducing their ability to live. I am asking the Government to take into consideration our objective. Our plan is a ceiling between the market

price and the actual carbon tax, over which we will not go year to year, to make sure that average families are not penalised into not being able to pay for what they need in their lives.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important motion. The only thing that amazes me is when I see people here talking as if they do not know how this has happened. A lot of the people who are talking against it and saying it is wrong - I refer to the high cost of heating homes and the high cost of travelling - are those who voted for it. Now they are here saying it is wrong. They are all around us.

I listened to some of the speeches and to say that I was scratching my head would be an understatement. I was completely and absolutely bamboozled because I was trying to figure out whether they were the same people who voted for these measures. Many people said we were not going far enough fast enough. When they are at home in their constituencies now, they meet fine, honest-to-God people who cannot fill their oil tanks, cannot heat their homes and find the cost of travelling enormous. It is crazy.

An awful lot of people from all sides of the House are saying that this situation is awful and that we must do something about it. They are the ones who have done it. Who said we had to tax people with additional taxes? There are other things we can do. Every person in the Chamber is deeply committed to protecting the environment. I do not believe there is one Deputy elected to the Dáil who would say that he or she does not care about the environment or that he or she is not worried about the future. Every one of us is worried.

I definitely do not think that the Green Party has a monopoly on worrying about the environment. That is rubbish. The real people who are worried about the environment are those who own it, namely the farmers of Ireland. They are the people who are really committed to the environment. It is very unusual to see people talking out of both sides of their mouths. It is crazy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I and the Rural Independent Group have highlighted this since November. I highlighted the price of fuel costs on a truck with farmers and everyone else. The fact of the matter is that in 2018, 66% of the price of delivering fuel in the country went to the suppliers and 34% went to the Government. Things have now come full circle. It is now 46% for oil companies and 54% for the Government. All of the increases in fuel are tax, including VAT, customs and excise and National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, taxes. That is the real problem here.

Some 56% of the delivery of fuel to every household in Ireland is tax. The Government has it within its remit to change that. Every backbencher from rural areas is telling people the situation is very sad, but they are the same ones in opposition who voted for carbon tax. We want a mini budget to be introduced to scrap carbon tax until people in this country are safe. We are elected to protect the people of Ireland and make sure they do not go hungry. The Government will cause mayhem. Crime will go through the roof because of the failure to act to save the people of Ireland. The Government is responsible for 56% of the fuel increases through tax. That is fact.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too am amazed because I called a vote in the convention centre on the Finance Bill 2020 and nine other Independents supported me. Every other party, including those in opposition, Sinn Féin and all, voted to give away our right to debate ten years of carbon tax increases to 2030, let alone vote against them. We signed up for a ten-year whammy after whammy to hit mammy or anybody else. We signed that right away.

I do not know what Sinn Féin is doing. It is missing in action. It has been absent as regards this issue. It is total crocodile tears. It is nothing short of a con job. The people out there are hurting and are very sad and angry. Others do not have the monopoly on anger. The people are waiting. They must know this. They can check the record of the Dáil. When I called a vote, no party supported me. Many Deputies wanted more extensive measures. We voted to give away our right to even debate or vote against carbon tax, a right we fight for every day.

The Green Party can be blamed and is to blame, but its partners in government, Sinn Féin and all the parties of the left voted for that. It was not half strong enough for them. Now they are wringing their hands. There are crocodile tears. It is a Pontius Pilate job. It is a farce, a shame and an utter disgrace that they would get away with this. Sinn Féin has a brass neck to put down this motion. My God, a brass neck is one thing but this is a super brass neck. It is made of a cement block. The pyrite blocks would not be as strong to put down this motion after voting the tax in.

Do Sinn Féin think the people are fools, eejits, morons and back in the 1800s? The Opposition voted to give away our right to debate carbon tax from 2020 until 2030. If that was not a con job and a trick o' the loop, I do know what was. The fairy godmother must be around here. Sinn Féin thinks she is waiting for it somewhere.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk against the carbon tax. I am glad that Sinn Féin has at last seen the light, having voted for the carbon tax already. I am glad it has now seen the light and is against the carbon tax because it affects every man, woman and child in rural Ireland, including ordinary workers, people with cars going to work, commercial transport and lorries that are driven by grand honest people who cannot stay going. Farmers with tractors and other vehicles, school bus operators, taxis and hackneys are all being driven down through the ground with taxes.

We can call it carbon tax, VAT or excise duty, but it is all tax on fuel. We cannot go to work or anywhere else without a car. We have no public transport, unlike in Dublin where there is one bus after another going around the corner with no one in half of them. We have no buses, no DART, no Luas and no trains. The last train went through Kilgarvan in 1959, I think. That is what I was told. That was last train the people of Kilgarvan saw.

All the Government is intent on doing in sorting out people's problems today is to increase the carbon tax again in May. God almighty, do Ministers have any heart at all? Do they know what they are doing to people in rural Ireland? Do they know how they are suffering? They cannot fill their oil tanks or their car tanks. People do not know where to turn because they are being demonised and criticised. Farmers are being criticised daily for one thing and another. The cost of fertiliser has increased. There is no assistance from the Government.

Deputy Michael Collins: This Sinn Féin motion is calling on the Government not to introduce planned increases in carbon tax in May this year and I agree. My question is why in God's name Sinn Féin is putting this motion forward when it had a chance to vote against the carbon tax Bill and did not do so. That question needs to be answered. Sinn Féin cannot change its mind as the wind blows. It has to pick a side. It is either on the side of the Government or on our side, the only Opposition in this Dáil.

I stood in the Dáil during a previous discussion on carbon tax and I said, much like de Valera said about Collins, namely, "It's my considered opinion that in the fullness of time history will

record the greatness of Collins and it will be recorded at my expense”, that it is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time history will record this carbon tax Bill as being the worst Bill that ever came out of Dáil Éireann because it inflicts pain on the people of rural Ireland that I represent. I and my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group have been the only political grouping in the Dáil completely opposed to every facet of the carbon tax. We have warned of its deep negative impact for a number of years. We forecast that the current cost of living crisis would emerge. We are now watching others who want to join us in tackling this deeply regressive form of taxation before it completely destroys the country and its people.

Carbon tax is the key contributory factor to the rising cost of living and is having a bruising impact on the price of electricity and home fuels, together with petrol and diesel. Furthermore, we do not buy the Government’s argument that the carbon tax goes back to the people in the form of income supports, such as the fuel allowance and help for low-income farmers to improve their environmental practices. After all, those supports were already in place long before the carbon tax. Furthermore, farmers are being crucified with carbon tax and not a single cent from the carbon fund has been allocated to that sector in 2022. Sinn Féin should get off the fence and join the only real Opposition in Dáil Éireann, the only real group that stands and speaks for the people. We speak for the people who are frozen in their homes and tell me in my clinics and on my phone week in, week out that they cannot deal with the cold in their homes thanks to the Green Party, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. It is a disgraceful decision. Sinn Féin failed to turn that around last week. It could have turned it around and helped people, but it failed to do so.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I wish we could channel some of that anger and passion into facing the existential threat that climate change poses. That is a challenge for all of us. I welcome the opportunity provided by Sinn Féin to take part in this debate and I support the motion. I take great exception to a Deputy from the Labour Party telling us that anyone who is opposed to a carbon tax is not serious about climate change. That type of divisive comment is unacceptable. Since my election in February 2016, I would say that, outside of health and housing, it is the topic I have spoken on the most. I have stood up repeatedly with a small number of colleagues and appealed to the Government to recognise the crisis posed by climate change and to declare an emergency. That was finally declared on 9 May 2019. I would like to say that it was as a result of pressure from us, but it was ultimately as a result of children standing outside the Dáil and appealing to all of us to do something, as well as all of the reports from various organisations that there was no turning back. The Minister for Finance or the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform told us that our planet was burning and I fully agree. I do not agree with a divisive carbon tax.

We like to quote the ESRI on different topics. I will quote it later tonight during questions to the Minister for Finance. A working paper in 2008 told us:

A carbon tax in Ireland will not stop climate change – indeed, it is unlikely to have a measurable direct impact on global warming. A carbon tax is important because it signals Ireland’s commitment to international climate policy.

It is about signalling as opposed to having an impact. I disagree with what the ESRI said about signalling. I think there are far more effective ways to signal to companions in other countries that we are taking climate change seriously.

I quote Professor John Sweeney, who is on the side of carbon taxes. He said, “politicians

feel comfortable talking about taxes rather than more fundamental social and economic changes". That is exactly what is happening here. We are being diverted, not by Sinn Féin's motion, but by the Government policy generally talking about carbon tax, as opposed to a proper analysis of how we bring people together like we did at the beginning of Covid. We rapidly lost that solidarity. How do we do that? As a small country, we are well placed to put ourselves forward to aspire and work towards being a green country. Galway city should be picked as a pilot project to roll out a green, thriving city. A feasibility study on light rail should be done and there should be a roll-out of public transport and park-and-ride to get the traffic off the road.

What we are currently doing is the complete opposite of that. We have looked for a policy for sustainable industries with seaweed and wool from sheep. Let us look at the period since 2015, when we brought in the climate action plan. What happened after that? Each year, our emissions have gone up. That says a lot about our sincerity. We zone in on a divisive carbon tax while the emissions go up. We then brought in a national mitigation plan. Friends of the Irish Environment had to go to the Supreme Court and get it quashed because the mitigation plan was unlawful and against our obligations under the 2015 plan. All of the energy went into that as opposed to joining forces to deal, in a sustainable way, with climate action.

Let us go local again. Let us look at the good idea of decarbonisation plans. Galway City Council, among other local authorities, put forward its plan in April last year. It now sits at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It told us in replies to questions that it cannot do anything about it because it will need guidelines from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. So much for joined-up thinking. The decarbonisation plan was submitted in April last year and there has been no progress. There is a circular that tells us that only towns of more than 5,000 will be looked at. They are exclusive guidelines that prevent the community from being involved. I will stop on time but I would dearly love to engage on this matter.

Deputy Joan Collins: I also thank Sinn Féin for introducing this Private Members' motion regarding not increasing the carbon tax this year. No doubt members of the Green Party in the Government will accuse those of us who support this motion of not taking the question of climate change seriously enough. I assure them that I take the issue of climate change and global warming very seriously. As things stand, we are heading for a 4°C increase in global warming by the end of the century, with a distinct probability of mass extinction of life on the planet. Even with the reduction in emissions targets being agreed, but not mandatory, we are heading for a 2°C increase by 2050. As a socialist, I am in favour of a just transition to a new, environmentally sustainable and truly just society. One cannot have a just transition to a green economy while maintaining a social and economic system which is based on injustice at its very foundation. A recent report by Oxfam estimated that the richest 1% of the world's population accounted for more than 15% of cumulative emissions between 1990 and 2015, more than twice the combined emissions of the poorest 50%, at 7%. The poorest on the planet are least responsible for climate change and suffer from its catastrophic effects. We never hear a leading voice in the Green Party highlighting these issues. Its solutions are based purely within the confines of capitalism and, for that reason, they will not succeed.

Carbon taxes are the main plank of Green Party policy. Many ecologists question their effectiveness in reducing emissions. For the well-off, carbon taxes as they stand are easily absorbed, and there is no great pressure to reduce energy and fossil fuel use. The least well-off have maybe cut back on their heating and electricity already. They may be living in a rural area with no public transport and be dependent on a car for shopping, getting children to school and

so on. Those having to use oil for heating have already seen the price increase by 50%. What do they do? They have to heat their home and use electricity. They cannot afford the €20,000 to €25,000 needed to avail of a retrofit grant or come up with the more than €30,000 for an electric vehicle. Consumption in this area cannot be reduced so all carbon tax will do is make them more expensive.

Carbon taxes can be part of the solution to reduce emissions but they must be progressive. The carbon tax regime here is regressive. It impacts mostly on those who can least afford them or take measures to reduce their consumption. The less people have, the more they are affected. It should not be beyond the capacity of the Government to develop, as a matter of urgency, with the aid of economists and ecologists, a range of options for a system of progressive taxes which will be much more effective in gaining public support and reducing emissions. The policy of ring-fencing the income from carbon taxes by subsidising action on climate change is something that I support, but there is a problem with the retrofit grant scheme. It is simply not feasible for many households to borrow the €20,000 or more needed to avail of the scheme.

In reality, people are being asked to pay a tax to fund a scheme that they cannot avail of. That is unjust. In order to avoid the catastrophe of a new mass extinction, which would be the sixth in the history of our planet, we need much more than regressive carbon taxes. The only just transition will be a just transformation to a completely new social and economic order, based not on the interests of the few but on the real needs of the many.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As other speakers have said, when we debate carbon taxation and climate change, we are, in effect, debating the future of humanity on our planet, the future of communities and peoples all over our world and, in some parts of our world, the future of their civilisation. That is what is at stake when we debate climate change and the future of our environment and our biodiversity.

When confronting a challenge of this scale, the best place to start is the science and the opinions of scientists on this topic. They have considered what are the most effective steps that can be taken to help mitigate this catastrophe, to help lessen the chaos and to help ensure that the generations to come have some chance of the standard of living that this and previous generations, or most of us, have been able to access. What do the scientists say? The advice from the majority of them who have considered this topic is clear. What is the view of our own Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC - extraordinarily, not mentioned once by the Opposition in this entire debate - on the topic? Its view is that “Carbon tax is a key component of transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy”.

