



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 24 Feabhra 2022

Thursday, 24 February 2022

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Scéimeanna Teanga

1. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an aontaíonn sí gurbh í Scéim Labhairt na Gaeilge an uirlis ba chríochnúla a bhí ag an Stát chun tomhais a dhéanamh ar leibhéal úsáide na Gaeilge mar theanga theaghlaigh sa Ghaeltacht, agus go bhfuil neart fianaise ann gur spreag an scéim teaghlaigh chun cloí leis an nGaeilge mar theanga bhaile agus gur chabhraigh sí leis an nGaeilge a bhuanú mar theanga phobail, tábhacht atá aitheanta i bpleananna teanga Gaeltachta a aontaíodh lena Roinn; an aontaíonn sí gur chuir an Stát deireadh leis an scéim seo in aghaidh thoil phobal na Gaeltachta agus in aghaidh chomhairle na n-eagraíochtaí Gaeilge ag an am, lena n-áirítear moltaí an Staidéir Chuimsithigh Theangeolaíoch inar moladh an scéim a mhéadú; an aontaíonn sí go bhfuil gá anois múnla nua den scéim sin a thabhairt ar ais mar chúnaimh don phróiseas pleanála teanga agus mar bhealach chun faireachán a dhéanamh ar spriocanna an Stáit maidir le húsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht a bhaint amach; agus an bhfuil sí sásta gníomhú chun a chinntiú go dtarlaíonn sé sin. [10696/22]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Baineann an cheist seo le scéim labhairt na Gaeilge, scéim a bhí ann suas go dtí 2011. An gcreideann an tAire Stáit gur seo ceann de na scéimeanna críochnúla gur chóir go mbeadh ann chun tomhais a dhéanamh ar leibhéal na Gaeilge agus chun tacaíocht a thabhairt do theaghlaigh sa Ghaeltacht?

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Mar is eol don Teachta, chuirí deontas faoi scéim labhairt na Gaeilge, arbh fhiú suas le €260 in aghaidh na bliana é, ar fáil do theaghlaigh cháilithe Ghaeltachta a bhí in ann a léiriú don Roinn gurbh í an Ghaeilge príomhtheanga labhartha bhunadh an tí acu. Tá na tacaíochtaí teanga a chuirtear ar fáil faoi chlár tacaíochtaí pobail agus teanga na Roinne, agus go deimhin faoin bpróiseas pleanála teanga araon, dírithe ar thacaíochtaí ar bhonn

pobalbhunaithe trí chéile seachas ar dheontais phearsanta *per se*. Mar sin, tá cistiú suntasach, atá ardaithé go céimiúil ó cuireadh deireadh le scéim labhairt na Gaeilge 11 bliain ó shin, á chur ar fáil ar leas na Gaeilge mar theanga teaghlaigh sa Ghaeltacht.

Luafainn sa chomhthéacs sin an cistiú atá á chur ar fáil ag an Roinn don eagraíocht Tuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta. Leis an gciste sin, ar fiú breis agus €1.6 milliún é thar tréimhse trí bliana faoi láthair, cuirtear clár leathan tacaíochtaí praiticiúla ar fáil atá dírithe ar thacú le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta atá ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge nó ar mhian leo é sin a dhéanamh. Níor mhiste a lua go bhfuil an ciste sin deich n-oiread níos airde ná an gciste bliantúil arbh fhiú €50,000 dá fheabhas é, a chuirtear ar fáil don eagraíocht cúig bliana ó shin. Comhthreomhar leis an gciste sin, luafainn chomh maith an maoiniú suntasach atá á chur ar fáil ag an Roinn agus ag Údarás na Gaeltachta don eagraíocht Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, atá dírithe ar thacú ar bhonn níos leithne le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta a bhfuil páistí ag aois réamhscoile acu. Tá ciste ar fiú beagnach €500,000 curtha ar fáil don eagraíocht ag mo Roinn i mbliana. Tagann sin sna sála ar an gciste trí bliana arbh fhiú sa bhreis ar €1.2 milliún a cuireadh ar fáil ó 2018 go 2021.

Mar a bhaineann sé le tacú le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta tríd an ngréasán bunscoileanna agus iar-bhunscoileanna Gaeltachta, luafainn an cistiú suntasach thar tréimhse trí bliana atá á chur ar fáil ag mo Roinn chun deiseanna breise sealbhaithe agus saibhrithe teanga a chur ar fáil do lucht freastail scoileanna Gaeltachta ó cheann ceann na bliana. Críochnóidh mé an freagra nuair a thioctfaidh mé ar ais.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ceist mhór fhada a bhí ann agus tá a fhios agam go raibh roinnt dí rialaithe as ord go déanach aréir. An rud a bhí i gceist sa cheist ná tuilleadh eolais a fháil faoin scéim mar a bhí sí. An gereideann an tAire Stáit gur uirlis í a bheadh úsáideach amach anseo maidir le slat tomhais ó thaobh cé mhéad teaghlaigh atá ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge? An bealach é gur féidir clainne nó teaghlaigh a mhealladh chun fanacht leis an nGaeilge i gceantair Ghaeltachta atá faoi léigear ag an mBéarla nó fiú siúd atá tar éis an Ghaeilge a thréigean beagán teacht ar ais chuici? Tá na ceisteanna sin i gceist agam ach ceann de na fadhbanna atá agam ag déileáil leis an gceist seo ná go bhfuil mé de shíor ag lorg eolais ar cén chostas a bhí ann roimhe seo nuair a bhí an scéim ann. Ní raibh an Roinn in ann an méid sin a sholáthar dom roimhe seo ach b'fhéidir go mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann a insint dom cén chostas a bhí ar an Stát nuair a fuarthas réidh léi. Ansin b'fhéidir go mbeidh muid in ann a oibriú amach an fiú í a dhéanamh arís.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Mar is eol don Teachta, cuireadh deireadh le scéim labhairt na Gaeilge in 2011. Faoin scéim sin chuirtear deontais arbh fhiú €260 in aghaidh na scoilbhliana ar fáil do theaghlaigh cháilithe Ghaeltachta a bhí in ann léiriú don Roinn gurbh í an Ghaeilge príomhtheanga labhartha an teaghlaigh. Tá an clár tacaíochtaí teaghlaigh, atá bunaithe ag mo Roinn ó 2012, dírithe ar thacaíochtaí atá pobalbhunaithe agus ní díreach ar bhonn pearsanta. Tá tacaíochtaí éagsúla ar fáil ó mo Roinn faoin gclár sin. Anuas ar sin, tá réimse tacaíochtaí ar fáil faoin bpróiseas pleanála teanga agus tá cistiú suntasach ar fáil faoin gclár seo. Tá an cistiú seo ardaithé go céimiúil ó cuireadh tús leis. Mar shampla, tagraím arís don chistiú atá ar fáil do Thuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta. Leis an gcistiú sin, arbh fhiú breis agus €1.6 milliún é thar tréimhse trí bliana faoi láthair agus a ceadaíodh anuraidh, tá sé ar a chumas clár leathan tacaíochtaí praiticiúla a chur ar fáil atá dírithe ar thacú le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta atá ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge nó ar mhian leo é sin a dhéanamh.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Aithním na tacaíochtaí praiticiúla a luaigh an tAire Stáit agus níl mé ag iarraidh cur as dóibh. Is anuas orthu sin a bheadh scéim labhairt na Gaeilge

dá dtógfaí ar ais í. Ghlac an tAire Stáit leis, nuair a rinne sé tuarascáil taighde Thuismitheoirí na Gaeltachta a sheoladh anuraidh, go bhfuil géarchéim thromchúiseach ann i leith teangeolaíochta sa Ghaeltacht. Mar sin, tá ar an Stát díriú isteach ar conas is féidir leis teaghlaigh a mhealladh ar ais chuig an Ghaeilge, a mhealladh chun fanacht léi nó fiú siúd nach bhfuil tar éis clainne a thógáil le Gaeilge a mhealladh chun é sin a dhéanamh. Caithfear sin a dhéanamh ach go háirithe sna ceantair atá ar imeall na Gaeltachta agus atá i mbaol ón ngalldú atá ag tarlú timpeall orthu le tamall de bhlianta anois. Tá mé ag impí ar an Aire Stáit níos mó a dhéanamh agus níos mó airgid a chur sa treo sin le féachaint conas gur féidir leis fás agus conas gur féidir linn tacaíochtaí breise a thabhairt do na clainne sin.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Tá maoiniú suntasach á chur ar fáil do Chomhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta, mar shampla, ó mo Roinn agus ó Údarás na Gaeltachta. Cuimsíonn an maoiniú sin dóibh tacú ar bhonn níos leithne le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta a bhfuil páistí ag aois réamhscoile acu. Tá ciste ar fiú €500,000 curtha ar fáil don eagraíocht ag mo Roinn i mbliana agus tá tuilleadh maoinithe ceadaithe ag Údarás na Gaeltachta. Tá cistiú suntasach ann chun deiseanna breise sealbhaithe agus saibhrithe teanga a chur ar fáil trí na gréasáin bunscoileanna agus iarbhunscoileanna Gaeltachta ó cheann ceann na bliana. Tá na cistí faoi leith a chuirtear ar fáil faoi scéim na gcúntóirí teanga, clár na gcluichí Gaeltachta, clár na n-ealaíon teangabhunaithe dár teideal CUISLE, agus beartais eile nach iad san áireamh sa chiste sin. Níl ansin ach cuid den chistiú. Tá tacaíochtaí eile ábhartha nach beag iad á gcur ar fáil ag mo Roinn agus ag Údarás na Gaeltachta faoi scáth an phróisis pleanála teanga a chabhraíonn go díreach nó go hindíreach le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge mar theanga teaghlaigh sa Ghaeltacht. Is fiú a lua go bhfuil cistiú iomlán ar fiú €17 milliún curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinn faoin gclár tacaíochtaí pobail sa phróiseas pleanála teanga.

Sports Events

2. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the Government support and resources that are being provided to a sporting organisation (details supplied) to host an event, particularly in the context of infrastructure deficits in Irish football. [10148/22]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: In the context of what has happened in Ukraine this morning, I ask the Minister of State to give a sense of what his Department can do and what supports he can give to the Ukrainian community here in Ireland through the various organisations with which he has strong relationships.

My question relates to the proposed bid for the European championship football tournament in 2028, for which the FAI is co-bidding. What financial supports may his Department have to give in support of that bid?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Our solidarity, across Government and all Departments and agencies, goes out to the Ukrainian people after the shocking invasion we have seen overnight. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has spoken this morning, as has the Taoiseach. All aspects of Government will be supporting the Ukrainian people and providing a humanitarian approach, where possible, but also working with our European partners on responding properly. There will be further meetings later today.

The football associations in the UK and Ireland recently indicated their intention to bid to

host jointly the UEFA championships in 2028. Ireland was due to host part of the 2020 iteration of those championships. The Department worked closely with the Football Association of Ireland, FAI, in bidding for and preparing to host and I am well aware of the significance and scale of the tournament and what a positive experience it could be to host it jointly in 2028.

In terms of Government support for a potential bid to host the 2028 championships, while I and the Department are positively disposed to such a bid, we will need to have a clearer understanding of the costs and benefits of jointly hosting the event before committing to supporting a bid. To that end, the Department is engaging closely with the FAI to better evaluate the case for bidding for Euro 2028 and no commitments have been made at this point.

With regard to the Deputy's question about wider investment in sport facilities, my Department operates two schemes which provide grant assistance to sports organisations for the development and improvement of both sports stadia and facilities generally. The sports capital and equipment programme, SCEP, is the primary vehicle for Government support, with €1.1 billion being invested since 1998 and the programme for Government is committed to continuing to prioritise that investment, especially in disadvantaged areas.

In the 2020 round, there were more than 3,000 applications seeking more than €200 million in funding. On Friday, 11 February, the Minister, Deputy Martin, and I, announced 1,865 individual grant offers with a total value of more than €143.8 million.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

Of this amount, almost €22 million or 15% of the funding was allocated to soccer. Tolka Park stadium has benefited from a number of SCEP grants previously and any future applications would be considered in line with the relevant scoring system and assessment procedures.

Funding is also provided by my Department to sports organisations under the largescale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. The LSSIF is designed for projects where the grant sought is greater than the maximum available under the SCEP. The first allocations under the LSSIF were announced in January 2020 and, thus far, approximately €86.4 million has been awarded to 33 different proposals.

Dublin City Council made an application under the LSSIF for a grant towards the design work associated with the redevelopment of Dalymount Park.

A provisional grant of €918,750 was announced in January 2020 towards the overall design cost, at that time estimated at €2.45 million. The actual cost of design work is now expected to be €1,357,757 to which an amount of €509,199 will be contributed by the LSSIF.

While the priority in the short term is to advance all of the successful projects, as it is now two years since the first allocations were made and in view of the issues faced by grantees as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was considered timely to review progress on all projects allocated grants. My Department has now met with all successful grantees and work is at an advanced stage in drafting the review. I expect this work to be finalised shortly. Once that review is complete, the scope for awarding any additional grants, adjusting the level of existing grants and the timing of any new call for proposals will be considered.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The nervousness that comes in from football people, who will have different viewpoints on this, is that major infrastructural deficits exist in Irish football.

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There is controversy over the Dalymount Park plan that is the heartbeat of Irish football, traditionally. There is controversy over what will happen to Tolka Park. One third of all League of Ireland footballers only have a junior certificate as a qualification. This is a much-loved and very important game. It is much-loved in the more disadvantaged areas of our country, which is probably why it has been so politically powerless, traditionally. There are so many needs within this game and deficits in the relationship between the State and the football communities in Ireland that the hosting of this tournament has to be questioned. I am glad to hear the Department is questioning the FAI's approach.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There is an examination of the cost benefit which is a prudent and appropriate thing to do. We will examine the ratio to see whether any potential bid will stack up. It is important not to put the investment in facilities beside the potential investment in securing the hosting of an event which could bring a multiple of benefits to Ireland. We know major events have a positive economic benefit.

We are committed to investment in grassroots. In the past two weeks, we announced the single biggest historic investment in grassroots sport and a multiple increase in investment in grassroots football clubs across the country. There is a significant spectrum of investment in grassroots structures of League of Ireland clubs in the past two weeks. In terms of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, we have an ongoing investment towards the design work on Dalymount Park and there has been some drawdown of that in order that it can progress that work.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are way over time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have sufficient time to answer.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: I appreciate that. The general point is that if one thinks about where football is, its interaction with the education system is minimal compared to other codes. There is greater energy and atmosphere around the League of Ireland than there has been for a number of years. I look forward to going to Dalymount Park on Friday evening to support Bohemian FC. The infrastructure around the League of Ireland is not perfect. It is only five years since the women's team effectively went on strike because of the lack of respect it was getting from within the association. We also know of the all controversies that have taken place heretofore.

Football is so important and so powerful. We have such diverse senior teams in women's and men's sides representing this country. A Traveller woman plays for the Irish women's team and a number of lads with various ethnic backgrounds play for the senior men's team. This is an exciting time for Irish football. The issue really is that we grab that and invest in a different way than with the big prize of hosting a big tournament, the benefits of which are unknown.

Deputy Jack Chambers: In my engagement with the FAI, I am absolutely committed to strengthening the League of Ireland. A huge growth in interest has been seen, but the Deputy is correct in saying we have an infrastructure deficit to address and we have to partner with many of the clubs in trying to remedy that.

I know the Deputy has done considerable work in the context of education and how we can strengthen that pathway for players, in parallel with the League of Ireland. I am committed to doing much work there and I am absolutely committed to trying to strengthen both the grassroots aspect of football and the League of Ireland infrastructure which needs investment. That

is why we see funding streams, even through the largescale sports infrastructure fund. Work is ongoing there and I accept we need to do more.

However, it is not a question of either-or. Potentially hosting a major event could bring significant economic benefit to the country. There could be huge North-South and east-west benefits. I argue there is scope to explore both properly in order that it has a meaningful impact-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----on the broader economy but also on our commitment to developing League of Ireland infrastructure.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Táimid thar am. Tá mé ag bogadh ar aghaidh.

Arts Policy

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media further to Parliamentary Question No. 287 of 8 February 2022, the time, date and the details of discussions she and her Department have had with the Minister for Social Protection and her Department specifically on the impact of the proposed basic income for artists pilot scheme for artists with disabilities; and if she will work closely with the Minister for Social Protection to ensure that the needs of artists with disabilities are fully taken into account prior to the roll-out of the basic income for artists. [10697/22]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question is to give an account of the discussions to date with the Minister for Social Protection and her Department on the impact of her proposed basic income for artists pilot scheme on artists with disability and if she will work closely with the Minister to ensure the needs of artists with disabilities are fully taken into account prior to the roll-out of the basic income scheme for artists.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Before I answer, I acknowledge the devastating developments overnight in Ukraine. As the Minister, Deputy Coveney, said earlier, we utterly condemn this act of unjustifiable war and our hearts and thoughts are with the people of Ukraine.

The basic income for the arts pilot scheme will run over a three-year period and the intention is to research the impact a basic income would have on artists' and creatives' work patterns by providing the opportunity to participants to focus on their practice and to minimise the loss of skills from the arts, as a result of the pandemic. Stakeholder engagement has been core to the policy development process and this included a stakeholder forum on 15 December 2021 and a public consultation throughout January.

The impact of such a scheme on artists with disabilities is a theme that has been raised throughout the consultation and I can assure the Deputy that it is a matter I take very seriously. I want to ensure that all artists, including those with a disability, can apply to participate in the pilot.

The Department of Social Protection was a member of the oversight group I established last year tasked with appraising the recommendations set out in Life Worth Living report. That group met eight times last year and the Department of Social Protection attended each of those

meetings. In addition, an interdepartmental working group, including the Department of Social Protection, was established to support the work of the oversight group. It met seven times last year and the Department of Social Protection attended each of those meetings.

In addition, bilateral engagement between the two Departments on the treatment of the basic income for the arts payment has been ongoing, with at least seven meetings over the past number of months. In particular, discussions around the treatment of the grant payment for the purposes of income disregards across a number of social welfare schemes, including disability allowance, are ongoing.

I assure the Deputy that the issue of artists with disabilities is something on which I am focused. I believe the basic income for the arts has the potential to help artists and creative arts workers with disabilities overcome labour market barriers by creating a self-sustaining creative practice operating on a self-employed basis.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. It is interesting there have been eight meetings between both Departments, or at least that the Department of Social Protection was in attendance at seven of the eight meetings that were held. That is good news. It is to be hoped progress is being made because it can have a devastating effect on people with disabilities. Many questions need to be answered regarding other artists; those are for another day.

The focus today is specifically on artists with disabilities who are concerned that if this scheme is rolled out, they will be sidelined or discriminated against by the potential that a means test or income disregard does not take full account of their circumstances. A suspension of the means test for the period of the three years of the pilot would probably be a better approach in their instances rather than an income disregard.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I am determined to ensure the voices of artists and art workers are heard in the development and delivery of supports to the sector. In terms of the basic income for the arts pilot scheme, as the Deputy will know, this recommendation arose from the recommendation from the arts and culture recovery task force and is subject to ongoing consultation. I believe the whole process must be based on that consultation because it is a game changer for the arts community.

A wide range of issues with regard to the operation of the proposed scheme, including the issue of artists with disabilities, have been raised in the context of this consultative process. These are now being considered by my Department the context of finalising the scheme.

I appreciate this issue has been raised by Deputy Ó Snodaigh and others, including Deputy Hourigan. I assure the Deputy there is ongoing engagement at present across government and, as I said, with the Department of Social Protection, on all the relevant issues related to this proposal, as there has been since the outset of this process. I intend to launch the scheme and all details with regard to its operation shortly.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the Minister's commitment and that of others such as my colleague, Deputy Kerrane, who also raised questions on this issue.