The CCAC has also stated:

A very wide range of research in Ireland and elsewhere has shown that raising the cost of emitting greenhouse gases is essential if we are to halt global warming.

That is the view of the CCAC.

I heard a number of speakers, particularly in Sinn Féin, quote from a paper from the ESRI. Let us look at other papers from the ESRI and what have they stated. A paper from the ESRI this month stated:

In the coming years, major reductions to carbon emissions are going to be required to meet Irish and European objectives on climate action. A key part of this strategy will be the

use of carbon taxes.

That is the view of the ESRI, oft quoted this evening, on the core issue we are confronting.

I heard Deputy Ó Broin quote from literature published by the University of Toronto. He made reference to a meta-paper. I was not quite sure what kind of analysis he was referring to but I researched it and maybe he is referring to a paper by Jessica Green, from the University of Toronto, in 2020 that did indeed raise issues and question the role carbon taxation can play, including in helping us to avoid a collapse of our environment. Deputy Ó Broin did not, however, make any reference to Roger Martin and a paper of his. He said a review of his “profiles a growing body of academic research and good evidence ... to show that careful carbon pricing policy may be a tool to help Canada ... prosper in the long term”. Roger Martin is dean of the school of management at the University of Toronto. Deputy Ó Broin did not quote Danny Harvey either. Professor Harvey has said that carbon taxes work by encouraging people to change their habits. Professor Harvey is professor of geography, also at the University of Toronto. Deputy Ó Broin did not, I am sure, consider a paper by Tracy Snoddon and Trevor Tombe that stated, “Carbon taxes are not only an efficient tool to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, but they are also an increasingly important source of government revenue.” That was also published by the University of Toronto.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are right on the last point.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Therefore, the only university heralded by Sinn Féin this evening to advance its cause regarding carbon taxing, the party’s view on which I am still not clear on, a point to which I will come to in a moment, did publish a paper by one of its members of staff on carbon taxation, but many other papers from the same university acknowledge the role of carbon taxation and carbon pricing and make that case.

That is not to say for a moment that I or this Government does not fully appreciate or recognise the impact that rising prices and the rising cost of energy are having on many people in our country and our society at the moment. Many people, just as we emerge from the darkness of a pandemic and as they were looking forward to and hoping for better, different, brighter days, are now confronted by the challenge of their standard of living going down as the price of many things goes up. The Government absolutely recognises that and we have acted on it in the measures we brought forward on budget day and last week. Those measures mean that, for example, a single person living alone whose only income comes from the State will receive between €600 and €800 more in payments from the State this year versus last year. That is €600 to €800 of additional support from the State. I am not saying for a moment that they are that amount better off. I fully appreciate the challenge so many face. This is additional support, it is needed and the Government recognises that it has to be delivered quickly. With the various changes we have made to personal tax credits and to the amount of income on which one can pay the lower rate of income tax, combined with the changes of a few weeks ago, somebody on the standard rate of income tax will receive, after they have paid their taxes, an additional €400 to €600 per year in recognition of the challenge that is developing and the impact that rising costs and changes in inflation are having on living standards. We understand it. We get it. We have acted. We have brought forward measures to make a difference. A standard approach from the Opposition and from Sinn Féin, however, is to claim that we do not get it, that we do not understand and that we cannot appreciate the lived reality or the difficulty many face. This Government does. However, just as I would never claim to have a monopoly on wisdom on any topic, nobody in this House, as I say again and again, should claim a monopoly on compassion.

We recognise the challenges many people face but we also have constraints. As we indicated earlier today, we have a national debt now approaching €250 billion. We have constraints in other areas on which this House wants us to make progress and on which we need to spend the country's money.

We have heard again in this House the claim that one can recognise the challenge of climate change and also be against carbon taxing. Maybe, just maybe, one can, but there are not many scientists or economists who support that claim. I always recognise, however, the autonomy and independence of everybody in the House to form a view not in keeping with the mainstream view on any given topic. That is the essence of democracy. You cannot say, however, that you are in favour of mitigating the effects of climate change and of avoiding a climate collapse while also pretending that there are no difficult choices. Given the change that is happening in our environment, in a week in which we have seen multiple storms batter our country, with another to come, it must be recognised that extreme change is already happening. What the Government is doing, in standing by the changes we will make in a number of weeks' time, is asking the country to see that in conjunction with all the measures we have taken to protect those who need help the most, the additional funding to be raised through increased carbon taxation will be used to fund retrofitting, changes to social welfare payments, changes in transport and more sustainable ways of living within our communities. That is what this money is being used for. The very Sinn Féin that, on the day the climate action plan was published, came out and attacked it for being vague, not having ambition and lacking detail is the same Sinn Féin that attacks any way the Government can fund it. Sinn Féin attacks the plan for being unambitious; it is against any way of funding it. Sinn Féin is creating the sense, the myth, that it is possible to make progress on this civilisational challenge without there being difficult choices.

We appreciate and understand that the act of putting up these carbon taxes is difficult for many, but that is why the Government has put in place measures to help.

7 o'clock

That is why we are using the revenue from the additional rates of carbon taxation to do all we can to help our society to either mitigate the change that is coming or get ready to deal with the consequences. For that reason, we do not accept the motion.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I thank the Minister. I listened carefully to what he said and do not agree with a lot of it. Hard choices will have to be made; we all agree with that. This generation faces a climate emergency and we all have a role to play in addressing it. However, guilting those who earn the least is not the approach to take. Oxfam tells us the world's richest 1% cause double the CO₂ emissions of the poorest 50%, yet in this country we propose additional carbon taxes that will disproportionately affect those on low to middle incomes. That is a fact, though the Minister might not like to hear it.

In this State, those on lower and middle incomes spend a higher proportion of their income on food, electricity and home heating. Many people are now experiencing a cost-of-living crisis as well. People are choosing between heating their homes or paying their rents. Rents have increased across the board over the past 12 months. In the same period, home heating has increased by 50%, petrol by 30% and gas by 28%. Now the Government wants to introduce another charge for our least well off. Government Members are delusional if they think this is acceptable. They are out of touch and have no idea how much people are struggling.

The Government could, and should, have established an expert advisory group on energy poverty before pushing ahead with this increase but it chose not to and opted out of that. The carbon tax is a commitment in the programme for Government but no advisory group has been established on increasing the cost on low- to middle-income families. Yet the Government can establish a drawn-out review before committing to a living wage for those on the breadline. That living wage will not be introduced prior to the 1 May increase in carbon taxes on fuel to heat homes, if it is ever introduced. It gives an appreciation of the priorities of this Government. That is okay because people can retrofit and insulate their homes under the home energy upgrade scheme, while renters will be at the good grace of their landlord, who may opt to participate in the scheme. Others will face the challenges of covering 55% of the cost. I am not sure how the Government expects those on low to middle incomes to fork out up to €25,000 for retrofitting or to purchase an electric car. The carbon tax does nothing to alleviate pressure on renters and little to address the climate crisis we are in.

Before coming in I checked *daft.ie*. I selected residential properties for sale at €300,000 or less in Limerick city and its suburbs. Of 144 properties listed, six had a BER of B2 or higher. People will pay a significant amount to heat their home and that amount will rise with the introduction of carbon tax. I am not afraid to quote the ESRI. That institute has acknowledged that its research did not take account of energy poverty, defined as “an inability to heat or power a home to an adequate degree”, yet the Government is determined to plough ahead with this tax increase. It has been stated that the Government will put aside €3.5 billion in revenue raised to address fuel poverty but the ESRI has acknowledged that an increase of €6.50 in the fuel allowance would leave the poorest 20% in society worse off after the carbon tax. I call on the Government to scrap the increases, do the right thing and not to pile further pressure on low- to middle-income earners.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Whenever there is an economic crisis, the burden of pain falls on the shoulders of those least likely to withstand the strain. There is always a disproportionate impact on the standard of living for low-income households. They are a particularly vulnerable group, living on a knife-edge from pay packet to pay packet. Anything that disturbs that sensitive balance can cause a cascade of hardship for the family, painting a picture of deepening crisis that can result in housing instability, job loss, food and medicine insecurity and a spiralling descent into greater depth as families try to manage expenses.

To any observer there is a marked disparity in people’s vulnerability to the cost-of-living crisis. With inflation at a 20-year high and essentials rising in price across the board, families are being forced into making choices that will have a direct impact on their health and well-being, as well as on their standard of living. There are distinctly sharp price rises and fuel and energy costs, which most families, particularly low-income families, can ill afford. There seems to be no slacking in the pace of these price rises, a pace that has not been seen in decades. The cost of essentials such as food, clothing and footwear has risen substantially. The Government has offered nothing more than a Band-Aid to address the rapid rise in the cost of living. Families are finding it near impossible to make ends meet and to find the money to pay household bills. Carbon tax is applied to domestic home heating fuels and fuel oils. The proposal to further increase that tax will result in additional increases in already exorbitant home and heating costs.

In some countries, carbon taxes have been shown to have a negative impact, resulting in job losses and companies going out of business. It is not necessarily balanced out by jobs created. Carbon tax has its greatest impact on low- and middle-income families who are least able to sustain the rise in the cost of many essential products.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas le achan duine a labhair ar an rún seo anocht. I thank all the Deputies for their contributions so far. I have listened to the points that have been made from all sides. My understanding of the carbon tax the Minister announced on budget day is it would be legislated for in Finance Act 2021. That included increases out to 2030. That vote took place on the 2 December 2021. I looked at the record because I wondered why the Rural Independent Group Members were protesting so much that we did not vote against it. It is clear the Sinn Féin Deputies all voted against it. It was revealing that none of the Rural Independent Group Members turned up for that vote, which legislated for the increase in carbon taxes we are dealing with today.

I listened to comments from other Opposition Members, particularly Deputy Cian O’Callaghan. We are not suggesting that this issue deals with the cost-of-living crisis. We put forward proposals, unlike his party, to deal with those issues, including some that his party is now supporting, such as the reduction in VAT for a period. That is to be welcomed. We believe the motion is focused on the principle of “Do no harm”. The Government is about to make matters worse for many households.

The Minister of State from the Green Party, Deputy Ossian Smyth, was talking about 50 into two and how that works. It brought back memories of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, telling us we needed two cars for every 50 people in rural Ireland. The Minister of State did not address the fact that what the Government plans to do will increase hardship on ordinary families who have already seen their annual home heating oil bill increase by €700 on average. It is easy for Deputies and Ministers to say it is not a huge increase, but €19 extra to fill people’s home heating oil could be the extra amount that breaks them. It could mean they cannot go to the doctor the day their child is sick, they cannot turn on the heat that night or some other decision has to be made. People are making serious decisions in the real world that nobody in this Chamber has to make.

Let us forget about hitting back at Sinn Féin and the Minister saying carbon tax is an issue of humanity; it is not. The climate crisis is an issue of humanity; how we fund it and deal with it is not. The idea that carbon tax is the be-all and end-all is nonsense. Carbon tax, if it is to be used properly, is about changing behaviour. The Government does not even plan for behaviour to change, because the carbon tax will continue to increase. If it did plan for such change, we would see a significant reduction in the tax over the coming years but that is not being proposed.

The Minister did not deal with the issue of this being a regressive, flat-rate tax. Deputies pay the same tax as ordinary people on whom the cost-of-living crisis is bearing down. Ministers rehearse how they did this and that but the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other organisations are on the front line and saying this is not enough.

The motion proposes we do not make matters worse. It is simple. The Minister is shaking his head. He will increase the cost of home heating oil and gas in a couple of weeks. Some families are saying they cannot take that any more. That increase makes it worse for them. Perhaps it does not for the Minister, because he can absorb it. For many other people, though, it makes matters worse.

As I pointed out in my opening contribution, the issue is that not every person is causing the same problems. The top 1% are responsible for half of the world’s carbon footprint. In Ireland, the top 10% have a carbon footprint that is eight times greater than the bottom 10%. What are the Minister and the Government planning to do? He is planning to do what he always does:

use flat-rate, regressive taxes. The poorest people in society will pay the same as the highest earners. That is why this motion needs to be supported. This is why the Minister is out of touch. He can shake his head all he wants, but he is completely out of touch with what is happening in real life. If he is not, then why does he not act?

The motion is asking him to not make things worse. He is going to make things worse by doing this. I would like him to explain how, by increasing the price of gas and oil, he is not going to make things worse for hundreds of thousands of families already at breaking point. He is going to do that. The reason he can shake his head is that he does not get this and does not understand where people are at.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Deputy is a full minute over his time now. He will have an opportunity to contribute again in the next hour and a half as well, during the next business.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister can shake his head all he wants, but many people are fed up with the type of politics he is doing and the pressure he is putting on ordinary families.

Amendment put.

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Tax Code

7. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if the advantageous tax provisions applying to real estate investment trusts and Irish real estate funds apply for the purchase of both new and existing housing stock; the number of new and existing housing units purchased by Irish real estate funds in each of the years 2017 to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10106/22]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We just discussed how the Minister for Finance is going to continue to push up tax on ordinary families in the form of carbon tax, despite them being pushed to the pins of the collars because of the cost-of-living crisis. I ask him to explain to the House why he is not going to allow the vulture and cuckoo funds to pay any tax on their incomes from rent or any capital gains tax, CGT. Are these tax advantages available to Irish real estate funds, IREFs, and real estate investment trusts, REITs, for the purchase of existing property stock or are they just applicable for new stock? I ask because the Minister has justified these advantages as in some way stimulating housing supply.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): It is important that we have this discussion in the context of overall Government housing policy, which is providing record levels of State investment for all forms of housing. However, Government expenditure alone cannot meet all the housing needs of our State. Modelling undertaken by my Department estimates that

approximately €12 billion of development funding will be required annually to meet the targets set out in Housing for All, of which €10 billion will be required from private capital sources. That is what is at stake here: the role of private capital in leading to the supply of new homes. Much of the residential investment committed to by institutional investors is observed by the level of forward commit transactions, that is, the provision of capital to fund the construction of new dwellings, or the agreement to purchase contracts to de-risk a project sufficiently to enable the sourcing of low-cost financing. It is likely that such construction would not occur in the absence of this investment.