When will the discussions conclude? This scheme was supposed to be rolled out early in the first quarter. We are past the early part of the first quarter at this stage. The discussions around this issue need to conclude in order that reassurances can be given to those artists who wish to avail of the scheme or allow them at least to put their names forward and, it is hoped, be part

of the pilot, in particular those who are struggling not only with low incomes anyway but also the additional challenges a disability would raise. They are the ones who have raised this issue with me continually and who feel they may be excluded or sidelined and lose their medical card or some of the other benefits that help them ease the burden of a disability.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Deputy. I am seeking to bring this to a conclusion and hope to be able to launch it shortly. As I said, however, it is such a groundbreaking initiative and a game changer. My focus is on getting it right and on the consultation with the very voices the Deputy said must be heard. It will be a three-year pilot, as promised. I am determined to get it right and that the consultation is at the heart of the process. I will get it out as soon as possible but, as I said, the consultation is key to this to make sure that when we roll out such a groundbreaking initiative, it addresses all the issues like those raised by the Deputy.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.

Television Licence Fee

5. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will address reports that she intends to make changes to the television licence fee collection; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10695/22]

Deputy Imelda Munster: Will the Minister comment on reports that she intends to make changes to the television licence fee collection, and will she make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Catherine Martin: A healthy, independent and well-functioning media system is critical to our democracy, providing a platform for diverse opinion, challenge and debate. It is also of key importance for our cultural vibrancy and development, not least in supporting Irish content in a globalised marketplace.

Recognising this vital role played by the wider media sector in our society and the fact the media system as a whole is under severe financial pressure, the Government established the Future of Media Commission, chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, to consider the way forward at a time of profound change and significant challenges. As such, the commission's task was a complex one, with a remit that was broader than simply examining the funding of public service broadcasting.

This is about putting in place a sustainable framework for the wider media sector: print, radio and all other platforms. It is about enabling greater accessibility, equality, diversity and inclusivity in the media, supporting environmental sustainability, and the promotion of our language, culture and creativity.

On the question of future funding, the commission was asked to examine how public service media can be funded in a way that is sustainable, gives greater security to the sector, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money. Given the wide-ranging and far-reaching recommendations the commission has addressed, it is only right we give the report very careful and detailed consideration. The commission's work must also be considered in the context of a range of other complex and interrelated issues that will require decisions by Government in the media and wider digital space. These include the recently published national digital strategy, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill and Ireland's approach to the

implementation of the forthcoming Digital Services Act.

I met with Professor MacCraith on a number of occasions since the commission was established, including since the commission's report was finalised. I also recently met with an Taoiseach and other Cabinet colleagues as part of our collective examination of the commission's report. It is intended that the Future of Media Commission report will be brought to Cabinet in the coming weeks, following which it will be published.

With regard to the current funding model, public sector broadcasting is funded by revenues from the TV licence fee and the Exchequer, with An Post the designated collection agent for the TV Licence fee. This will continue until such time as the Government may decide on an alternative funding model.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As the Minister said, the Future of Media Commission was initially set up to look at the TV licence and then it was expanded. The commission reported last July but the Minister has had that report now since last October and it still has not been published.

Those of us who are not in Government have been working from leaks in the media. We learned from one of the leaks that apparently the commission recommended the licence fee be funded through the Exchequer, but apparently this was rejected by Government backbenchers. Then, last week, it was reported that the Government intends to change the licence fee collection agent from An Post to Revenue. Will the Minister please clarify if these leaks are accurate?

Deputy Catherine Martin: To clarify, the commission completed its work and, last September, the detailed report was submitted the Taoiseach and me. It contains recommendations on a wide range of issues. I am not going to comment on the content of that report until it comes to Cabinet, but I will say there are far-reaching recommendations that require we give them appropriate consideration. They cannot be considered in isolation, however. As I said, the report is one of a number of developments taking place in the media and digital space that need to be considered in the round. These include the recently published national digital strategy entitled *Harnessing Digital: The Digital Ireland Framework*, and Ireland's approach to the implementation of the forthcoming Digital Services Act.

As the Deputy knows, we are progressing our Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. The report is with me and the Taoiseach. As I said, we met recently with some Cabinet colleagues to consider that. Our ambition is to bring it forward as soon as possible.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am sure the Minister recognises it is important we have sight of the report for many reasons. We need to be able to debate and scrutinise any changes to the licence fee. We cannot do that without seeing the rationale of the commission in making its recommendations.

Can I get a commitment that the Government will not increase the cost of the licence fee when we are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis? Will the Minister confirm she intends to remove the contract for collection from An Post? That is a particularly worrying scenario given An Post and post offices across the State are on their knees. Will the licence fee or levy seek to direct funding to support local and national print media?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the Deputy. I cannot comment on the recommendations of the report until it comes to the Cabinet. As I said, I discussed the matter with the Tao-

iseach and with Cabinet colleagues quite recently, even this week. I expect it will be brought to all of Cabinet in the coming weeks. My ambition, as well as that of the Taoiseach, is to publish that report as soon as possible. None of what has been in the newspapers has been verified by the Taoiseach's Department or my Department. I have read much what is seemingly in the recommendations. However, as I said, that has not been verified by the Taoiseach's Department or by me. I even noted reports at the weekend that the Oireachtas joint committee's position seems to be one that is supporting a household charge. None of these leaks has been verified by anyone. It needs, deserves and is worthy of proper consultation. It is my ambition and it is the Taoiseach's ambition to publish it as soon as possible.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Sports Funding

6. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the plans and a likely timeline for the next round of a sports and equipment capital programme; when it is likely to open to new applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10456/22]

9. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of applications that were submitted for sports capital grants in County Louth for the latest round of funding; the total number that were awarded funding; the way the funding that has been set aside for the sports capital programme appeals process will be implemented; the expected timeline for the appeals process to last; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10372/22]

16. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to allocate the funding for the approved projects under the 2022 sports capital grants; if there is a timeline available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10507/22]

21. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the detail of the appeals process for the sports capital and equipment programme; the amount of funding that will be set aside for successful appeals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10334/22]

47. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of unsuccessful applications that were made for the recently announced sports capital and equipment programme; and the amount that has been set aside to cover potential successful appeals. [10150/22]

49. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the process involved in allocating funding from the sports capital and equipment programme grants; the recourse available for unsuccessful groups to appeal a decision made by her Department in relation to the sports capital grants; the future funding opportunities that are available to those who were unsuccessful at this time; and if she will make a statement

on the matter. [9885/22]

52. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when her Department will make a decision on sports capital and equipment programme grants applications that have been appealed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10508/22]

61. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status and process of assessment for sports capital and equipment programme grants that were invalid or incomplete; when sports clubs can appeal their grants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10309/22]

65. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide an overview of the sports capital and equipment programme appeals process; the timelines involved for sports clubs and organisations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10333/22]

68. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her Department has set aside funding for successful appeal applications to the recent sports capital and equipment programme announcement; if so, the amount of such funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10404/22]

70. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the process in place for sports capital and equipment programme appeals; the length of time the applicant has to make an appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10152/22]

Deputy Alan Dillon: Many sporting clubs and organisations were not in a position to apply for the 2020 sports capital and equipment programme. We need some clarity around the timing of the next round of the sports capital and equipment programme to ensure clubs and organisations can start their preparation in good time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6, 9, 16, 21, 47, 49, 52, 61, 65, 68 and 70 together.

The sports capital and equipment programme is the primary vehicle for the Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and for the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. More than 13,000 projects have now benefited from the sports capital and equipment programme since 1998, bringing the total allocation to more than €1.1 billion. The programme for Government commits to continuing the sports capital and equipment programme and to prioritising investment in disadvantaged areas.

The 2020 round closed for applications on 1 March 2021. By that date in excess 3,000 applications had been submitted, seeking more than €200 million in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received. The scoring system and assessment procedures were finalised and published prior to assessment work commencing. All applications were assessed in accordance with these procedures. All of the improvements that were introduced to recent rounds of the programme to make the process as user-friendly as possible were maintained for this round. These included giving applicants a second chance to submit corrected documentation. The full scoring system can be viewed on the sports capital website.

Approximately 1,000 of the submitted applications were for equipment-only projects. These applications were assessed first. Grants with a total value of €16.6 million were announced on 6 August 2021. The remaining capital applications were then assessed and 1,865 grant offers, with total value in excess of €143.8 million, were announced in the last two weeks on Friday, 11 February 2022. As with recent rounds of the programme, the total funding available to allocate for each county was based on the population and the level of demand for that county. The top scoring applications in every county received the full, valid amount applied for. The remaining applications were allocated a grant that was based on their score and the amount sought, while applications in the bottom scoring 5% of applications in any county received no more than 75% of the amount sought. Details of all applications that were submitted in the 2020 round can be viewed on *gov.ie*.

All valid capital applications received a grant offer. All allocations can also be viewed on a county basis on the same site. My Department will shortly be in touch with all successful applicants via the Department's online system, OSCAR, formally notifying them of their provisional grant application. These notifications will set out the next steps required to obtain formal approval of their grant. When work is complete and grantees can show proof of payment, my Department will then process any grant drawdown requests.

My Department will also be in contact with all applicants whose applications were deemed invalid. There are currently 243 such invalid capital applications. All unsuccessful applicants will have the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision. Full details of the appeals procedure will issue to these organisations very shortly. Of the record €150 million made available to capital projects, €6 million has been kept in reserve for any successful appeals lodged by unsuccessful applicants. When the appeals process is complete, a full review of the 2020 round of the sports capital and equipment programme will be undertaken. Any recommendations contained therein will be included in the terms and conditions of the next round. The precise timing of this next round of the programme will be announced once this review is completed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have six speakers, so I ask them to co-operate with the time limits.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The sports capital and equipment programme funding to local communities is without doubt one of the best investments we can make in our communities. I commend the Minister of State on the recent announcement of the €150 million national pot. It has an enormous impact throughout the country. I acknowledge the Minister of State's Department and the team in terms of how this was administered.

The full review of the 2020 round should be undertaken in a time-limited manner to ensure any of these recommendations contained will be included in the next round. We want clarity around the timing of the next round. That is very important. It is equally fair to provide some information to those standing on the sidelines, wondering when they will get the next opportunity to start working on their applications. If we could possibly get a provisional timeline rather than any details around the next one, that would be useful.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their generous sports capital programme. On behalf of the 58 clubs in my constituency, I would like to say "Thank you". Of course, there are a number who, as my colleague has outlined, were either unable to apply or who were unsuccessful. It is important we outline to them at this point, which

is the root of my question, what level of funding has been set aside for appeals, as has been the case in prior years. As Deputy Dillon has outlined, this process started pre-pandemic. While the Department has been incredibly generous in its ability to come up with €150 million, clearly there will be demands by various clubs and organisations throughout the country in the coming months, to which I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, in particular would like to be responsive. I hope there will be a second phase or an extra capital programme.

Deputy James O'Connor: First, I would like to say how grateful we are for the support we have received from the Department. I thank the Minister and, in particular, the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, for visiting the constituency.

In terms of this particular grant funding, many clubs are now asking about what the plan of the Department will be. I would very much appreciate it if both the Minister and the Minister of State would be able to provide us with some detail on timelines for the funding to be allocated as well as the process that would entail.

Again, I would like to say how much of a positive development it was. It was very welcome. It is very much one of the more community-based initiatives the Government has undertaken and it has done so very successfully. I want to outline my appreciation for the €1.9 million in funding my constituency received. I am also very hopeful about the appeals process that there would be significant funding set aside for any clubs that may have made an error in their application during the appeals process.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I join the other Members in what they have said about the next phase of this process. I would also ask if we have a vision into the future so that we could front-load funding for local authorities. I believe that, in certain circumstances, there are clubs that have expertise within them, perhaps those who have greater education or that have planning experts, engineers, barristers, teachers or whoever on their sporting committees, and there those other sporting clubs that do not have that level of expertise, and this second group can fall through the gaps during funding process. Is it not better as a long-term strategy for the Government to support local authorities to have an audit of the sporting needs in any geographical area and for them to have municipal sporting facilities so that all sporting bodies can benefit from them, rather than having these competing interests within any one geographical area?

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: The thrust of my question was slightly different than the initial question that was posed by Deputy Dillon. However, the Minister of State captured it in his answer. It was to ask about the status and process of assessment of sports capital grant applications that were invalid or incomplete. It is important, as Deputy Ó Ríordáin outlined, that those clubs that do not have that backroom team with that level of skill can get another opportunity to make sure they have maximised their application in terms of outlining the impact they make within their communities. Sports capital funding is so impactful within communities. In County Waterford, there was a similar announcement in respect of the active travel funding. The sums were about €24 million in both cases. Sports capital funding, however, is so much more relatable to communities and people understand it much better. It makes a tangible difference from the bottom up, so I hope people will get another bite at the cherry.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: In Limerick and north County Tipperary, more than 100 clubs and organisations got sports capital funding. It is a very good measure and there has been a significant increase on previous years. In the appeals process, there will be some clubs and sporting organisations that are deemed invalid because the type of application they put forward

is not covered under the scheme, and there will be others that are invalid because they have not submitted the correct documentation. There is a major distinction. Will the Minister of State expedite the process? We need some indication as to when the appeals process will get under way. It is very important. Many of the clubs will probably be able to get the documentation together and resubmit it. Will the Minister of State clarify whether €6 million has been set aside that could be claimed under this appeals process?

Deputy David Stanton: Will the Minister of State pass on to his team in the Department how grateful people are for how they were treated so professionally, respectfully and helpfully?

On the question regarding the appeals, as my colleagues have said there are people who have invalid applications and so on. Can those clubs and organisations that did not get their full ask appeal as well? In some instances, the categories are such that it is not possible for the clubs to tick the box and gain that set of points. Will the Minister of State re-examine that for future years?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Dillon in the first instance. Communities throughout County Mayo have responded to the programme and I acknowledge his input in that regard. As in all previous rounds, a review will be undertaken. We will take the learnings from this round, and once that has concluded, we will be able to provide a specific timeline. I do not want to mislead people about whether the process will open in a particular month or on a certain date. The programme for Government is clear that we are committed to running regular rounds of the sports capital and equipment programme. We have completed one round and we will provide a timeline for the next round when the review has concluded. The priority for now remains the round before us, given the appeals process has not concluded.

I acknowledge Deputy Farrell's points and the 58 clubs in Fingal that have benefited from the programme. A total of €6 million is available for appeals by unsuccessful applicants or applicants whose applications were deemed invalid. They will have an opportunity to respond in that regard.

Deputy O'Connor referred to €1.9 million in funding for his constituency. All clubs will soon receive communication on the exact process for how they can draw down the provisional grant offer. It will set out what they will have to do to get the full grant allocations. They will be written to shortly and that will kick off the drawdown. We will, I hope, see many projects happen this year. We want to get drawdown happening quickly.

On Deputy Ó Ríordáin's point, many local authorities have benefited this time. In Dublin, many clubs have partnered with local authorities and got significant grant allocations. For example, Bohemians Football Club partnered with Dublin City University. There are many other examples throughout the country where clubs partnered with institutions to maximise the sharing of facilities and the community benefit. That municipal approach is important to strengthen sports infrastructure for our communities. We are currently conducting an exercise with Sport Ireland in which we are mapping every recreational facility in every community in the country, which will show the geographical and community deficits that exist. It will underpin future, focused investment in sport. There are areas where that level of investment does not exist or where communities have not been able to apply, and that will inform a future approach.

I acknowledge Deputy Ó Cathasaigh's points about the benefits for County Waterford and the importance of a bottom-up approach. The appeals system will be outlined shortly.

24 February 2022

To respond to Deputy O'Donnell, applicants with invalid or unsuccessful applications will be able to appeal. A full €6 million has been set aside. The Minister and I will finalise the appeals process this week and early next week. I hope the process will be able to commence in March and there will then be a window for all clubs to make an appeal and be assessed quickly. It will not be a drawn-out process.

I will convey Deputy Stanton's feedback to the officials. When we publish the formal appeals system, it will give clubs the opportunity to see where they fall in that context. It will be-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise for interrupting but the Minister of State will have an opportunity to conclude. We have gone way over time.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I am conscious that in the current round, there remains work to be completed regarding the formal notifications appeals process and the subsequent review of the 2020 programme. I am conscious the Department is working towards drawdowns for successful applications. In fact, I was in contact with the Minister of State's office in respect of even the 2015 awardees. In 2018 and 2022, there were announcements regarding the sports capital programme, so there was a four-year cycle in between. That is a long period for sporting organisations and clubs to have to wait to access vital funding. I would prefer there to be a two-year cycle, meaning the next awardees would be announced in 2024, with the applications opening in early 2023.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. My constituency, Dublin Fingal, has very distinct identities, individual communities and farmland, predominantly, in between. With those distinct identities come distinct rivalries, which is why those communities have looked carefully at the allocation of each sports capital funding round that has occurred over the past decade or so. I circulated some figures directly to the Minister of State at the time of the last round, as he will recall, regarding sporting code analysis. That is something we should bear in mind, not least in light of the statement he made regarding the analysis the Department is carrying out, which I fundamentally welcome because it is the right thing to do.

Having said that, it is important that clubs be given the opportunity to reapply, particularly in light of what Deputy Dillon quite correctly pointed out. The cycle has been extended, primarily because of Covid. I would like to see some commitments given in respect of the next round and what it might look like.

Deputy James O'Connor: The appeals process is a delicate matter for many clubs and the status of appeals will depend on the nature of the errors in the applications that need to be amended. Obviously, some clubs made very minor amendments, many of them relating to appendices 4 or 5, as the Minister of State will be aware. I ask that a strong degree of leniency be given to enable them to resolve those issues. One example with which the Minister of State will be familiar relates to Fermoy GAA's application, on which we are working hard. It is a major sporting club servicing a huge area and population base. I ask for the Minister of State's support in respect of an extension of a lease from the OPW on the grounds the club occupies. Similarly, Shanballymore GAA faces an appendix 5 issue. I ask directly for the Minister of State's assistance in that regard too and am hopeful a sufficient degree of finance will be provided for the appeals process.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I am greatly encouraged by the Minister of State's response. The vision the Minister of State is outlining is something that I really welcome. The possibility that we will have an audit of the sporting needs of any given community, and that the local authority will be the driver for that, is something that will be welcome. I look forward to working with the Minister of State on it.

We would not want to see a particular sporting code or sporting pursuit fall by the wayside or fall through the cracks because some other sporting pursuit possibly has more muscle or more educated people behind its applications. I hope I am using appropriate language. I take great encouragement from what the Minister of State has outlined and I look forward to working with him on it into the future.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: In my initial enthusiasm, I may have misplaced the decimal point in my first contribution.

In the next round, we should consider looking at issues of sustainability in the applications. The Minister of State might say that of course I would say that, but if we manage to turn around an energy line within a club in terms of funding, if we turn that from an outgoing to an incoming, that means they will have more money to spend on their pitches, equipment and community-building facets and, of course, it will help us to meet our climate goals. It is something we should be looking at. If a club is putting in floodlights or if it currently has floodlights, we should consider how can we move that to a lower-energy light-emitting diode, LED, system. We should look at whether clubs can put solar panels on their roofs in order that the heating of water happens through the power of sunlight rather than affecting their bottom line. That would allow them to spend their money on so many other things.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is good to hear that the appeals process is getting under way in March. It will be welcomed. I have a few quick follow-on questions regarding that process. There has been inflation in the cost of materials. Following on from Deputy Stanton's point, will the Minister of State allow clubs to appeal to get an increase in the amount they have been allocated?