While it is important to facilitate collective investment through appropriate regimes, it is equally important to ensure that, where such investment brings a profit, a fair share of tax is paid. As the Deputy will be aware, and as is common for investment funds generally, tax occurs primarily at the level of the investor rather than within the fund. Additionally, in the cases of IREFs and REITs, withholding taxes apply on distributions to investors to ensure collection of tax revenues. In 2019, I made several significant amendments to both regimes to ensure appropriate levels of tax are paid by investors in Irish property. Due to the small number of market participants within the REIT regime, and to protect taxpayer confidentiality, Revenue cannot provide data with respect to the residential holdings of REITs. As REITs are publicly listed companies, however, information, such as annual reports, is publicly available. Regarding the proportion of new units, Coldwell Banker Richard Ellis, CBRE, estimated the level of forward commit investment by institutional investors in the past year totalled just over €2 billion.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister did not answer my question concerning whether these tax provisions will apply to the purchase of new and existing housing stock. The housing crisis, as I have said on many occasions, is not an accident. It is a direct consequence of the policies of the Minister's party, and of the decisions made by that party and by its partners in government, Fianna Fáil. It is an outcome of a decade of underinvestment and has resulted in a chronic shortage of affordable housing.

This fact is undermining our economic competitiveness and damaging living standards. We have seen house prices increase by 14% in the past year, while rents have gone up by 10%. The average rent is now €1,500. Institutional investors are forward-purchasing, and not forward-funding, entire developments to rent at extortionate prices. Those institutional investors are paying no tax on the rent they get - nothing, zero, zilch and not a bean. The latest financial stability review published by the Central Bank of Ireland last year found that most units purchased by these funds in 2020 were existing rather than new stock. How can the Minister justify these funds enjoying this tax advantage for a purchase that does not stimulate new supply?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Let me be clear that where tax is paid: it is paid by those who invest in these regimes. Those in REITs are subject and liable to a 25% withholding tax, while those in, or investing in, an IREF, are subjected to a 20% dividend withholding tax. That is where the tax is paid. It is paid when the person or the company investing in one of these funds gets the money back. It is taxed in exactly the same way in which a pension fund is taxed. The tax is incurred, therefore, when the income is redistributed to the person or company investing in the fund. The reason I believe these private capital funds have a role to play in our country is this is about ensuring that new homes are built. These funds play a role in the building of new homes, and particularly in the case of the building of new apartments.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister has again refused to answer the question because the facts are terrible for him. These funds, which he ensures pay no corporation tax, and which

in some cases have rental income of €61 million, pay no CGT when they dispose of their assets. No other Irish company can enjoy that advantage. No other individual who rents out properties can enjoy it. The Minister, though, has created a nice wee sweetheart deal for these IREFs and REITs. Other landlords will have to pay corporation tax at 25% and there will also be a need to pay CGT. Shareholders in those companies will also have to pay tax on the dividends they get. For these funds, however, no tax is charged on the rental income or on capital gains. They are being allowed to snap up the majority of second-hand properties. That is why GillenMarkets told international investors that current housing policy has benefited institutions and developers at the expense of individual buyers. This is the housing policy of the Government. GillenMarkets continued by stating that “the aim of institutions is to maximise rental income from their properties and developers are designing apartment blocks to maximise this income for the institutions rather than aiming to meet the needs of society”. That is the Minister’s policy and his legacy.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I reiterate this is a Government that is investing €4 billion annually in responding to the intense housing needs we know exist. In the aftermath of a pandemic, this is a Government that has seen its policies lead to more than 20,000 homes being built last year, more than 30,000 homes now being commenced and more than 35,000 homes having received planning permission. That is what the effect of our policies have delivered, in the aftermath of a pandemic during which the construction sector was closed. I accept that for many people we are not making enough progress fast enough. I accept as well that many people want to see rents coming down quickly-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They want to see the funds paying.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----and the price of homes change so they will be able to afford to buy their first home. I accept that, but that is why we have the help to buy scheme, which the Deputy is against-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is a sweetheart deal.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----and why we also have the Land Development Agency in place, which the Deputy is against-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister is changing the subject. On the floor of the Dáil he cannot defend his own policy of a sweetheart tax deal.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----and why we have the shared equity scheme. I am well used to this from the Deputy. I said earlier, and he knows this is the case, that where the tax is paid, that is when the income is distributed from the fund. That is where the tax is liable. It is liable at 20%. It is liable at 25%. That is where the tax is paid. This was the case with the debate we had earlier on climate. The Deputy is peddling a dangerous idea: the concept, with regard to climate, that there can be progress without difficult decisions.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister thinks it is dangerous to ask who pays tax, and not fleece people in this market and push up house prices.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Again, the Deputy will not acknowledge the reality that where the tax is paid is where the income is distributed.

Tax Code

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he is considering further tax measures to alleviate the severe burden of heating and energy price increases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10105/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister knows, and it has been discussed at length in this Chamber in recent weeks, that people are being crucified by the rising cost of energy and heat for their homes. Another report was published today, on a survey by Amárach, which shows that people are cutting back on food, meals and essentials because of the rising cost of heating and energy, a basic necessity to keep themselves warm. What tax measures are the Minister willing to consider to address the cost-of-living crisis that people are facing?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I appreciate the challenges many people are facing and I know the issues the Deputy raises are ones that too many are confronting. As I said in the debate earlier on carbon taxation, to be emerging from the very dark and difficult pandemic, with all that it meant for employment and income, for many to have to confront rising prices on top of this is a bridge that is hard for many to cross. I accept that, but it is not about the measures I am considering; it is about the measures that have been put in place by the Government. It is about the measures that were introduced in last year's budget. I accept that, with regard to many of the measures we brought in, the Deputy will be of the view that more can, and should, be done.

The changes we made last October that took effect in January included a €5 increase in the weekly payments that are vital to our social welfare code. Changes were made to the living alone allowance, the qualified child allowance and the fuel allowance. We made changes to personal taxation thereby trying to get to a point where more people pay the standard rate of tax on more of their income. This is the reason we increased the personal tax credits. In addition to the measures we put in place, it is about the measures that the Government announced last week. We made changes in the energy credit. There was a lump sum payment of €125 for those in receipt of the fuel allowance. In addition to what we have done on public transport, changes were made to the drugs payment scheme and other important schemes that affect the cost of healthcare. We have brought forward a package of measures that aims to respond to the challenge we know many are facing at present. These are measures that have either been implemented from 1 January or will be implemented in the coming weeks. We know many people need help and the Government is determined to do what it can to provide that help.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am afraid it is just not enough. Heating and energy bills are set to increase by approximately €800. For many people, it will be more than that if their homes are badly insulated. In most cases, they have little control over that if they are tenants, public or private, or do not have the money to retrofit their homes. Who will make up the gap between the very small measures, such as social welfare increases, including an increase to the fuel allowance for those who get it, or the €200 energy credit and the cost-of-living increase? When it is added up, it is still well short of the increase of just in the price of heating and energy, never mind how the cost of rent is rocketing and food prices and so on are going up. It is not enough. Does the Minister consider the fact - because he should - that the same people who are being crucified by these costs are paying €494 million in carbon tax, which the Government plans to increase, €481 million in VAT and €263 million in public service obligation levies? They are being crucified by taxes that he has the power to reduce. Does he not think that, given the unprecedented crisis we are facing, he needs to do a hell of a lot more?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am increasingly being struck by the tone, particularly from some Members of the Rural Independent Group, and the venom with which the word “tax” is used. It is extraordinary for a Deputy of the far left, such as Deputy Boyd Barrett, who I would have thought understands the role taxes play in providing public services on which our country depends, to do so. These are taxes that I know are difficult for many people to pay, but they are also taxes that pay for our schools, hospitals, and the public services that are essential to our society. They are public services that many people, whom the Deputy represents through this question, depend on and want to work well. They also know that the funding of these services plays a part in the services working well or better in the future.

In regard to the measures brought forward, I know they will never be enough for the Deputy. I know any measure that I bring forward, short of the collapse of capitalism, is a measure that he will be unhappy with and make a case against. However, these are measures that will help those who are experiencing real challenges, which we accept and understand. They will be implemented in the coming weeks, in addition to the measures that were implemented on 1 January.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Between the wars, climate destruction and inequality that capitalism generates, it will not need me to help it collapse. It will be more likely to do it itself. I do want taxes put on those who are doing well from the current inflation crisis. As I pointed out to the Minister, why will he not consider taxes on the excessive profits of energy companies? Energia’s profits were up by 46% last year and 45% the year before that. What about the profits of the oil companies or the ESB? Does the Minister think it is okay that poor people on low and middle incomes will be considerably worse off, some of whom are making the decision not to have meals, pay rent or medical bills, while the companies that are hiking up the prices are making obscene profits? Does he think he should possibly address that injustice? Does he think that he should possibly use the power he has, as the Minister for Finance, to tax their profits as against imposing crippling taxes on people who cannot afford it?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: We are just bringing in measures that will increase the corporate tax rate for the largest companies - I am not sure of the turnover of these companies - by 15%. Corporate tax rates will go up. The Deputy will appreciate the challenge involved in doing this. I know he would want them to go up more. One of the reasons corporate tax rates are increasing is it is a challenge to look at how we can find ways in which very large, very complex and, at times, very profitable companies can be taxed more effectively and differently.

I refer to the point the Deputy made about the ESB. The ESB is a semi-State company and, therefore, the profits it makes are returned to the State via dividends. The dividends are used by the State to help fund public services that the Deputy wants to see improved. If a decision is made to reduce that level of profitability in any way, it would have a knock-on effect on other services the Government uses those dividends to pay for. That is the reality of it. As I said earlier, we appreciate the significant pressure that so many people face at present. We know the measures we are bringing forward, for many, will only help, but we are bringing them forward in recognition of the challenges they are facing. They can and, I believe, will help.

Disability Services

9. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of engagements he has had with the Ombudsman and Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal regarding the eligibility criteria under the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme since 2017; the

actions he has taken following and in response to such engagements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10107/22]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For years, citizens with severe and permanent disabilities have been denied access to personal transport through the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme, a scheme the Minister has been responsible for since 2017. In October, the entire board of appeal resigned due to his inaction. This board assessed appeals from citizens who were rejected under the scheme. They resigned *en masse*. Will the Minister outline the engagements he had with the board, including the first engagement, and the actions he took to respond to each engagement and concern the board raised?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant.

There has been ongoing engagement between officials in my Department and both the Ombudsman and the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal since 2017 and I met with members of the board in March of last year. The ongoing engagement has reflected past and current issues surrounding the administration and oversight of the scheme such as the decision and implications of the recent Supreme Court case in June 2020; increases in the administrative burden and demand on the scheme arising from closures of other mobility schemes in the past decade; and concerns regarding eligibility criteria and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the assessment and appeals elements of the scheme.

The members of the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal wrote to me recently tendering their resignation from the board. My officials engaged with the Department of Health and the Public Appointments Service to seek expressions of interest from medical practitioners to participate in the board. I am informed that the notice seeking expressions of interest has been issued. It is hoped to move this process along as quickly as possible so that appeals can recommence as soon as possible.

I recently gave a commitment to the House that a comprehensive review of the scheme, to include a broader review of mobility supports, would be undertaken. I have been agreed with my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, that the review should be brought within a wider review under the auspices of the national disability inclusion strategy, to examine transport supports encompassing all Government-funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister has been responsible for this scheme since 2017. I asked him when the engagements happened. He said there were ongoing engagements in 2020. Was that the first time the board of appeal raised concerns with him? Can he indicate to the House the first time he was made aware that they would not continue to operate this scheme because of its discriminatory nature or the concerns they had with it? What action did he take following his being alerted to that?