Following on from that, the next round of sports capital funding could be very significant. If it is returning to an annual basis, clubs that received insufficient allocations this year could go for phase 2 next year. That is something that needs to be looked at.

I welcome the appeals process getting under way in March. Will the Minister of State allow clubs in Limerick to appeal based on the allocation they have got to date if they believe they should have got a higher allocation? It would be extremely important at that time if the Minister of State could announce when the next round of sports capital grants will take place. That would allow clubs to plan, maybe for phase 2, to ensure they get adequate funding for an overall project.

Deputy David Stanton: The Minister of State did not get an opportunity to answer the question I asked earlier. If clubs want an increase in what they received, is that possible through the appeals process? If a club in that category submits an appeal, can I take it that there is no danger of it having a reduction in the amount it recently received?

I join my colleague, Deputy Ó Cathasaigh, who spoke about energy, green energy, insulation and different ways of producing energy, etc., for clubs. Many clubs are really interested in that and would welcome any supports that could be provided through this and other grants.

24 February 2022

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for the sports capital grant in Carlow, and particularly for St. Leo's College. The Minister of State gave his commitment to women in sport and they got their full grant of €300,000.

On the appeals process, I have written to the Department. There are three clubs in Carlow that had originally been requested further information and they did not get the grant. Will the Minister of State contact them or do they have to contact the Department? Communication is key here to ensure they get the grant now with the appeals process. I welcome the €6 million that is there, but I would be grateful if the Minister of State could contact the clubs and let them know about the appeals process.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is an overall time limit for this group of questions and I am told we are out of time. The Minister of State could take one minute. I am sorry about that. There is an overall time limit and given the number of speakers, we have gone way over time on this issue.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I do not need an answer. I am okay.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will allow the Minister of State to speak but it is by way of exception because we have gone way over time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will try to respond quickly. A couple of key questions have been asked.

I repeat that we will conclude the review and we will then provide clarity on when the next round will be announced.

The appeals process will be published shortly. Unsuccessful or invalid applicants will obviously be able to appeal. It will be a broader appeals system than before. The previous appeals system was based on a mistake that the Department may have made. It would be a broader appeals system compared to the previous round.

Different Deputies have mentioned specific issues. I have said that there will be opportunities for clubs to appeal. We will publish that. It is better that I publish it, but I will say that it will be a broader system than before.

On Deputy Ó Cathasaigh's point, many clubs promoted that sustainability piece in this round, for example to convert to LED lights and to make significant energy savings. If you look across the country, you will see that there have been a considerable number of successful applicants for that. I take the Deputy's point there as well.

Successful applicants will get the drawdown information quickly. Clubs that want to appeal will also be communicated with. That will be published online. They will have an opportunity shortly to have that window to appeal.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are way over time. We have given it good time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It will be a broader system than before.

Cross-Border Co-operation

7. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has had discussions with Tourism Ireland regarding the extension of Fáilte Ireland marketing brands including Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Wild Atlantic Way to include counties in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10218/22]

Deputy Imelda Munster: Has the Minister had discussions with Tourism Ireland regarding the extension of Fáilte Ireland marketing grants, including Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and the Wild Atlantic Way to include counties in the North of Ireland? Will she make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Catherine Martin: As the national tourism development authority, in line with its statutory functions as set out in section 8(1)(a) of the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003, Fáilte Ireland's role is to support the long-term sustainable growth of tourism in Ireland. Its remit does not extend to jurisdictions outside the State, such as Northern Ireland. Tourism Northern Ireland, which is a non-departmental body of the Department for the Economy in the North, is responsible for the development of tourism in Northern Ireland.

Fáilte Ireland develops, supports and promotes tourism at regional and county level within the State in line with the relevant tourism experience brands, which provide the overarching context for enterprise supports, tourism product development and related marketing. There are four regional tourism experience brands covering all counties of the Republic of Ireland - the Wild Atlantic Way, Ireland's Ancient East, Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and Dublin.

Tourism Ireland promotes the island of Ireland in more than 21 markets overseas as a compelling holiday destination, using the Ireland brand to position the island as strongly as possible against the more than 200 other destinations with which Ireland competes. Tourism Ireland promotes Ireland's four regional experience brands, as well as Northern Ireland's experience brand, Embrace a Giant Spirit, on a range of platforms, including online, overseas trade platforms and other publicity.

My Department and both tourism agencies will continue to foster North-South co-operation to enhance an all-island tourism offering and grow international visitor numbers to the entire island. My officials continue to liaise with their counterparts in the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland through monthly meetings and also quarterly operational meetings with both the Department for the Economy and Tourism Ireland.

On 20 January 2022, I took part in a shared island dialogue event hosted by the Department of the Taoiseach, which focused on all-island tourism. Over 160 tourism and civil society stakeholders from across the island joined the event online to discuss the success of tourism co-operation on the island of Ireland over the past 20 years and explore how best to enhance opportunities for domestic and international visitors in the years ahead. Over the course of the dialogue, a number of key themes emerged including the opportunity for greater alignment and linkages between tourism initiatives on the island and further developing on a cross-Border basis the on-island tourism that has grown in response to the pandemic travel restrictions.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

My Department will continue to work with the Department of the Taoiseach to implement

our commitments to the North-South development of tourism as included in the shared island chapter of the renewed national development plan. This includes supporting Tourism Ireland in its mission to grow tourism into the island of Ireland, to promote the recovery of the sector post pandemic and to work with the Northern Ireland Executive on developing large-scale North-South tourism initiatives which will support the sustainable growth of the sector including cross-Border walking and cycling trails as well as new market opportunities.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Minister will be as well aware as I am that Tourism Ireland is tasked with marketing Ireland, North and South. It was created under the Good Friday Agreement alongside the two existing tourism boards.

I suppose my question relates to the lack of joined-up thinking in terms of the national tourism project. For example, the Wild Atlantic Way stops at Donegal despite the fact that the coast goes on into Derry and Antrim, and Ireland's Ancient East does not include Armagh, which would have much to offer in terms of that particular brand. It seems a no-brainer that there is no connection between the two and they are not branding Ireland as an island. Given the success we have had - the past two years have been desperate but we had success in 2019 - when there are bodies set up tasked to that, they do not take advantage of promoting Ireland as an island.

10 o'clock

It does not make sense at all not to include Antrim and Derry in the Wild Atlantic Way and the likes of Armagh in Ireland's Ancient East. That is a simple task. Has the Minister taken any steps to promote this issue in particular?

Deputy Catherine Martin: The tourism development authority is acting in line with its statutory functions under the National Tourism Development Authority Act 2003. Fáilte Ireland's remit does not extend to jurisdictions outside the State. From my engagement with Tourism Ireland, I am aware that it does an amazing job in promoting the entire island. Since the establishment of the North-South Ministerial Council under strand two of the Good Friday Agreement, North-South engagement and collaboration in the area of tourism has added great value to the marketing of the island. I have been there and seen the amazing work they are doing in branding the entire island, including the branding and marketing of the Causeway Coastal Route, Ireland's Ancient East, the Wild Atlantic Way, the Global Greening initiative, the development of screen tourism, including the "Game of Thrones" studio tour, which recently opened in Banbridge, the Taste of Ireland food and drink initiative and maximising the tourism benefits of major sporting events. Tourism Ireland does a fantastic job of marketing the island.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We have a lot to offer and it is nonsensical that tourism experiences stop at the Border. Recently, I met with Tourism Ireland, and I got the distinct impression that it was put on the back-burner. I ask the Minister to flag up to Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland the simple things I pointed out, those no-brainer issues, such as why the Wild Atlantic Way cannot be extended along the coast to Derry and Antrim, and why the likes of Armagh, which has so much to offer, is not included in the Ireland's Ancient East brand. Tourism Ireland agreed with me, but the question is why it is not being done. Why are we not putting as much effort as possible into promoting Ireland as an island, given the success we have had for years in bringing tourists to this country?

Deputy Catherine Martin: The three tourism agencies operate within a balanced ecosystem within the remit of the enabling legislation. Fáilte Ireland supports tourism enterprises in

the Republic of Ireland, Tourism Northern Ireland supports enterprises in Northern Ireland, while Tourism Ireland provides opportunities and support for enterprises across the whole island to promote their businesses overseas. As Deputy Munster says, the structures were established following careful consideration under the Good Friday Agreement. Changes to the function and remit of the bodies would require consultation and agreement on a North-South basis. My focus currently is on ensuring that Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland do the best possible job they can within their existing remit and that we continue the close co-operation we have with our colleagues in Northern Ireland to ensure that visitors to this island can enjoy a seamless experience with a wealth of attractions, activities and hospitality on the entire island of Ireland, in particular as we emerge from the pandemic.

Broadcasting Sector

8. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the establishment of the media commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10439/22]

13. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide an update on the establishment of the media commission; the expected timelines and other relevant details; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10217/22]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We all know that the media landscape has changed dramatically in recent years, so I wish to ask the Minister today about the status of the establishment of the media commission.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 13 together.

The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2022 will, when enacted, formally dissolve the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, and establish a new regulator, coimisiún na meán, which will be responsible for overseeing the regulation of broadcasting and video on-demand services and the new regulatory framework for online safety. Coimisiún na meán will also have functions relating to the promotion of an open, trusted and pluralistic media and online environment, including research, education, media literacy, the protection of children, and journalistic and creative supports. Part 3 of the Bill sets out the legal basis for the establishment of an coimisiún, including its powers and functions, the membership of an coimisiún as a multi-commissioner body led by an executive chairperson and matters relating to the staffing and superannuation of an coimisiún. It also sets out the accountability of an coimisiún to the Oireachtas and provides for the independence of an coimisiún in the exercise of its functions. Given that infringement proceedings have been launched against Ireland for the delay in the transposition of the revised audiovisual media services directive, which will be given effect in Irish law by the Bill, I am keen to see the Bill enacted by the summer recess. This would pave the way for the formal establishment of coimisiún na meán by ministerial commencement order in the second half of this year.

A key milestone in the progress of the Bill through the Houses was marked on Tuesday, when I had the opportunity to complete Second Stage of the Bill in Seanad Éireann. That debate provided an opportunity for me to set out what I believe are the most important provisions of the Bill, including the establishment of an coimisiún, and for me to listen to the perspectives

of Senators from all sides of the House. Based on that debate, and the widespread recognition of the importance of the Bill, I am confident that we, as parliamentarians, can complete our consideration of the Bill by the summer. I acknowledge that this is an ambitious timeline for a Bill of this scope and scale. However, I believe this will still allow us to give extensive consideration to the Bill on Committee and Report Stages in both Houses. I know that Members of both Houses are as committed as I am to the enactment of the Bill and to the formal establishment of an coimisiún and the commencement of its operation.

Given the importance of an coimisiún, the Government has approved its establishment on an administrative basis prior to the enactment of the Bill. While an coimisiún will, as set out in the Bill, ultimately be funded through levies on regulated services, I secured €5.5 million in budget 2022 to provide start-up funds to resource the establishment process. A programme of work is now under way to secure the recruitment of key staff with the relevant skills and expertise to establish and lead an coimisiún and to lay the groundwork for the commencement of its regulatory functions. This includes managing the transition of Broadcasting Authority of Ireland staff and functions to an coimisiún, while at the same time ensuring the continuity of existing broadcasting regulation set out under the Broadcasting Act 2009.

The recruitment of the senior staff who will lead and manage coimisiún na meán is a priority. Work is currently under way between my officials and officials from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Public Appointments Service, PAS, to secure the recruitment of those staff, including the executive chairperson and online safety commissioner, through open, transparent, and effective public competitions. As provided for by Part 3 of the Bill, the recruitment of the commissioners and executive chairperson will be carried out by the PAS. I would expect that these critical posts would be advertised in the second quarter of 2022 at the latest. Part 16 of Bill provides for the dissolution of the BAI and the transfer of its regulatory functions, assets, rights and liability, and its staff to an coimisiún. In this context, it is important to note that the Bill specifies that BAI staff will transfer over on their existing terms and conditions. The dissolution of the BAI and the transfer of its staff will take place following the enactment of the Bill and commencement of the relevant provisions.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: As we know, people rely on newspaper, TV, radio and online platforms to find out about local and national issues, to inform them about current affairs, to showcase our culture and especially to reach out to our Irish abroad and to bring the nation together at times of national celebration and reflection. I rely heavily on my own local media such as KCLR, *The Nationalist* and the *Carlow People*. I see how these traditional broadcasters and newspapers in Carlow are facing new and increased pressures. We need a media that informs, entertains and reflects us as a people and delivers value for money. How can we protect and enhance independent journalism and ensure creative artists have a platform to showcase our culture to the country and to the wider world? This is a significant issue for me. Disinformation is on the rise. Sustainable and impartial journalism has never been more important. That is why it will be important to have the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill. I welcome the commitment the Minister has given that the Bill will be enacted by the summer or the end of this year. The timescale on this is of the utmost importance.

Deputy Imelda Munster: My question was prompted by comments from the Minister on the establishment of the media commission, which indicated that the process would begin ahead of the passing of the Bill. The committee has corresponded with the Minister, as it appears that we are in a vacuum currently in terms of the commission and the Bill. We know that the staff of the BAI will be transferred, but is the Minister saying that the recruitment process has started or

that it will not happen until the second quarter of this year? Are we looking at the second half of this year before the commission will be established?

Deputy Catherine Martin: Disinformation is a significant and complex issue, as Deputy Murnane O'Connor has said, and requires a distinct and targeted response. The EU is currently reviewing the code of practice on disinformation in order to strengthen it and to link it to the forthcoming Digital Services Act, which will set out the standards for platforms in dealing with the issue. The code of practice is a European Commission initiative which involves a range of online platforms, including social networks and advertising industry players, signing up to the self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation. The Commission intends that the code will evolve into a co-regulatory instrument under the Digital Services Act. In addition, the European Commission has established the European Digital Media Observatory, including a hub here in Dublin City University, which has been tasked with monitoring the implementation of the code.

In response to Deputy Munster, I do not see the vacuum. The Bill was before the House and has completed Second Stage in the Seanad. It is very much to do with the importance of establishing the commission that we have approved its establishment on an administrative basis prior to the enactment of the Bill, and I have spoken about that several times. That is why I secured the €5.5 million. My intention is that the Bill will be enacted and we will have this commission set up.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: When that Bill is enacted and the BAI is formally dissolved, the new regulator, coimisiún na meán, will be established. This is important because it will be responsible for overseeing the regulation of broadcasting, video on-demand services and the new regulatory framework for online safety set out in the Bill. It is essential from both an operational and reputational standpoint that the commission has sufficient staff with experience and skills that are at an appropriate level in order to effectively carry out its regulatory functions. How will the Minister ensure that the commission has the required skills needed for such a wide remit and to cover the specific area of online safety as set out in the Bill? How will we ensure the voice of those most directly impacted by the work of the commission - the general public - will be integrated into its work?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yesterday, we had Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, at the media committee. She was very clear about the responsibility of Ireland in terms of regulating social media effectively and having a regulator with real teeth. She stressed time and time again the need to ensure sufficient resources are available to address these issues because it is a completely new regulatory environment in terms of the tech giants, where we are starting pretty much at zero. Will the Minister expand on the funding situation? What level of funding does she expect to come from the content levy, what level of funding will come from the Government and what sort of increase does she expect in regard to staff numbers?

Deputy Catherine Martin: I want to address the previous issues that I did not get to conclude. I have provided €5.5 million to commence recruitment of staff. The aim is to pass the Bill by the summer. With regard to recruitment, officials are engaging with the PAS and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I expect to advertise for the key commissioner posts in coimisiún na meán in the second quarter of the year.

Deputy Murnane O'Connor asked about resourcing. Given the importance of an coimisiún, we approved the establishment on an administrative basis prior to the enactment of the Bill so we can move quickly with this. That is why I secured €5.5 million in the budget to provide the

start-up funds to resource the establishment process. A programme of work is now under way to secure the recruitment of key staff who will have the relevant skills and expertise to establish and manage an coimisiún. This includes the recruitment of the online safety commissioner through an open, transparent and effective process managed by PAS. An coimisiún will ultimately be fully funded by the industry levy.

Question No. 9 answered with Question No. 6.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

10. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the public consultation on the selection process for the board of Údarás na Gaeltachta; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10442/22]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Tá an cheist seo dírithe ar bhord nua Údarás na Gaeltachta. Conas a bheidh na bail roghnaithe? Cén plean atá ann don athbhreithniú air sin? Cén leagan amach a bheidh air? An bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt air sin?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Mar is eol don Teachta, luaitear sa chlár Rialtais go ndéanfar athbhreithniú ar struchtúir fheidhmiúcháin agus rialachais Údarás na Gaeltachta agus ar an bpróiseas roghnúcháin nó toghcháin i ndáil le bord an údaráis. Mar a bhaineann sé leis an athbhreithniú ar an bpróiseas roghnúcháin nó toghcháin i ndáil le bord an údaráis, cuireadh tús le gairid le comhairliúchán poiblí mar chuid den athbhreithniú. Tá sé seo á dhéanamh sa chaoi is go mbeidh an deis chuí ag páirtithe leasmhara agus ag an bpobal trí chéile a dtuairimí faoin ábhar a roinnt i scríbhinn leis an Roinn. Is féidir aighneacht a dhéanamh faoin ábhar idir seo agus an 25 Márta tríd an gceistneoir ina leith, atá ar fáil ar *gov.ie*, a chomhlánú agus a sheoladh chun na Roinne idir seo agus sin. Ós rud é gur comhairliúchán poiblí é seo, foilseofar na haighneachtaí a bhfaightear ar shuíomh Idirlín na Roinne in am tráth.

Comhthreomhar leis an bpróiseas sin, leanfaidh mo Roinn ag obair mar is cuí i gcomhar leis an Oifig um Sholáthar Poiblí i dtreo sainchomhairleoireacht a aimsiú chun tabhairt faoin athbhreithniú foriomlán agus moltaí ina leith a sholáthar don Roinn maidir leis an ábhar. Is é an cuspóir trí chéile a chinntiú go mbeidh fáil ag an údarás ar an saineolas, ar na scileanna agus ar an ionchur pobail ábhartha agus cuí atá de dhíth le go mbeidh an bord in ann tacú le feidhmeanas an údaráis a cuid feidhmeanna a chomhlíonadh go héifeachtúil agus go héifeachtach ar leas na pobail Ghaeltachta a ndéanann an t-údarás freastal orthu.