There have been severe consequences of inaction for many years in respect of this scheme. One of the last actions taken by the Ombudsman, Peter Tyndall, was to publish a report called Grounded which itemised how people with severe disabilities could not leave their homes and were unable to take up normal activities that the Minister and I take for granted because of the flaws in the scheme. We have had the new Ombudsman call it out and call on Opposition

and Government Deputies to put on pressure to get this rectified. When was the Minister first alerted to the matter? When did the board members first raise concerns that they would not be able to operate the scheme any longer? What actions did the Minister take immediately following that?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: As I said, my officials who have been in contact with the board regularly alerted me to the concerns the board had about the operation of the scheme. When I met members of the board last year, which I did via a video conference, they informed me that they had very significant concerns regarding the operation of the scheme. They emphasised what other bodies have already done, the need for action to be taken to deal with issues regarding the eligibility criteria of the scheme and the administration involved in the scheme. I gave commitments to them that I would act on that and aim to make progress. However, I clearly did not meet their expectations for progress. I very much regret that they have resigned from the board in the way that they have. I accept responsibility for it. I am well aware of the consequences of appeals not being processed speedily. I am going to do my best to try to get a board appointed and then to deal with the fundamental issues that have led to this point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is still not clear when the board first raised concerns about this. It appears the Minister has only met the board once in the five years he has held responsibility. Maybe he can clarify that. Forget about the board of appeals. Has the Ombudsman not been raising this directly with the Minister? The Ombudsman made clear that he wrote to the Minister for Finance and the Minister with responsibility for disability matters in 2017 repeating concerns about the eligibility criteria having a particularly narrow focus and being overly prescriptive. In January 2020, there was supposed to be a special Cabinet meeting on disability issues. There was correspondence to the Secretary General but no action. People with severe disabilities were found to be grounded and unable to get out of their homes. There was no action. The board of appeals, all medical professionals, resigned *en masse* because there was no action and the Minister, as he has said, did not meet their expectations. That is a terrible situation. As we speak, there are people out there whose appeals cannot be heard. These are children and adults with disabilities.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am very much aware that there are adults and children, citizens of our State, who are already grappling with such need in their lives and are expecting there to be a speedy appeal process in place. Of course I am aware of the assessments that have been offered of this scheme for so long. As I said to the House a few moments ago, I very much regret that the board members who were operating the scheme that I was responsible for felt they had no option but to resign in the way they did. Through the Public Appointments Service, I aim to get a new board in place as soon as possible. In respect of the key issues that we need to make progress on, I will work closely with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, to look at how we can resolve these matters as soon as we can. They are difficult issues. As I said twice already, I very much regret where we are now. I accept that we need to make faster progress on this matter given the views of those who were on the board and I will do my best to do that.

Economic Policy

10. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to introduce measures to support businesses impacted by increased energy, fuel and insurance costs (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9668/22]

An Ceann Comhairle: Question No. 10 was to be grouped with Question No. 8 but if the Deputy wants to make a brief contribution on the matter, maybe the Minister would give a brief reply.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I was not aware the question had been grouped. The last two years have been a very challenging time for businesses due to the Covid-19 restrictions. While larger grocery, pharmacy, hardware and retail outlets maintained or increased trade during the pandemic, smaller retailers faced periods of closure and significantly reduced footfall. On top of that, the cost of energy, fuel and insurance have all risen significantly over the last 18 months. These increases are greatly impacting on the ability of many to continue to trade. They urgently require assistance from the Government.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Many of these businesses still have a number of months of Covid support available to them in the form of the employment wage subsidy scheme. I acknowledge that the Deputy has made a number of constructive suggestions over the last two years to change the operation of the employment wage subsidy scheme and the Covid restrictions support scheme, which I have taken on board. Those schemes are still in place for many businesses affected by the pressures to which the Deputy refers. Do I at this point have any plans in place to bring forward a further set of business supports? The candid truth at the moment is that I do not. I accept that many businesses are facing new challenges in the rising cost of energy and in retention of staff. We are not yet out of two years of an exceptionally high level of support for our economy, which was needed, and a very high level of support to many businesses. That is going to be in place for many of them for a number of months. To be clear, that was for Covid, for a different reason. Even in the current environment of a lower Covid impact on businesses, those supports are still in place, albeit at a reduced level.

Housing Schemes

11. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 92 of 16 December 2021, the status of the promised review of the help to buy scheme; the terms of reference for the review; the person or body carrying out the review; the timeline for the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9688/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question pertains to the status of the promised review of the help to buy scheme, the terms of reference for the review, the person or body charged with carrying out the review, the timeline and if the Minister will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Deputy, who raised this issue with me just in the week before Christmas. Where it stands at the moment is that I will soon sign off the terms of reference for this report. We will procure an independent consultant to the Department to carry out this work. I expect that will all be done in the next few weeks.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister. Will the terms of reference be published prior to the review going ahead? No. The Minister is going to go outside the Department for an external group to run it. When does he expect that to be completed? What exactly will it be looking at? I realise our opinions on this differ. From anecdotal evidence on the ground and the figures, I do not believe the scheme has been successful at what it is supposed to be doing. In the Minister's previous answer, he referred to 60% of people needing help with the deposit.

Therefore, 40% did not need help with the deposit. I welcomed his comment in his reply, which I had the privilege of seeing earlier, that the review will be extensive. He did not read out the whole reply so I am focusing on the positive aspect, namely that the review will be quite extensive. I would like to see a breakdown of those who benefit from the scheme, by locality, income and savings, to determine whether it is actually achieving what it is supposed to do.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I have no issue at all with making the terms of reference of the review publicly available. I will be happy to publish them. I do not want to do it at the expense of slowing down this process but there is no reason we cannot publish the terms of reference and make them available to the Deputy.

The organisation will be external to the Department of Finance, as is frequently the case with assessments like this. The review will consider whether we are now making the most effective use of State money in helping those who are looking to buy their first home. The Deputy and I have differing views on this. She will focus on the 40% who did not need the full support of the scheme to assemble their first deposit. I would retort that, with any tax measure, there will always be some who might not benefit as much as others. For a large majority of people, however, the scheme plays a role in helping them. We will consider the level of deadweight within the scheme and the degree to which it is helping those seeking to buy their first home, which must be newly built.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is not “any tax measure”; it is a tax measure to assist people with the deposit when buying a house in a most serious housing crisis that is getting worse every day. I watched these developments as a councillor locally. I recall exactly when the construction started because we used to get quarterly reports telling us how many houses would be constructed and where. It stopped in 2009. The final column stated: “Construction suspended”. From 2009 until a year or two ago, not one single social house was constructed in Galway. There are many reasons for a housing crisis but one of the major ones is the failure of government to be in the middle of the market, balance the market and build social housing - I prefer the phrase “public housing” - on public land. I cannot remember the figure pertaining to the increase under the scheme. A certain price was predicted and it jumped astronomically. The original estimate was €40 million per annum. By January 2021, the cost was €167 million. Then it went up to nearly €500 million, which is the last figure I saw, and higher than that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The cost for 2021 was €191 million. It is the case that the total cost since the scheme was introduced in 2017 was €568 million. I agree with the Deputy regarding the essential role that public or social housing needs to play in ensuring that we have an overall housing policy capable of working more effectively. That is why more than 6,000 social or public homes will be built this year. Time and again, including earlier this evening, some Members of the Opposition, although I am not suggesting the Deputy, pick a particular aspect of our housing policy and suggest it is the only way in which the Government is seeking to respond to housing needs, including the need to build more homes. In conjunction with the scheme in question, we have a public housing programme that is gathering momentum week by week, with more homes being built across our country.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the total value of wage subsidies provided in 2020 and 2021. [6406/22]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government imposed the longest and most severe Covid restrictions in the EU. It shut schools, businesses, building sites, healthcare facilities and society for longer than any other country in the EU. In many ways, the scars of the shutdown are only becoming apparent. My question is to find out the total value of the wage subsidies provided between 2020 and 2021.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The total cost of the temporary wage subsidy scheme, TWSS, and employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, was €10.26 billion. The schemes have played a role in protecting the jobs of up to 690,000 people in our country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I agree that the funds provided by the Government have been absolutely necessary. There is no question about that. If a government is going to shut down a business and prevent its owner from making a living, it has to provide an income to that owner so he or she can live. If a government is going to tell workers they are not allowed to work, it has a responsibility to provide them with an income to pay for the costs arising for their families. The Government had many choices to make but took an outlier position, a position that no other country in Europe decided to take. That aspect of expenditure alone necessitated €10 billion. It is estimated that the total Exchequer expenditure was €40 billion. That is the second-largest investment by a state on a crisis since the banking crisis. My concern is that there is so little investigation and analysis of the decisions made by the Government in the period in question.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy is the person who opposed the use of vaccination certificates for the reopening of the hospitality sector. I say to him time and again that he was against the closure of our economy and country but that when we tried to reopen them safely, he was against that as well. He was against both. I accept that the lockdown lasted many months. The Government accepted the impact it had on the economic and mental health of those with a job and those who create jobs in our country. I would have thought it appropriate for the Deputy, in his evaluation of how we performed, to have noted that the measures we had in place played a significant role in minimising the loss of life and the number of people who contracted the awful disease. While it was the case that we had measures in place that required businesses to close for longer than was the case elsewhere, it was also the case that the measures we put in place prevented the deaths of even more of our citizens. The Deputy was against the closing down of our economy and our efforts to reopen it safely.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I welcome the support the Government provided to businesses and their employees throughout the pandemic. It was money incredibly well spent when it was needed to keep businesses afloat. Could the Minister outline to the House the scale of his engagement with businesses and their response to the EWSS? He certainly responded to calls from Deputies like me to extend the scheme, which businesses called for. They called for certainty, which the Government was able to provide to them by indicating it would extend the scheme, as it did, and wind it down gently. Many sectors and businesses in my constituency

were utterly dependent on the EWSS. As for the contribution to the deficit generally, is it not the case that VAT and the corporation tax yield have been higher than expected and that we are on a trajectory to manage much more effectively in this regard than was thought at the outset of all the difficulties?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We sought the use of antigen testing when the Government pooh-poohed it and refused to use it. We, like many other countries, knew antigen testing was a better way of stopping Covid from entering the hospitality sector and that the sector could be kept open through its use. We sought air filters in schools and extra hospital capacity so people's lives would be protected without having to shut down to the extent we did. We sought the proper management of nursing homes and hospitals. The majority of people who died actually caught Covid in those two locations, under the management of the Government. The party that sells itself as the party of fiscal responsibility is now the party that has created a national debt of a quarter of a trillion euro. The Minister will have as his legacy a national debt of a quarter of a trillion euro. That is an eye-watering figure. It steals from future generations. It prevents hospitals from being built, it prevents doctors and nurses from being employed, it prevents schools from being built and it prevents society, in the future, from functioning as it should. The Minister's choices have robbed from future generations.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Deputy Tóibín is the second Deputy who has attempted to write my legacy today. I do not know what has provoked that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A quarter of a trillion euro.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Deputy Tóibín is the Deputy who voted against the legislation to safely reopen our country and our economy. He voted against it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That is utter rubbish.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: He consistently voted against it. I remember the debates in here vividly. The Deputy came here, voted and argued against-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----the use of certificates that allowed the hospitality sector to reopen. If the Deputy wants to have a debate about my legacy, I ask him to look at what is happening now with the number of employers that are opening up again. I ask him to consider how quickly the PUP fell and the way in which the viability of employers was affected during a moment of the greatest challenge for our country. Indeed, I published a debt report today, which also states that our level of higher debt has now stabilised. There is a possibility that next year-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It has stabilised at a quarter of a trillion euro.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----that our debt, as a percentage of national income, will be back to what it was before the pandemic.

I thank Deputy Carroll MacNeill for raising the issue of engagement. There is constant engagement with businesses, big and small, across our country, not to mention with Deputies, such as Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in this House.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: A quarter of a trillion euro has a phenomenally significant impact

within society. That money is owed as a State, in large part because of the decisions that have been made. On another related issue, what efforts is the Government making to recoup wage subsidies and supports that were paid to firms that made profits and paid dividends in this period of time? Again, all of this money comes out of society's ability to deal with the major projects and challenges that we have in the future, including to pay for housing, healthcare and education. What are the Minister's plans in that regard?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am deeply aware of my responsibility for the additional €32 billion of national debt and understand the impact it could have in the future. I am not sure what element of that Deputy Tóibín was against. Was he against the employment wage subsidy scheme?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Was he against the pandemic unemployment payment? Was he against the additional money we put into our health services when the pandemic hit?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister knows that is not the case. I have already said that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: What element of it was the Deputy against? What element would he have done differently?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The outlier restrictions.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: As for the closure of our economy, I fully accept that it-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The outlier restrictions

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----had an effect on so many. Yes, the level of closure that we had was higher than many but so was the number of deaths that we were successful in preventing within our country. I refer to the loss of life and the number of people we were able to help not get this disease. Those who had the disease in our country also fared fairly well. However, as I said, I know there are thousands of people in our country who do not have a loved one here with them today. I am very aware of them when we have debates like this.