Mar is eol don Teachta, faoi réir na bhforálacha ábhartha de na hAchtanna um Údarás na Gaeltachta, arna leasú faoi Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012, is ar feadh tréimhse chúig bliana a mhaireann ceapacháin ar bhord an údaráis de ghnáth. Ós rud é gur ceapadh an bord reatha i mí Eanáir 2018, tiocfaidh deireadh lena shaolré i mí Eanáir 2023. Is é seo an dara bord atá ceaptha faoi na socruithe reatha réamhluaite.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeidh deis ag an bpobal a thuairimí a chur in iúl mar gheall ar an mbord agus ar an leagan amach a bheidh ann. Gan dabht, sa tslí atá ann faoi láthair, níl an rogha ag an bpobal a ionadaithe féin a roghnú. Tá laige ansin agus tá laghdú ar an nasc idir an pobal agus na hionadaithe atá ann thar a gceann. Mar sin, tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh an deis sin ag an bpobal. An bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt ar an tréimhse a bheidh ag an mbord nua? An mbeidh gach ionadaí ar an mbord sin ar chomh-

chéim? An mbeidh deis ag gach ionadaí freastal ar feadh na tréimhse céanna? Faoi láthair, tá ionadaithe ann ó Chorcaigh, ón Mí agus ó Phort Láirge atá srianta. Níl ach dhá bhliain acu ar an mbord. Cuireann sé isteach ar fheidhmiú an bhoird go bhfuil daoine ag athrú an t-am ar fad agus go bhfuil tréimhse ghairid ann. An bhféadfadh an tAire Stáit soiléiriú a thabhairt air sin?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Leis an bpróiseas comhairliúcháin poiblí, beidh deis ag gach duine ar fud na tíre páirt a ghlacadh sa phróiseas. Aontaím leis an Teachta go mbeidh sé an-tábhachtach deis a thabhairt do gach duine páirt a ghlacadh ar bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta. Mar is eol don Teachta, beidh an próiseas comhairliúcháin poiblí ag tosú go luath. Tá súil agam go mbeimid in ann an t-athbhreithniú a thosú chomh luath agus is féidir. Nuair atá an próiseas seo críochnaithe, beimid in ann an struchtúr nua a chur amach agus na ceisteanna agus na céimeanna eile a shoiléiriú. Beimid in ann na ceisteanna sin a fhreagairt i ndiaidh an phróisis seo.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Mar a luaigh mé, beidh an bord reatha as feidhm in 2023. Tá an t-am sin ag druidim linn go tapa. Tá an próiseas comhairliúcháin tosaithe anois. An bhfuil tuairim ag an Aire Stáit ar cén fhad a thógfaidh an próiseas comhairliúcháin? An mbeidh an córas nua i bhfeidhm in am i gcomhair an chéad bhord eile a chur isteach in 2023? An bhfuil plean faoi leith chuige sin? Luafaidh mé arís an tslí ina bhfuil an nasc idir pobal na Gaeltachta agus an bord laghdaithe nuair nach bhfuil deis ag an bpobal a ionadaithe féin a roghnú. Dar ndóigh, ní raibh aon ionadaíocht ag roinnt acu ar feadh ceithre bliana agus is laige é sin. Pé rud a roghnófaí, tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh gach ball ar chomhchéim agus go mbeidh deis ag an bpobal a ionadaithe féin a roghnú amach anseo. Cífidimid cad a éireoidh as an bpróiseas comhairliúcháin, ach an féidir soiléiriú a thabhairt ar cén uair an mbeidh an bord nua ag teacht i bhfeidhm?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Tá nasc idir an bord agus an pobal agus is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag déanamh an próiseas seo anois chun deis a thabhairt do dhaoine páirt a ghlacadh sa phróiseas comhairliúcháin poiblí. Ina dhiaidh sin, beimid in ann an struchtúr nua a chur amach nuair a bheidh an t-athbhreithniú críochnaithe. Beimid in ann na céimeanna eile a fhoilsiú nuair a bheidh an t-athbhreithniú críochnaithe maidir leis an mbord eile. Táimid ag déanamh na hoi-bre sin anois agus nuair a bheidh an t-athbhreithniú foilsithe, beimid in ann na céimeanna eile a chur amach maidir leis an mbord nua. Tuigim, ámh, go bhfuil an bord seo críochnaithe an bhliain seo chugainn. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an t-athbhreithniú críochnaithe i rith an tsamhraidh agus beidh go leor míonna againn chun na céimeanna eile a chur i gcrích.

Cross-Border Co-operation

11. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of a shared island approach to sport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10436/22]

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Our shared island initiative aims to harness the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement, to enhance co-operation, connection and mutual understanding on the island and engage with all communities and traditions as we seek to build consensus around the shared future. Sport will play a large part in all this. Will the Minister update the House on the shared island approach to sport.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am pleased to inform the Deputy that there will be a shared island dialogue on sport this afternoon. It will be the ninth event in the shared island dialogue

series that was launched by the Taoiseach in October 2020. This event is being held in the Sport Ireland national sports campus in Blanchardstown and can also be watched online from 2.30 p.m.. Current and former sports stars, sports organisations, clubs, community groups and health and well-being professionals will come together today to examine the role that sport plays in building and improving community relations. It will also explore how to enhance co-operation through sport across the island.

There is, of course, a long and vibrant tradition of collaboration in sport across the island. Many of our sporting bodies are organised on an all-island level; our international teams in sports as diverse as rugby, cricket and hockey draw on the talent of people from all parts of this island for their success and our Olympic heroes come from all backgrounds, cultures and traditions, representing the full diversity of communities and traditions on the island of Ireland.

Towards the end of last year, I launched a sports action plan which runs until the end of next year. One of its actions commits to continue to engage positively on a North-South basis to facilitate the delivery of sport and physical activity to all on the island and to enable the sharing of best practice and access to facilities. Today's dialogue provides an important opportunity to look at how we can put that into practice.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: That is most welcome. As we build a shared island we need to facilitate and expand our sporting connections and, therefore, this news is very timely. Sport plays a vital role in breaking down barriers and bringing communities together. We only have to look at our experience through Covid to see how important sport was. It brings us together in a common cause and in teamwork and, most importantly, it helps fill the gaps that divide us. That is nowhere more important than in Ireland.

Can the Minister of State indicate any measures that have been implemented or are planned on the shared island approach to sport?

Deputy Jack Chambers: More than two thirds of the 70 or so NGBs have decided to run their sports on an all-island basis. They have produced some brilliant teams across so many sports. We have also seen that in our international representation in athletics and a range of other sports. It is important that we strengthen those ties and ascertain how we can share sporting facilities. The Department and Sport Ireland have a lot of engagement with Sport Northern Ireland on how we can achieve that across the board.

Sport has a key role in allowing people to leave their differences at the door and build a common connection and common purpose through sport. Building those links between people from different traditions on this island can play a key role in breaking down barriers. We are keen to strengthen that. The dialogue we will have today will play a key role too.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I commend the Minister of State on his input and role in the area so far. He has taken a real leadership role, although I saw his exploits on Twitter earlier this week and I do not think he will be any threat to Johnny Sexton or Joey Carbery soon. The role he is in probably suits him better.

More seriously, is there a budget allocation in the shared island unit for initiatives relating to sport?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The shared island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach is supporting today's event. That will allow future conversations on what cross-Border initiatives

might be possible. That is across all areas of government. That structured conversation with people who have experience and who have grown up, North and South, on how we can build those bridges and break down barriers, leave their differences at the door and celebrate different traditions through sport is important. We have seen many example where sport in communities, particularly in the North, has played a key role in bringing people of all generations together where they can celebrate difference rather than having that divide. That is why it is a key area of focus in today's dialogue. Hopefully, it will fulfil future opportunities. Both Departments work closely on sharing facilities and looking at infrastructural possibilities.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are running out of time. We have time to squeeze in one more question but it will not have the full time.

Tourism Industry

12. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans for domestic tourism for 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10506/22]

Deputy Brendan Griffin: What is the outlook for domestic tourism for 2022. I had tabled another question on international tourism as well but I would ask the Minister to give the House an update on the plans.

Deputy Catherine Martin: In budget 2022, the Government allocated €67.6 million in additional funding for tourism, thereby bringing the overall tourism services budget to €288 million. This funding will enable the tourism agencies to assist in the recovery of the sector. The funding allocated to the tourism agencies in 2022 includes €50 million for further business continuity support for strategic tourism businesses and a €35 million increase in the tourism marketing fund as well as €36.5 million in capital funding for tourism product development.

Fáilte Ireland recently unveiled plans to support a sustained and sustainable recovery of the tourism industry this year. The plans include a doubling of domestic marketing investment to €10 million to drive domestic demand including short breaks all year round. The implementation of four regional brand tourism strategies will be critical to driving the long-term recovery of tourism across Ireland and to capitalising on the anticipated growth in inbound tourism in 2022.

There will be further investment in the digital presence of tourism businesses, including enhancing the digital capabilities of more than 400 tourism businesses through Fáilte Ireland's Digital that Delivers programme. A digital audit of more than 800 hotels will be conducted and a suite of digital supports will be rolled out to ensure that businesses are visible, searchable and, most importantly, bookable. Fáilte Ireland will help address staffing and skills issues in the tourism and hospitality sector, including the first-ever excellent employer programme. The agency will assist businesses in their immediate recruitment efforts and help them to commit to driving long-term change and to making the industry an appealing and rewarding workplace that can attract and retain talent.

Fáilte Ireland will continue its investment in new and enhanced and best in class visitor experiences. Projects that will open between now and 2025 will be dispersed throughout the country and will help drive visitor growth with a strong focus on the outdoors. This will be

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complemented by a strong network of festivals and events such as the Fleadh Cheoil 2022, which I am pleased will return as an in-person physical event, taking place this summer in Mullingar. The Fleadh Cheoil is the world's largest annual celebration of Irish music, language, song and dance and it attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the host town.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has one minute. He will not get back in again.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: It is very important that there should be strong marketing funding. There will be strong demand among people for going overseas. That is attractive after having had two years at home and, therefore, it is really important that we try to keep as much money in our economy as possible. It is really important that there be good interaction between the Minister and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science around addressing the skills shortages. That will be a critical challenge for the industry in the years ahead. The commitments in the programme for Government on the Wild Atlantic Way and greenways are important. We should look at what we can do with the eastern seaboard as well. There is great potential there. Developing those experiences is very important. As a final point, it is really important to fight for the capital in 2022 for future years to keep investing in new attractions and experiences in Irish tourism.

Deputy Catherine Martin: There is much to address there. As I outlined earlier, there has been that increased funding in the form of the €35 million increase in the tourism marketing fund, as well the €36.5 million in capital funding for tourism product development. The Deputy will be aware the largest-ever investment announced last year by Fáilte Ireland in Westport, Dublin, Donegal and Cavan. That is the investment in those new visitor experiences.