Tax Code

13. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will prioritise the removal of VAT from defibrillators following the agreement by European Union finance ministers to amend Council Directive 2006/112/EC on 7 December 2021 given that the removal of VAT will increase the ability of many sports clubs and community organisations to private life-saving assistance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9689/22]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister if he will prioritise the removal for VAT from defibrillators from following the agreement by European Union finance ministers to amend Council Directive 2006/112/EC.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The EU Commission published a proposal on the reform of VAT rates in January 2018 which would allow member states more flexibility in how they apply VAT rates. As the compromise text agreed at the meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, ECOFIN, in December has been amended significantly in comparison to the original

proposal, the European Parliament will once again be consulted for its opinion. While not providing for as much flexibility as the original proposal, it still provides greater scope for member states to make changes when it comes to setting VAT rates. Assuming the Parliament issues its opinion on the proposal, the Council will formally adopt the directive. I understand that the Slovenian Presidency wrote to the European Parliament looking for an early response. I expect the response will be due in the coming months. Following the Council formally adopting the directive, it will be published in the Official Journal of the European Union and will enter into force on the 20th day following that of its publication. After that, we will consider what our options are with regard to setting VAT rates. I hope that we will get an answer back from the European Parliament in relation to this proposal in the coming months. After that, I know that the Council will act to try to implement the directive quickly.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It is encouraging to see that this is finally progressing. Hopefully, it will end in a positive result. As the Minister is probably aware, approximately 5,000 people die in this country every year from sudden cardiac death. Around 14 or 15 years ago, when I used to train an under-13s soccer team, I witnessed a defibrillator saving a young person's life on the pitch. I am fully aware of the benefits of having them in as many locations as possible. As recently as three weeks ago, we were down in Glounthaune, County Cork, where Stryker, the medical devices company, sponsored three defibrillators that have been kitted out in old telephone booths along the new greenway that we are installing between Carrigtohill and Glanmire. We are fully aware of the importance of these machines. It is important that we get them out to as many areas as possible. I ask the Minister to expand on precisely what process must happen on the EU side before we see the introduction of these VAT changes.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am very aware of the really important role that defibrillators play in sporting and voluntary clubs all over our country. I see them in many clubs that I go into. In terms of what will happen, firstly, the European Parliament has to come back with an opinion on the decision that has been made by the finance ministers at the meeting of ECOFIN. When the Parliament comes back with that opinion, it will then be considered by ECOFIN. At that point, the final decision is made on the matter and it will then be published in the Official Journal of the European Union. That is the procedure that is ahead. I very much hope it can be concluded quickly.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister mentioned that the current proposal is not perhaps as flexible as the original proposal. I am not fully aware or *au fait* with what has happened previously. I ask the Minister to expand on why it is not as flexible as the original proposal. Second, I am aware that in the context of the negotiations around this issue at EU level, a list of supplies to which a reduced VAT rate can be applied is to be increased. Member states will also be allowed to make some supplies subject to 0% VAT. The emphasis here is going to be on issues regarding improving the environment, public health and the digital transition. I ask the Minister to comment on that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The reduced areas of flexibility refer to two new limitations that will be on member states. They are included in the third annexe of the current proposal. The first limitation will limit member states to applying a 0% rate to no more than seven value added taxable categories. The second limitation will limit member states to using a maximum of 24 categories to which a reduced rate can be applied. In other words, it will be setting a floor of no more than seven categories and a ceiling of 24 categories. The area of reduced flexibility concerns the kinds of goods and services to which a lower rate of VAT can be applied. The Deputy made reference to the question of whether these VAT rates can then be applied to the kind of

changes in technologies that are needed for a lower carbon future. Indeed, they can be, but that will then depend on the decisions that individual member state Governments make.

Question No. 14 replied to with Written Answers.

Tax Code

15. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Finance if he will now consider establishing an escalating tax on the owners of multiple properties given the role that property investment funds and entities are now playing in dominating the housing market and contributing to unaffordable rents and limiting housing options for ordinary persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9675/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People Before Profit has always opposed the tax that is imposed on the family home because it is an unjust and regressive form of taxation.

8 o'clock

We think there is an added case, however, given the role the vulture funds, cuckoo funds, buy-to-rent property investors or whatever name one wants to give them who are now controlling and dominating the housing sector are playing in driving up rents and house prices to unaffordable levels, to have a real property tax - not one on family homes but on these people who are wrecking the housing market.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: As we have debated on several occasions already, these funds and this capital are leading to the supply of more homes overall and this does have to be seen in conjunction with, for example, a very strong public housing programme. I know the Deputy wants us to build more public housing but we are going to build well in excess of 6,000 public homes this year through local authorities and approved housing bodies.

At the moment, these companies are taxed when the income they have is redistributed to those who invest in these funds. It is liable for tax at either 20% or 25%, depending on whether it is a real estate investment trust or an Irish real estate fund. They are taxed in the same way a pension is taxed. The income is taxed when it is distributed out of the fund. Do I currently have any proposals to change that taxation again in the future? I have changed this taxation regime in the past, dependent on concerns that I and my officials have had regarding efforts made to minimise tax. The option is always open to me to make further changes in how they are taxed if such issues are presented to me again. That is the main reason I would be looking to change the taxation of those funds at the moment.

Ultimately, they do play a role in terms of the supply of more homes. I appreciate how much they are contested and the political debate in respect of them but it fundamentally boils down to whether we want the savings that exist in other parts of Europe and the world to play a role in building more homes in Ireland. I believe those savings do have a role to play in more homes being built in this country and that is why a stable taxation regime in respect of them, as we have had in recent years, is appropriate.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That sounds good but it is just not what is happening on the ground. We are going to have to blow this fantasy out of the water. As I have pointed out on several occasions, zero council houses were built last year in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. We

just got the figures. Next year, five will be built. There is a lot of construction going on in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The Minister should drive out there to have a look. There are SHDs going up all over the place. These are private build-to-rent developments that will be rented for €2,200 a month if one is lucky. There is an opportunity cost here, if one likes, to use economic jargon. If all the construction workers are building unaffordable profit-driven developments, they are not building council houses. The facts are clear on the ground. The council is delivering nothing. The Minister referred to AHBs. Who is building for the AHBs? It is the same property investors and they are charging a fortune. This is nonsense. We need to stop these people wrecking our market and start building affordable and public housing.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Nevertheless, the social housing list in Dún Laoghaire is being addressed through AHBs and the provision of housing generally. I know my colleague from Dún Laoghaire objects to SHDs. He raised a particular development in Glenageary, namely, Cualanor, in the House several weeks ago. He objected to one down the road as well. I was in Cualanor on Saturday and I saw all the houses and apartments where several hundred, if not 1,000, people are living with their families. It has a beautiful small playground for kids.

The Deputy raised it a couple of weeks ago and he is objecting to another set of apartments being built 500 m up the road. I would like to see housing developed right across Dún Laoghaire for the people who need it. I know the families, as does Deputy Boyd Barrett, who need to move into different types of accommodation right across our constituency. There is a finite amount of land that can be developed. There is sea on one side of the constituency. It is an urban area. There is a need to build upwards to accommodate the growing population of people who have been living there for a long time, as well as people who want to come here, work here and develop our economy. The Deputy does not want housing here; he does not want housing there. He tells the Minister and the Government to solve the housing crisis, but just not on his territory.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: As we have heard from the exchange that has just taken place, there are more homes being built in the constituency represented by Deputy Boyd Barrett. It is not for me to say that; Deputy Carroll MacNeill is more of an expert than I am in that regard. Those homes are being built. It is part of the increased number of homes that are being built in the country overall. We know more need to be built but more than 20,000 homes were delivered last year, more than 30,000 homes have been commenced and more than 35,000 homes are in the planning process. That is what is happening. Those are homes that are being built.

As regards what is happening in the social housing programme we have in place, we have a record budget in place now to deliver those homes. Is it not the case that a share of all the homes the Deputy sees being built across the constituency he represents are being set aside for public use and will deliver more public and social housing for families who need it?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: My constituency colleague being sent in to mark me is an interesting new phenomenon. This is a new tactic on the part of Fine Gael. It does not matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I have no interest in marking the Deputy. I am just setting the facts straight as the Deputy is well able to do. I have no difficulty-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have a public office that is visited by people who are homeless and cannot afford stuff; the Deputy does not. I have to deal with-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right. I do not use State funds for that.

I have to meet them at my own cost.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have to deal with the families who are being thrown off the housing list.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I meet people at my own cost. I do not use State funding for things like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The rents in the places the Deputy is talking about are €2,200. They are not affordable for the people on the housing list and that is why people are ending up in homeless accommodation. There are 5,000 families on the various housing lists. They have been waiting 15 to 20 years because all the construction workers are building developments for profit. We get a tiny proportion of those at a huge cost but, meanwhile, those construction workers are not down at Shanganagh Castle building on public land the public housing we need. They are not inputting the water infrastructure on the Old Connaught Road or up in Stepside where there is public land on which we should be building public housing.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Nobody is being sent in to mark anybody here.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have noticed the new tactic. Fair enough. It is all politics.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I would have thought, given Deputy Boyd Barrett's prowess as a public speaker and the way in which he-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am not objecting; I am just pointing it out.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: -----tackles me regularly, that he would be up for debate and discussion as opposed to, frankly, the feigned outrage he indulged in just there.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not feigned at all.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy is entirely-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is real anger.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Well the Deputy appears to have recovered from it pretty quickly. We are surely-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Every week, I come in here enraged by the housing crisis in my area. There is nothing feigned about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we let the Minister respond, please?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I would have thought the Deputy would welcome debate and that a perspective on what is happening in his constituency can be legitimately given in this Dáil by a fellow Deputy who also represents that constituency. I am well aware of the level of housing need that is there. I am well aware of the anxiety and trauma it is inflicting upon so many but I simply make the case to the Deputy that with the funding we are putting in, we will see and are seeing more public housing being built. These funds, which I know the Deputy is

against, play a role, particularly in delivering more apartments.

Question No. 16 replied to with Written Answers.

Insurance Industry

17. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance the status of his plans to address the rising cost of and limited access to public liability insurance; the detail of his recent engagements with an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9473/22]

28. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on his engagement with an organisation (details supplied). [9682/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What are the plans of the Minister to address the rising cost of and limited access to public liability insurance? What recent engagements has he had with the insurance industry, Insurance Ireland and his office to promote competition in the insurance market? I think he would struggle to find a company that is offering bouncy castles that has insurance. We have reached that doomsday scenario where they are operating without insurance because we have not been able to bridge the gap.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 and 28 together.

As the Deputy is aware, insurance reform is a priority for the Government, with the establishment of the office to promote competition in the insurance market representing an important action within the overall reform agenda. One of the roles of the office, which I chair, is to engage with insurance industry stakeholders. The office held more than 60 meetings with a wide range of groups in 2021 and earlier this year.

The Deputy referred to a particular sector. Fáilte Ireland produced extensive reports and helped fund and establish tourism products that deal with adventure sports. That organisation is up and running. It is encouraging people in the tourism adventure sport area to come together collectively as a group, work through a broker, and then approach insurance companies rather than them being picked off one by one by the major insurance companies. They are now approaching these insurance companies through a broker with ten, 20 or 30 similar type businesses around the country and are able to get insurance on that basis. Many of them have been very successful.

I accept that there are some companies out there, small operators who may not be part of that particular group at this time, but the arrangement mentioned is proving very successful already. There are similar areas in high risk. I can think of the equestrian centres, pony clubs, and point-to-point races which had major problems with insurance over the past six months. They have come together collectively as a group rather than individual point-to-point clubs seeking to get their own personal insurance for their own riders and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine was helpful in that respect. Most of these activities are back up and running. Some of the point-to-point races and pony clubs activities commenced on 1 February which did not look possible in November. There has been great progress in some of the areas specifically referred to by the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I accept that there have been advances and these are to be welcomed. I am talking specifically about a number of companies operating in the leisure industry that probably run very large events. They are breaking their companies into individual parts. If they are dealing with marquees, they are keeping that separate. They cannot in any way, shape or form, and I am talking specifically here about bouncy castles, get these covered. That means that local authorities, for example, and community organisations and centres that want to run events for children will not be able to do that or use these sort of services into the future. We have looked at options and are still working with Insurance Ireland and others from the point of view of trying to get a broker and to deal with regulation. I have met the Minister of State previously on this issue and the problem is that we are past the doomsday situation. These people are operating, many of them very well, using best practice but they just cannot get insurance.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy again for consistently raising this issue because it is a very important sector of the Irish business environment. There has been great success in the reduced premiums in motor insurance and the same is happening in house insurance this year. On 1 July we will have new price walking measures introduced by the Central Bank which will have immediate effect. People will receive notifications of their renewals. People who have been charged what I would call a loyalty penalty up to now, from mid-May of this year in just a couple of weeks' time, will see the benefit of that loyalty penalty being dealt with effectively by the Central Bank on policies that come to be renewed after 1 July.

I acknowledge the work of Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland. Everybody knows that this House and the Department of Finance has no role in the market. It is a private sector business but I will say that we are very open to refer people to both Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland to see what commercial arrangements they can make themselves. Again, this has proven very successful.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There have been a number of pieces that have been dealt with legislatively here but we still have failings around the fact that the duty of care legislation has not been brought in. That is a major part of this. We have all seen situations such as in my own constituency involving community centres; there may be a claim against two or three parties using a centre and, although the centre itself may never be taken to court, because the incident may have happened on its premises it has seen its premiums go up by something like €10,000, which is utterly unsustainable. The fact is that we do not have enough players in the market. We have to do some serious work. There is an onus on Government in this. I have dealt with the Minister of State and am dealing with other Ministers around this and we will try to get a solution but we really need the Government to put its shoulder to the wheel on this. We could have a situation where children could get injured, or whatever, and are dealing with companies that are operating best practice but do not have insurance because they cannot get insurance.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy again. I could deal with a wide range of issues but I will try to concentrate on the specific area that the Deputy has mentioned. Duty of care is an absolute priority and is being dealt with. We will have proposals on that in the immediate future. The Department of Justice is seized of that issue, having successfully brought forward the personal injury guidelines last year. All of the claims going through the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, are stood over by the Government and PIAB, and are showing reductions of 40% in those areas. Some people are not happy and some will be challenged in court but those figures are holding firm. The duty of care legislation is being dealt with specifically in the areas the Deputy has mentioned.

In respect of community events, I have seen some of the major insurance companies offering to deal with some of those, like community bicycle and cycling groups. Recently another company publicly announced that it is dealing with some social employment scheme in regard to activities that it is running. There is a great deal of information available through Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland.

Small and Medium Enterprises

18. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the study by his Department into SME survival, recovery and investment following Covid-19; when this study will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9680/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. I was asking the Minister a very specific question on the publication of the report and he has clarified that it has been published which I am aware of. The misunderstanding was on my part as I thought that the Department of Finance itself was carrying out a report. Can the Minister address in his reply, moving on from the fact that the report has been published and I have it in front of me, where we are going on the findings of that report? I thank the Minister.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: Specifically, the findings of the report estimate that the share of firms making losses throughout 2020 and 2021 could have been around one third higher if supports were not available. It finds that in the absence of the extensive supports provided by the Government to SMEs, the distress rate for companies would have been 72% higher.

Moreover, by 2024, without the support that we had in place, the distress rate is estimated to be around 20% higher relative to the baseline. In respect of what happens beyond this, this answer provides the backdrop to the phasing out of the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, that is now in place. As the Deputy and the House is aware, we are now in the final phase of the first reduction of EWSS. Companies who were receiving up to €350 per employee will now be receiving up to €203 per employee and that will now move to €100. The same process will then happen to companies four weeks later which were affected by the December public health regulation requiring companies to close at 8 p.m., such as restaurants and so on. That will provide the backdrop to the phased exit from EWSS.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have read the paper and it is not an easy paper to read. It is the second working paper that has been produced by the Minister's Department along with the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. I fully accept that without the support, all of these businesses would have been much worse off. I am on record in supporting the Government on quick action.

That is not what I am asking here. I am asking where we are going next. When one looks at the figures, for example in the 2021 report from the same group of people, the facts are staggering. SMEs are the predominant enterprise type in Ireland, which we know. They account for 99% of the active businesses with 92% of these being micro- where they have fewer than ten employees. It goes on to say that despite Ireland's reputation as a high-tech, knowledge-intensive economy, the majority of employees in Ireland work in traditional domestic-facing sectors, where SMEs are the dominant employer. When I take the two reports together, it is the small enterprises that are in serious trouble, notwithstanding the help. The prediction is that by 2024 a substantial proportion of these will have gone out of business.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am thankful to Deputy Connolly for raising this issue because this has been a matter of considerable concern. Of these sectors, some have been naturally slower to open, particularly in the catering sector where people have been slow to plan events, exhibitions, and so on. It is a sector that is uniquely small in the number of employees, with fewer than ten. I am thinking of two in my own constituency which adapted throughout the pandemic to try to provide food in different ways but they are highlighting that theirs is a slower recovery, even when things are open, because of their dependence on people planning events into the future, such as exhibitions, weddings, big catering events and so on. Is there any capacity for that sort of sectoral analysis that provides additional supports to those small, particularly those microenterprises that Deputy Connolly has referred to, to be able to help them through?

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am afraid I do not follow the questions from Deputy Connolly. She asked me what was the way forward, and I said what the way forward was in the employment wage subsidy scheme. The report focused on the impact of the employment wage subsidy scheme on SMEs.

On the question asked by Deputy Carroll MacNeill, she raised an important point that is covered in this report, which is that there are parts of our economy that clearly are having or have had a slower recovery than other parts of the economy. The way in which we seek to recognise that is by the varying speeds of how different sectors will leave the employment wage subsidy scheme. I believe there will be a need to do further sectoral analysis, to better understand how different parts of our economy are responding to the withdrawal of supports. However, even with that analysis done, the Deputy will appreciate that we simply cannot maintain, nor is the Deputy calling on me to do so, an employment wage subsidy scheme that was introduced for a health crisis when the health crisis has passed. Even though many sectors are now facing new challenges, the solution to those challenges cannot be the continuation of this scheme. Yes, we will do more sectoral analysis, because it will be a key issue for our economy over this year.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Minister's approach, as opposed to divide and conquer in a classroom, is to have the good student and the not-so-good student who he fails to understand. It is beneath the Minister and it does not do him justice with regard to the issue being raised. I did not ask him about the extension of the programmes he has. I asked what was the follow-up from the report that identified serious difficulties with small to medium-sized enterprises, particularly going up to 2024. I asked him to focus on that. I acknowledged that the Minister did not need to read out the answer to the question to give him extra time to look at the difficulties identified by two reports, last year and this year, relating to small to medium-sized enterprises, and I am highlighting what the reports are telling us. The SMEs are the backbone of the country, as the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has repeatedly told us in the Dáil. I agree with him and with the Minister. However, they are highlighted as being in particular trouble. I am not sure why the Minister is shaking his head, but I will try to avoid it and concentrate on the issue. However, my time is up. The Minister is saved by the bell.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I repeat what I said to the Deputy. She has a habit of giving me a very precise question and when I give her a very precise answer, she normally dismisses it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is a stand-up comedy.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy asked me what the future of the schemes was and I answered the question. She asked what was the way forward for the sector, and I answered

the question. I gave the Deputy a precise answer to a precise question. I do not know how my answering the question has provoked her to draw an analogy of good pupils and bad pupils.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is what the Minister did.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I come into this House, as is my obligation and duty, and I answer the questions the Deputies put to me. However, as I said, the Deputy asks a precise question, I give a precise answer and more often than not she dismisses it. The Deputy asked me a question about the future of the employment wage subsidy scheme and I answered it.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did not ask the Minister that question, but I will keep my mask on to stop me talking.

Questions Nos. 19 to 22, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Tax Code

23. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the research and collection of data on property vacancies by his Department with a view to introducing a vacant property tax; if the data collection has been concluded; when this data will be published; when he expects to bring proposals for the vacant property tax before Government; the estimated timeline for the expected introduction of the tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9681/22]

62. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if he has received preliminary returns from the local property tax which might shed light on the case for a tax on properties left vacant for a long period; and the issues to be considered in framing such a tax. [9458/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is a factual question. I was not expecting it to come up.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The Deputy should have ended on better terms.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I always strive to end on good terms so I will use my 30 seconds to bring the Minister back into good humour. He might address himself to the factual question here regarding the status of the research by the Department and the Minister relating to the collection of data on property vacancies and so forth. I will not use up the time as the question has been set out.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am glad to assure that my humour is good. I am just answering all the questions that are put to me, including by the Deputy. Regarding where things stand with that, I will spend time trying to find the written material here and would do so at the expense of answering the Deputy's question. The Revenue Commissioners are currently assessing the data they received as part of the local property tax returns. I expect that information will be available to me in the second quarter. When that information comes in I will share it with the Deputy and other Deputies who have a keen interest in this matter. I hope that will guide me in the design choices we make in a tax to tackle this issue.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister and accept his answer on this. I wish I could use the time to go back to the other question, but the rules preclude me from doing that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I am sure the Ceann Comhairle would be liberal in his appli-

cation of those rules on this occasion if there are any matters the Deputy believes I have not answered.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I would be delighted to follow up on the last question relating to the small and medium enterprises which have been identified. If the Minister chooses to answer that in the spirit that it is asked, I will be delighted. As the backbone of the country a substantial proportion of the small and medium enterprises are in trouble, notwithstanding all the Government's supports which must come to an end at some stage. However, targeted supports are what is needed or a targeted response. We know that as well from another Department's review of the Údarás na Gaeltachta companies. The vast majority of companies in the Gaeltacht areas have fewer than ten employees, so they are particularly vulnerable as well.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: As I said, and the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, was the first to say it, we appreciate the fundamental importance of these companies to the operation of our economy and we recognised that through the support schemes we had in place. To deal with the Deputy's question regarding the future, I will park the EWSS for now, given that we have discussed it already. What does the future hold? The future is, first, to look at what role Enterprise Ireland can play in supporting small and medium-sized companies to scale up and become more innovative, with all the change that is under way and the challenges the Deputy referred to. Second, we have to look at funds such as the additional funding that is being made available to Ireland through the recovery fund and the Brexit adjustment reserve fund and see if we can use that type of funding to support SMEs in particular parts of the country that are being adversely affected by the issues we have touched on this evening. It will be an ongoing focus of mine in the implementation of this budget and beyond to try to deal with particular issues that are affecting the viability of Irish SMEs. I agree with the Deputy about their fundamental importance and the need for us to continue to find ways to support them.

Tax Code

24. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether taxes on energy and heating fuel such as carbon tax and VAT are now directly contributing to fuel poverty and excessive fuel costs for many households; if he plans to take steps to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9671/22]

60. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider tax measures in order to reduce the impact of rising energy costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9676/22]

230. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; if he will provide clarity on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9243/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People Before Profit has been against the carbon tax from the outset, despite what some Members appeared to be suggesting rather bizarrely earlier. We have been very clear in opposing carbon tax as an unfair, regressive tax. There is no evidence that it has any significant impact on the reduction CO2 emissions. However, even if that was always true, it is simply blatantly self-evident that increasing the carbon tax yet again in the current situation is going to contribute to fuel poverty, hardship and injustice.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I propose to take Questions Nos. 24, 60 and 230 together.

This was the subject of a Private Members' motion today and is the subject of another one tomorrow. I will repeat the key points I made earlier. I believe that carbon taxing is playing and will play an important role in how we can reduce carbon emissions in the future. The challenge we face with regard to the climate is existential. Cognisant of the challenges that many people are already facing with the rising price of energy, we are putting in place additional supports to help those who will be affected by the further increase in carbon taxation that will take place a number of weeks hence. If the Deputy looks at the impact that carbon taxing is having on the rising price of energy, it is but a small share of the total cost of fuel and energy in our economy at present. The increase that is coming up is 2 cent per litre. I know when 2 cent per litre is added up it can be a lot for those who have the least, but the reason we have made changes in the social welfare system, in the fuel payment and in the living alone allowance is to help those who will be badly affected by the rising price of energy at present.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: To be clear, what is needed are caps on energy and heating prices. That is what we believe is the necessary action. While the Minister is clearly not going to do that, although he should, it is unacceptable to add additional hardship to people by further increasing carbon taxes. He is absolutely right that on its own it is not enough. He has control of VAT, the PSO and carbon tax. This is more than €1.2 billion worth of taxes that will be levied on people's energy use, with most of it hitting the least well off. Does the Minister honestly think he should not reduce this and that he should certainly not even contemplate increasing it when we have excess winter deaths and people not able to pay the bills? They are literally making choices between food and bills and skipping meals. Does he not think it is totally unjust?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The mere fact the issue of the carbon tax has been raised so many times, in our Private Members' motion earlier and in another Private Members' motion tomorrow, should show what an important issue it is. The idea of the tax is that it would change behaviours. We told the Minister at the time it would not do so because we did not have alternatives. We have seen the increase in the prices. The Minister might say it is only small but he does not need it at this particular time. He knows we have overshot the runway on VAT, income tax and corporation tax. People are looking to him. The message he is giving out to people is that he will pile more hardship on top of them. This is just not fair. This is why there is such a backlash against the Government. It really needs to listen. It is not just to the politicians he needs to listen. He needs to listen to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which always ends up picking up the pieces, and many other organisations such as Barnardos.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I also need to listen to the Climate Change Advisory Council which, as I reminded Sinn Féin in our debate earlier, has advised us that carbon tax is a key component of transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally-sustainable economy. That is its view on this. Of course, I accept the change that is happening. I was at pains to acknowledge earlier that with regard even to the change coming up in May, which in the total cost of energy overall is €0.02 a litre, for many that is a lot. I acknowledge this. This is the reason the Government has brought forward the energy rebate. It is the reason we brought forward the additional fuel payment of €125. It is also the reason we have made many other changes in our social welfare code to protect those who need help the most.

On a number of occasions I have heard many Deputies make reference to where we are with our tax receipts. We did have a strong November, December and January but much of this was fuelled by a high level of savings going into consumption in our economy. This will come to

an end. We cannot, on the one hand, be making the case for people's standard of living going down with them being able to purchase less and, on the other, imply the higher level of VAT receipts we see will continue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am speaking about the higher level of VAT receipts specifically on energy and heating. Let us forget about the rest. It is up to €481 million and rising. The State has yielded a big tax bonus from the energy hikes that ordinary people are getting through their doors that they cannot afford. This gives the Minister scope not to impose further hardship on them. In fact, it gives him scope to reduce their energy bills and reduce the hardship, as do the profits of the ESB. The Minister is right that it is a publicly owned company. Its profits should be capped. Tell the company not to increase prices because he would rather not impose further hardship on people to get extra dividends. For that matter, the profits of Energia have increased. Tell that company that it does not need to make extra profits this year because people are suffering and they cannot take any more.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: When the Minister lauds the merits of the carbon tax he misses the point that there are no alternatives for people. He misses the point this will be the straw that breaks their backs. The Minister for Finance knows what the equilibrium is. He knows the tipping point. He knows that people cannot bear any more of the hardship he is putting on them right now. The message he is sending them is to suck up some more. It is not right and it is not fair. It is certainly not going to change people's behaviour in terms of the climate. The Minister needs to listen to more than one voice. He needs to listen to the people who are suffering most. He needs to listen to the people in his constituency and other constituencies who are feeling the brunt of the hardship they are going through. They cannot meet the very basic cost of living.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Minister identified inflation as a particular problem in the budget when he introduced tax reductions, social benefit changes and subsidies to try to address energy prices. It is a huge pressure. What we do not hear acknowledged in the House is the external reality about energy prices generally. I recall a Department of Finance paper from December 2021 about global demand and prices. Events have moved on so much since then. The paper stated wholesale natural gas prices had increased seventeenfold since June 2020 while oil prices more than doubled over the same period. It also stated that at the same time a lower than expected gas supply from Russia, low gas reserves due to the longer winter last year, weather-related disruptions to renewable energy production and an increase in carbon prices put further upward pressure on electricity prices and fuel prices. It stated that governments in many countries, including Ireland, have taken action through a mixture of tax cuts, social benefits and subsidies. The trouble is the tax cuts, the tax changes and widening the bands, which reduced tax for many people in the country, were opposed by Deputies now raising the carbon tax.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have debated long and hard the impact of carbon taxes and the failure of the Minister to reach out to his colleagues in the European Commission to speak about the potential of reducing VAT. This has not happened, despite the fact I raised it with the Minister in September. Deputy Carroll MacNeill rightly points out the Minister brought forward a tax package. The largest part of that package, which she did not mention, cost €340 million and 80% of earners were left out of it. It was the most expensive part of the Minister's tax package and eight out of ten earners were left out of it. In fairness to the Deputy, they are not the people who are struggling the hardest. They may be struggling but 80% did not benefit from the €340 million package. They could have benefited from other measures that were a

lot less costly. The issue is that gas prices are increasing time and again. They are likely to increase further given what is happening in eastern Europe. The Minister and the Government are planning to increase them further.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The reason we introduced the lump sum payment of €125 for those in receipt of the fuel allowance is to ensure that as part of our package we have funding and a payment available to those who need help the most. What we had here was a package that in its breadth and cost of €500 million was looking to respond to the challenges that we accept many are facing due to the rising cost of living. Deputy Boyd Barrett quoted a figure relating to VAT. We have a package that overall cost in excess of €500 million. We have a package that between it and the announcements contained in the budget means a single person in receipt of the old age pension will receive additional support from the State of between €600 and €800 for this year. This will help. We accept that many need more but it is a set of measures we believe will make a difference to those who need the help the most.

Insurance Industry

25. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will detail his meetings with insurance stakeholders since November 2021. [9307/22]

38. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Finance if we will report on his engagement with insurance underwriters and brokers to promote more competition. [9311/22]

64. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of meetings he has held with an organisation (details supplied) or insurance undertakings since 24 April 2021 to discuss the personal injuries guidelines and ensuring savings made as a result of the new guidelines are passed onto consumers in the form of reduced premiums; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9696/22]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister outline to the House the meetings he has had with insurance stakeholders over the past period?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I propose to take Questions Nos. 25, 38 and 64 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, insurance reform is a key priority for the Government and the establishment of the office to promote competition in the insurance market is a programme for Government commitment. The office, which I chair, is positioned within the Department of Finance. Its twin aims are to expand the risk appetite of existing insurers in the Irish market and explore opportunities for new entrants to help increase the availability of insurance.

The office has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including insurance providers, brokers and representative associations since its establishment, holding more than 60 meetings throughout 2021. As part of this, I held a series of meetings with the chief executive officers of the major insurance providers in Ireland in late 2021. The industry confirmed that it is committed to passing on the savings from the new personal injury guidelines and other reforms, to customers. It also restated its support for the reform agenda and that it is adhering to the lower award levels established by the guidelines in direct settlements with their clients. The need to expand their risk appetite into pinch-point sectors that are experiencing issues with the availability and affordability of cover, particularly high-risk and high-footfall areas such as leisure

activities, was impressed upon the providers at our engagements.

I have met with Insurance Ireland, Brokers Ireland, the Alliance for Insurance Reform and other groups on a number of occasions to discuss a range of issues, most particularly the capacity pinch-points in the market. I met them collectively as a group before Christmas and in January. I plan to meet them again. I am pleased to note that some sectors that were on the list of pinch-points and which had been experiencing difficulty, such as equestrian centres and tourism sectors, have arrived at solutions via the formation of group schemes which have, to some extent, alleviated these problems.

Finally, it is important to point out that a number of legal cases and judicial reviews have been launched in relation to the role of the Judicial Council and the Personal Injuries Assessment Board in the context of the personal injuries guidelines. It is vital that these challenges are resolved as early as possible in order to give clarity to stakeholders and ensure the impact of the guidelines can start to be fully felt by business and individuals alike.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Irish Water

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I hope the Minister of State, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, can address the important issues I raise. We learned today that thousands of people have been drinking water from rural supplies that are contaminated with E. coli, many of which are in my constituency of Mayo and also in Galway. Of the 380 group water schemes inspected, 20 were contaminated. When will the review of the funding and supports for water services in rural Ireland be finalised and acted upon?

I raised with the Tánaiste some weeks ago the plight of the dozens of families in Cleragh and Lisduff, just outside Kiltimagh, who were caught between Irish Water and Mayo County Council. Nothing has happened since. The problem is that Irish Water has basically issued an instruction to Mayo County Council that all connections and related works, including network extensions, must be delivered by Irish Water regional framework contractors and not by the local authority. All these families want is to be connected to the local treatment plant. Some €270,000 had been allocated and individual financial contributions have been agreed. Will the Minister of State confirm that either Mayo County Council can go ahead with the piping infrastructure or that Irish Water will at least allow the piping infrastructure to be provided in order that the families can be connected to the treatment plant when the upgrade is completed? Does Mayo County Council need explicit permission from Irish Water?

The Government is saying that housing is its priority but 20 social houses that are ready to be built in Kiltimagh cannot go ahead without the treatment plant upgrade. It makes a mockery of the town centre initiatives and the development of digital hubs when basic infrastructure is

not even provided in these towns. What powers does the Minister have in relation to Irish Water? Can he instruct Irish Water to take action?

In Mayo, there are 16 schemes ready for takeover, ten of which have a legacy debt. The debt has accrued because of leaking due to the decades of neglect of the pipe infrastructure. Will the Minister ask the Commission for Regulation of Utilities to do the decent thing and write off the legacy debt so that these schemes can be taken over? These volunteers in the community are trying to run water schemes that have debts in some cases of more than €100,000 or €120,000. There is one in my area, the Pullathomas water scheme. This is not fair on volunteers in the community.

What in the name of God is going on with Irish Water with regard to farmers in Mayo and single farms, often comprising several small plots of land, which require water? The Minister of State knows the make-up of farms on marginal land in areas like Mayo. It is incredible that Irish Water is attempting to charge already struggling farmers for multiple water supplies. The same acreage in other parts of the country, with large commercial farms, are charged for one supply. Even more despicable is that Irish Water is refusing to appear before Mayo County Council to answer questions from directly-elected councillors, many of whom are from the Minister of State's party. Where did Irish Water get its mandate from? The Minister of State's councillors are being treated with contempt in Mayo when trying to get answers from Irish Water for their own constituents.

When Phil Hogan created Irish Water, he hardly meant to conceive an unaccountable monster but this is what Irish Water is turning into. We saw at the weekend a Government Minister struggle to get information from the HSE. Are we now in a similar position with Irish Water? The Government needs to hold Irish Water to account and pull it back. The Government is accountable to the people, including county councillors who are the elected representatives. We cannot afford to have another HSE that is unaccountable to the people. All we are asking is that basic water infrastructure be delivered for the people of Mayo and other counties. It is not happening through Irish Water.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I will take this matter on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke. I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and providing me with the opportunity to address this matter.

I understand that Irish Water has taken in charge more than 170 group water schemes since it took over responsibility for public water services from the local authorities in January 2014. Irish Water is continuing with this process as schemes are upgraded and funded under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's rural water programme. The latest tranche of projects approved under the Department's multi-annual rural water programme was announced in October 2019.

Mayo County Council received approval for taking in charge of more than 50 schemes, with allocated funding of over €4.8 million. I understand the local authority has been actively completing the necessary work on these schemes and that 17 are currently with Irish Water at various stages of the taking in charge process. I also understand, however, that there are legacy financial concerns on some of these schemes, which need to be resolved. Irish Water and the local authority are actively working to resolve these issues. However, this will also require goodwill and a proactive approach by the schemes involved. Group water schemes are community

owned and run. They remain the full responsibility of the scheme until such time as they are formally taken in charge by Irish Water. An annual subsidy is available from the Department via the local authorities. This subsidy funds and supports the maintenance and operation costs of schemes providing water for domestic use, thus in turn facilitating their upkeep until such time as they are taken in charge.

To summarise, the taking in charge of group water schemes is co-ordinated by the relevant local authority. Local authorities submit taking in charge applications to Irish Water once works have been completed to bring the scheme up to the basic standard required. Irish Water will work to complete the processes as quickly as possible, engaging with the local authority, as required, but local communities also need to ensure that the legacy issues are resolved. I will bring the specific issues the Deputy has raised to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, after the debate.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister of State. When he referred to schemes and local communities, it is important to remember that we are talking about volunteers. We are not talking about the head of Irish Water and others who are paid huge amounts of money. Those involved are volunteers within their communities. They are tired and worn out, and need to resolve this issue. When the Minister of State says that they need to resolve any difficulties, they cannot pay money out of their own pockets to deal with legacy debt. If the legacy debt can be dealt with the schemes can be taken over. The legacy debt is holding everything up. I am afraid that the work will be done on the schemes and by the time the takeovers come around, systems will need to be upgraded. The work needs to happen now. What has to be done is time sensitive.

Regarding farmers, we cannot have a situation whereby small farmers are being charged for five or six connections just because the layout of their land covers five or six different plots. With the Minister of State please get Irish Water to go to before Mayo County Council and show a bit of respect for councillors and the mandate they have been given?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will certainly raise the issue the Deputy has articulated with the Minister of State, Deputy Burke. I recall that when the issue of group water schemes being taken in charge was discussed in a previous Dáil, a lot of the issues raised by the Deputy I also raised as a Deputy on the Government side.

It is a pity that the Deputy's party was not as supportive of group water schemes when the abolition of water charges was raised. As she knows, people in group water schemes pay for water. When people were paying for water, this was an issue I raised, namely that if everybody paid something people on group water schemes would have to pay a lot less. Unfortunately, people on group water schemes and those who use wells have to pay for what the Deputy and I get for free because they have to do what the Deputy and I get for nothing. That could be different if we and everybody else had to pay a small bit.

People in west and north Mayo had to bring water to their areas because nobody else was going to do for them. Mayo County Council and the State would not have developed water schemes. These communities had to do that work themselves because nobody was going to do it for them. Well sinkers had to do that work. They have been left with a legacy because they had to do the work themselves. This was the very issue I raised when we were debating water charges. I am glad the Deputy raised this issue because there is no such thing as free water, and I am glad she accepts the fact that there is no such thing as free water. I am glad that a speaker

from Sinn Féin has accepted the fact that there is no such thing as free water.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: On a point of order, the Minister of State is absolutely incorrect and he knows that. He is being mischievous.

An Ceann Comhairle: He is being humorous.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am glad the Deputy has accepted it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: He is being misleading.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State and Deputy for raising the matter.

Island Communities

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing us to speak about this very important issue. There was a shocking announcement at council level two weeks ago that the Dursey Island cable car service would be suspended for repairs from April to November this year. This affects residents on the island, farmers on the mainland that have cattle on the island and tourism. It affects the whole of Allihies, Eyeries, Ardgroom, Castletownbere and many parts of west Cork which depend on tourism.

Councillor Danny Collins put forward a motion at council last week which was fully agreed, namely to request the Minister for Rural and Community Affairs, Deputy Heather Humphreys, to come before the council to talk about a temporary solution that locals feel is not the greatest in the world, that is, a ferry service. In the past two weeks nothing that I know of has happened. At a council meeting yesterday there was no contact from the Minister. I would appreciate if the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, could tell us if the Minister will meet council officials, local public representative and locals to find a solution for Dursey Island.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I cannot understand why the cable car has to be closed for so long because in 1967 it was built in one month for £14,000. It will take eight months to repair it. We have cranes and helicopters in today's world, which were not available in 1967. Why will it take so long? On average, 200 tourists use the cable car every day. There are 50 cows and 600 sheep on the best of land. There are 1,432 acres of land there. There is a spill off on the Kerry side to Lauragh, Kilmackilloge, Helen's Bar and Bed and Breakfast, Kenmare and south Kerry. It will be a massive loss. It was a fierce attraction for the entire area at the mouth of Kenmare Harbour.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Dursey cable car is more than just a form of transport. Fáilte Ireland uses it in all of its promotional material to sell Ireland across Europe. It is also, more importantly, a lifeline for the eight farmers who keep livestock on Dursey Island. Lambing and calving season is upon us. These farmers need to get across to their livestock. It is an animal welfare issue. Cork County Council has taken the decision to close the cable car on 31 March until November. That is almost 9 months.

Deputy Healy-Rae is absolutely right. When the cable car was built in the 1960s, pickaxes and shovels were used to erect the towers. I cannot understand why the work will take so long. I would love for the Department to work with Cork County Council to examine two things: one, whether there is any chance measures can be put in place to strengthen the towers for the next

couple of months so that farmers can access the island during calving and lambing season; and two, which is absolutely vital, that funding would be provided for a ferry service when the cable car inevitably closes.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Heather Humphreys. I am aware of the concerns expressed by the residents of Dursey, the farming community which has animals on the island and those that promote tourism in the region regarding the recent decision by Cork County Council to withdraw the existing cable car service to Dursey Island in order to carry out maintenance works.

It is important to note that the provision, management and upkeep of the cable car is a matter for Cork County Council. It owns and operates the existing cable car service and is responsible for ensuring mainland connectivity for the island, residents and those who require access to farmland during the period of maintenance. I understand the recent decision to withdraw the cable car service was taken without any prior consultation with the island residents, island representative groups or the Department of Rural and Community Development. This is not how a local authority should carry out its business.

If this service was going to be withdrawn due to essential maintenance, there should have been consultation with the local community and, equally important, engagement with the Department. When maintaining any infrastructure such as roads, bridges or, in this case, a cable car, the local authority is responsible for providing alternative routes to minimise any access disruptions. It is the responsibility of Cork County Council to provide the residents of Dursey Island and all others dependent on the service with an alternative temporary service from the island to the mainland while these maintenance works are being carried out.

The Minister is disappointed that Cork County Council did not see fit to engage with, or provide any prior notification to, her Department about its intention to announce the closure of the cable car. It would have been preferable to have that engagement, and a solution and alternative arrangement in place, before Cork County Council announced that the cable car was to close. It is a pity that did not occur to anybody in Cork County Council, and I am sure the three Deputies will concur with that based on what they said.

9 o'clock

I assure the Deputies that the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is keen to try to find a solution. The Minister understands the urgency of the situation. His officials are engaged and will continue to engage with Cork County Council and the island representatives to seek a resolution to the issue. I spoke to the Minister before I came into the Chamber. She is prepared to make herself available to see how a solution can be accommodated for this issue. She understands the urgency and sensitivity around this and, as Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan said, how iconic the Dursey Island cable car is. I was previously Minister of State with responsibility for tourism and I know that Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland use the Dursey cable car on many iconic images. The manner in which this has taken place is regrettable. Hopefully, with the correct form of engagement with the Department and the local representatives on Cork County Council, a way forward can be found.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, for a forthright response.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Unusual.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, no. It is very welcome.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: Hear, hear. Very unusual.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister of State for a detailed response. He is right that there was no consultation, even with the council. This decision must have been made well in advance of the announcement two weeks ago, considering where we are. We need to find a solution. Would the Minister of State believe that since last Friday, islanders have been left without electricity? No one is speaking on behalf of the islands here anymore. I respect that the Minister of State is here. He has often come to west Cork. The Minister for Rural and Community Development should be here today to talk to us and give us her point of view on what she intends to do. Residents have been let down badly. Yesterday, officials told them to get boats themselves and to find their own way over with their cattle. That is an astonishing situation. I plead with the Minister of State to plead with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to come to west Cork to meet the council and the residents. They are honest residents who have not caused any problems or even held a public meeting, because they expect that the political system will resolve this issue. It is not happening at this moment. They need a ferry service. A temporary service is not the greatest solution, which they accept, but it would at least be some sort of solution. I would appreciate if the Minister of State would tell us if the Minister will come to meet officials and public representatives.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, for a positive response and outlining how they feel about it. We are asking for a ferry and that the structure be repaired sooner. The waters are treacherous, especially when the tide comes in. If ordinary people use boats, lives could be lost. When the tide comes in, it swings to the left, and when it is going out, it swings to the right. It is a serious matter. We are close to the people of Dursey Island. It is part of history and it is part of the tourism product that we are selling. There are three holiday homes and three guesthouses. Will we close them all? Farmers cannot get in and out. They need to go in and out daily. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to speak.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Cork County Council should have acted faster on this. It knew that the towers were deteriorating and that corrosion was happening. It should have acted before this. The Minister of State probably knows west Cork as well as anyone in this Chamber. He frequents it often. He knows that Dursey Island is about as far from Dublin as one can get in Ireland. It is on the western periphery of Europe. However, for the people of the Beara Peninsula and the farmers who farm on Dursey Ireland, it is the centre of the universe. They feel forgotten about. They have been without electricity for the last five, six or seven days, and they feel forgotten about. We need to act. I ask the Minister of State to ask the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to meet me personally so that we can try to find a solution for access to Dursey Ireland for the residents, the farmers, and even for tourists.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In the Minister's original response, it is clear that whether by cable car or by boat, Cork County Council has a responsibility to provide access to the island. It is not acceptable to just cut it. Cutting it without consultation is not acceptable. It is the statutory authority that is obliged under the law, which we passed in this House, to provide access to that island for those islanders and farmers. We as legislators are required to ensure that the local authority carries out those statutory responsibilities. We expect that from local authorities. To do that without consultation is not good enough, which the Minister has clearly stated in her response. She also states in her response that her officials are available. She is also available

to make sure that a solution can be found. She is not here this evening because she had a prior family engagement. I made myself available to take part in this debate.

I know that part of west Cork. Deputy O'Sullivan is right that I am no stranger to west Cork. If I represented that part of the country, whether south Kerry or west Cork, I would not find it acceptable to just cut a road or access to an island. It is not good enough. Those people, whether they are residents or farmers, deserve the same level of access, consultation and co-operation from their local authority, whether by a cable car, road or boat. They deserve a level of respect from their local authority. They pay road tax, rates and tax. They should have got a level of co-operation from their local authority and the fact that they did not is not good enough, which is what the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is saying. It is the job of Cork County Council and it needs to do it. The Minister's officials will make sure that happens. They have to make sure that provision is made to get people safely to Dursey Island.

Separately, there is a planning process that runs in parallel to make sure that a cable car can function into the future. Separately to that, there is a group of people who have objections to that planning process. They follow us around in the Office of Public Works. We have to respect the planning process. I will take all of the comments that the three Deputies have made with respect to access to Dursey Island to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and I am sure she will reply to them collectively.

An Ceann Comhairle: It seems to me that the chief executive of Cork County Council should be answering and accountable in this case, first and foremost, as distinct from any Minister.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is in the Minister's response to this as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies for bringing the matter to the attention of the House and the Minister of State for dealing with it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and the Minister of State.

Tourism Promotion

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, for taking this matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin. I would have preferred if she was here. Nevertheless, I know he will carry the messages to her. I slightly refined the message from the Topical Issue matter to say that clearly this office will not close. It seems that Fáilte Ireland will open it for what it determines to be the relevant part of the season, which is June to September. Fáilte Ireland lacks ambition and vision in this, despite its excellent work in marketing our country and in tourism and product development through the years. I do not like to see an organisation like this beginning to move away from being public-facing. If we are going to limit our tourism activities, marketing and tourism information points with trained, expert tourism personnel dealing with the public, I would assume that we are a different country, with some sort of Mediterranean climate, where all the tourism will be coming to our beaches in June, July and August. Of course, that is not our product. What about historical, cultural, sports, archaeological, adventure, activity, music or nature tourism? We need to market all of these all year round.

In the last full year of tourism, we had about 3.6 million first-time visitors to Ireland, with about 5.2 million visitors in total. We are bad at repeat tourism. The key to successful business is repeat custom and holding on to one's customer. One does that in tourism by embracing what is known as place-bonding. People have bonded to a place. They want to go back to Newcastle West in Limerick, Kildare, Sligo or Dublin because they have had personal interaction with professionals. We are bad at repeat business. Less than one third of our custom in tourism comes back to us. Repeat visitors are where people power and people interaction help to build place bonding.

Another thing we dismiss is the need for people to interact. I will quote from a publication by Fáilte Ireland. Regarding our domestic market, it states "the high existing level of domestic tourism consumption by Irish residents, limits the potential for further growth from domestic demand". In other words, we ignore it. This is also a fool's errand because we export 40 million bed nights per year. I would like to have a few of those in the Ceann Comhairle's County Kildare, the Minister of State's County Limerick and my county, Sligo, and that takes work. We need public-facing offices, not automated machines. Nobody went or returned to Disneyland based on an overwhelming online welcome. It is personal interaction that the Irish céad míle fáilte, a hundred thousand welcomes, is based on. Fáilte Ireland, despite its brilliant work for which it is globally famous, is now putting its back to the public and deciding that we have "seasonality", which limits the potential and lacks the vision and ambition of Seán Lemass's setting up of the regional tourism organisations in 1964, under the second economic plan, with T. K. Whitaker. Why are we pulling back from that vision now? Why are we seeking to put this online?

I want the Minister of State to relate to the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, the fact that in our region in particular, the north west, tourism is the sector with the most growth potential and the opportunity to produce jobs and revenue faster.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank Deputy MacSharry for raising this issue. I am taking this Topical Issue matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin.

I should clarify the respective roles of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and its agency Fáilte Ireland in respect of national tourism development. The Department's role lies primarily in the area of national tourism policy development and in securing resources to assist the tourism agencies in implementing that policy. In line with its tourism development remit, Fáilte Ireland is responsible for developing and promoting the tourism potential of the various counties and regions around the country.

The operation of tourism information offices is a matter for Fáilte Ireland. Historically, Fáilte Ireland has provided tourism information to visitors mainly through a network of fixed buildings known as tourism information centres. Pre-Covid, Fáilte Ireland had commenced a review of how it shares tourism information nationwide with visitors, both online and in person. The review identified a need and an opportunity for Fáilte Ireland to introduce a new and comprehensive plan in response to changing consumer behaviours, digital trends and declining visitor numbers to tourism information offices. In transforming how it distributes tourism information to visitors, Fáilte Ireland's new plan is responding to the global digital demand.

Expanding the reach of Fáilte Ireland's tourism information in Sligo will directly boost the local economy and opportunities for all local businesses. Some 85% of visitors to the tourism information centre in Sligo are international, with the majority of the footfall during the

busy four-month summer season from June to September. Therefore, a decision was taken to operate the tourism information centre in Sligo seasonally, from June to September, from 2022. The new plan focuses on expanding the range of tourism information. This will be done through maximising local digital information and resources on *discoverireland.ie* and installing a number of local high-impact tourism information kiosks in a number of high-footfall Sligo locations, including Mammy Johnston's, Strandhill, and Johnston Court Shopping Centre. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, understands that discussions are ongoing with Sligo County Council and industry stakeholders on additional tourism information kiosks. A significant map distribution network will also be established, with an unprecedented countrywide reach, in addition to a call centre, which will be operational seven days a week.

In 2022 Fáilte Ireland will also relaunch a successful local experts programme, including the Sligo local experts programme. This programme empowers front-line tourism and hospitality staff to promote their local areas to visitors. There will also be a significantly enhanced web presence for Sligo town and County Sligo, with 319 attractions, activities and places currently listed on *discoverireland.ie*. This content is managed by Fáilte Ireland's tourism information centre staff.

Investment in tourism in County Sligo is at an all-time high, from private investors to public investment by Fáilte Ireland and other agencies in a new surf centre in Strandhill and beach facilities at Rosses Point and Inniscrone. This investment in Sligo will significantly enhance the overall visitor experience and provide new business opportunities in the local community.

I will bring the points Deputy MacSharry has raised to the attention of the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, after the debate.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: I acknowledge that the Minister of State is answering on behalf of the Minister.

If Fáilte Ireland decides to open the office for only three weeks, the footfall will be there for only three weeks. I am ambitious for our country. I am ambitious for Newcastle West, Limerick, Kildare, Sligo, Donegal and every other place. We are open 365 days a year, 12 months of the year. One would swear from the response the Minister of State read out that this is all about beaches. Of course, we have those in many places in Ireland. Certainly, in Sligo we have them in abundance. The Minister of State mentioned Strandhill, where I live. We also have an awful lot of other attractions but, as an organisation, Fáilte Ireland has decided there is no point in opening the office except for a couple of months in the summer.

There is another thing I wish to take issue with. The Minister of State said that "the Department's role lies primarily in the area of national tourism development and in securing resources" in that regard. I know this is not necessarily the Minister of State's fault but increasingly, Ministers stand up in here and say something is an operational matter for the Garda, Fáilte Ireland, the Higher Education Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland - everybody but the Government. In my 20 years in the Houses of the Oireachtas, I cannot be called crazy for asking the question, what is it governments do now? Are they merely the communications unit for State agencies and senior civil servants? If I know one thing, it is that the people who voted for the Minister of State, the Ceann Comhairle, me and others sent us up here to try to have some level of influence on policy in order that the public and the people who pay our wages might identify and feel some sense of ownership of the national policy platform borne out of their lived experience and suggestions in life. I am not sure tonight's response captures that.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy answered his last question himself. He asked what the Government's role is and if it relates to policy. I answered that question. The first sentence in my initial response was that the role of the Department relates primarily to policy. I am a former Minister of State in the Department with responsibility for tourism. The role of the Department is the formulation of policy and Fáilte Ireland's role is as a national vehicle for the implementation of policy. Tourism Ireland's role is as a vehicle for the delivery of policy internationally on a cross-Border basis. The Minister's role is not the direction of day-to-day traffic within Fáilte Ireland. The Minister's role relates primarily to legislation, policy and, on an annualised basis, the drawing down of Exchequer funds to make sure Fáilte Ireland can deliver to Strandhill, Rosses Point, Inniscrone, Sligo town and all the other towns and villages. If the Minister were not focused on that, I am sure Deputies such as Deputy MacSharry would have something entirely different to say. If he were to say that the Minister was micromanaging Fáilte Ireland, we would all have something entirely different to say in that the Minister could be accused of managing four mice at the crossroads. That is not the role of the Minister. It is not the role of the Minister to grease parish pumps. It is the role of the Minister to outline a vision for the development of tourism over a five-year, ten-year or 15-year period to make sure that the maximum number of people visit this country internationally and, in the first instance, nationally, that the greatest number of people possible can get employment around the country and that we can have the greatest amount of economic benefit from that as is possible. Looking over recent years and successive Ministers with responsibility for tourism, that is where our primary focus has been. It is not fair that the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, should be criticised for just doing her job.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.20 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 23 Feabhra 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.20 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 23 February 2022.