From my engagement with Tourism Ireland I can tell him there is pent-up demand to visit Ireland. People are being attracted by the key attractions the Deputy mentioned such as the greenways, walkways and blueways. I am acutely aware of those commitments in the programme for Government and how they can really drive the tourism back. I am of course working closely with Fáilte Ireland to encourage people to still holiday at home and support our tourism industries.

There is engagement with the Minister, Deputy Harris, on recruitment. He is doing fantastic work there and has worked with the Irish Hotels Federation on that, as the Deputy will be aware.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Climate Action Plan

79. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the recent comments by the Director General of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, that greenhouse gas emissions are unlikely to fall here in 2022; if he has plans to strengthen the climate action remit of the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU, to prioritise the achievement of Ireland's 2030 and 2050 emission reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10693/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the recent comments by the director general of the EPA that greenhouse gas emissions are unlikely to fall here in 2022. Has the Minister plans to strengthen the climate action remit of the CRU to prioritise the achievement of Ireland's 2030 and 2050 emission reduction targets? Will he make a statement on the matter?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am happy to make that statement. In 2021, we saw a step-change in our approach to climate action, with the signing into law of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the publication of the national development plan, NDP, and the Climate Action Plan 2021. The significantly strengthened legally binding framework established under the climate Act with clear targets and commitments set in law will help ensure Ireland achieves its national, EU and international climate goals and obligations in the near and long term. This includes our commitment to halving greenhouse emissions by 2030 relative to 2018 levels. Achieving these goals will require changes across all sectors of our society and economy. It will involve collaborative effort by Government, business, communities, and individuals to implement new and ambitious policies. The statutory framework laid out in the climate Act ensures delivery of successive climate action plans, national long-term climate action strategies, and national adaptation frameworks, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC.

The CRU is a key stakeholder in a number of actions and measures identified in the climate action plan and the supplementary annex of actions published late last year. The commission's role in the protection of the environment, the promotion of renewable, alternative and sustainable energy use, the encouragement of the efficient use and production of electricity and supporting research and development for the generation of renewable and sustainable forms of energy and increasing the efficient use and production of electricity demonstrates its existing key role in supporting Ireland in reaching its climate objectives and emissions reduction targets.

It is a real challenge. What the head of the EPA indicated last week is indeed very possible. We see a particular problem with increasing emissions from Moneypoint power station and the return to pre-Covid traffic levels. These are the big challenges that are the cause of rising emissions but I am confident we can, and will, turn that around. Our plans that are in place will see emissions start to fall. It will take time but we are taking the right approach.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. As he knows, the director general of the EPA said it is hard to see how emissions will fall this year. I think a former head of the CCAC said they will likely increase. This is at a time we are in the second year of a carbon budget where we are supposed to see a 4.8% annual average reduction. I do not take any satisfaction from saying this but there is a real possibility that, as a Green Party Minister with responsibility for the environment, Deputy Ryan will preside over our missing every emissions reduction target in his tenure. The approach taken by Government is incremental. It is based on carbon tax which, regardless of one's position on it, is in itself incremental. Does he see an alternative, better way to finance this transition that reflects the urgency that is needed?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Finance is not the key obstacle. It is one of the elements we need to have in place but it is not the biggest constraint. The biggest constraint is that we all - public and Government - must engage in a form of system change that takes time, especially with transport, agriculture and energy. With energy, there is probably a clearer, more certain path.

All the finance in energy is going to go in this clean direction towards retrofitting, renewables and hyper-efficiency in what we do. We are on the path there. It will take us time to switch off Moneypoint but we will do that. Transport and agriculture are more difficult. Financing is indeed one part but the biggest issue is probably political commitment at local and national levels. We have that political commitment in this House and it then comes down to the decisions themselves. It comes down to each decision on the allocation of space as much as the allocation of finance, to take that example. That is going to be the key metric.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I do not agree. I refer again to the level of funding committed to this. We differ on the carbon tax but it will at best raise €9.5 billion, though I question that figure. That figure is a drop in the ocean in respect of what is needed to deliver the type of urgent systemic change the Minister is talking about. People do not see the impact on public transport, for example. They do not see it with renewables. We are not there and the window of opportunity is closing. This transition might happen, and I expect it will, but at this rate it will not happen in time. That is where I see the real issue with delivering that institutional change. For the State to lead on this requires a level of resources beyond anything that has been committed at either an Irish or European level. There must be a step-change.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The question I come back with is: where are those resources going to come from?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: You are the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes, and my answer to that is much of the private finance is already going in this direction. What I say to the food industry and the farmers behind it is if they think that industry is going to be able to survive in this decade if it does not start addressing the ecological crisis we are in then they are badly mistaken because that funding will disappear. It is the same for forestry. We can, and will, examine new funding mechanisms to pay for nature-based solutions. However, I return to the key point, namely, that funding is available. Are we in this House, and local authorities across the country, willing to make the scale of leap we must make? I think we are and the people are. It will take time. There may indeed be periods when reductions are not seen. It is not going to be exact in each year. It is not a straight line. However, I am absolutely convinced we can, and will, make that turn. It will require absolute political courage in the decisions we must make, and there is no shortage of that on this side, as well as the funding to back it up.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Grealish is taking No. 80.

Cybersecurity Policy

80. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the increases in funding that have been given to the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, over the past 12 months; his views on the way the centre has improved Ireland's defence against cyberattacks on State infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10521/22]

Deputy Noel Grealish: Given the volatile situation in Ukraine and that the cost of the cyberattack on the HSE last year is €100 million and still rising, will the Minister outline the increases in funding given to the NCSC over the past 12 months? What are his views on the

way the centre has improved Ireland's defence against cyberattacks on State infrastructure?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The programme budget for cybersecurity in my Department's Vote for 2022 is €5.1 million. That is broken down into €2.5 million in current expenditure and €2.6 million in capital expenditure. While this is the same funding allocation as 2021, it represents a trebling of the budget when compared with 2020. In addition, provision has been made in the Department's Estimate for 2022 for a year-on-year increase in the payroll and administration of the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, in the sum of €2.5 million, €2.1 million of which is for pay and €400,000 is for non-pay administrative overheads. The increased pay allocation is in recognition of the Government's decision last July to expand the capacity of the NCSC with an additional 20 posts, which are to be filled before the end of this year.

Strengthening the NCSC is a key component of our strategy. In the past year, we commissioned a capacity review to benchmark the NCSC against its counterparts in European and other states. The consultants noted the knowledge, expertise and motivation of the NCSC's staff, which was apparent in their exemplary response to the HSE incident last May. The Government has accepted the recommendations in the capacity review and invested in increased capacity in a number of ways, including the appointment of a new director of the NCSC and a number of other new staff, new threat intelligence contracts and a new contract with the UCD Centre for Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Investigation. The NCSC has completed a national risk assessment of critical infrastructure to ensure that it has a thorough understanding of critical national infrastructure and has contact channels with all operators.

The Deputy will not be surprised to hear me say that this matter is of particular importance this morning. Given what is happening in the world, we should all be concerned about our security. Our systems are on heightened alert and are working with European and other colleagues to ensure that we are fully apprised of risks or threats. At the moment, the risk to our country is low to moderate, but the possible knock-on effects of what is happening elsewhere are something about which we must be vigilant. We are being so.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I welcome the budget increase for cybersecurity and the recent appointment of Mr. Richard Browne to the position of director of the NCSC. The incidents in question can have devastating consequences for national security, healthcare and many other social, economic and personal matters. The cyberattack on the HSE last year was the largest attack against any health service computer system in history. It paralysed systems and caused major disruption throughout every part of the health service, and its effects are still being felt in certain areas.

Cybersecurity threats pose some of the greatest challenges to our State. Only last Saturday, the NCSC issued an alert. Given that the military conflict in Ukraine has escalated in recent days, will the Minister confirm that all essential posts have been filled and that the NCSC is fully equipped with staff, technology and funding to deal with potential and probable threats in the coming months and years?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am glad that the Deputy acknowledged that the appointment of Mr. Browne as director of the NCSC was a key appointment. Mr. Browne is well qualified and was centrally involved during the HSE attack last May. I can confirm that we have already brought on board many of the people we want. The NCSC is being moved to new offices that are fully equipped and secure. Further down the line as my Department moves to Beggar's Bush, we will be building a state-of-the-art, secure and isolated facility to give us all the capabilities we

need.

I spoke to Mr. Browne in recent days to get a sense of the current risks. We are on heightened alert. We are not seeing immediate domain name system, DNS, or other attacks on our systems. It is key that not just the NCSC, but every Department and business monitors and manages its networks so as to reduce risk. The NCSC's key role is helping others to ensure that we have our defences in place.

Deputy Noel Grealish: In addition to large-scale cyberattacks from abroad, cybercrime is on the rise. According to Garda reports, it increased by 150% during the pandemic, costing billions of euro in 2020. Unfortunately, many people caught by online scams do not report it to the Garda, so the costs could be much higher. The attractions of cybercrime for criminals are many, as the rewards can be higher and the risk of getting caught are lower. Even criminals not involved in cybercrime are using encryption to hide their activities and cryptocurrencies to store and move money, making it harder for the Garda to track.

The Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau is struggling to recruit cyber experts due to competition from the private sector, which is paying much higher salaries in a competitive market. Is the bureau working with the NCSC or do they work independently of each other? Are there enough resources going into both to protect our State and citizens?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy on the risks in terms of crime as well as national security. It is vital that the Garda cyber unit, the NCSC and our Defence Forces cyber capabilities work. Each has a separate but co-ordinated role. The central co-ordinating role lies with the NCSC. It has to have the best expertise and contacts with international networks in order to assess risks and share knowledge and information. I saw that in evidence during the attack last May when there was a weakness in our system, which allowed an incursion into the health system. That system was particularly weak at the time because Covid had led to there being so many networked devices. While that weakness was regrettable, the State's response was quick, co-ordinated and collective. We need to ensure that the Garda, the Defence Forces and the NCSC work collectively. I am confident that they will.

Energy Prices

81. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the rising cost of energy and electricity for households; when households will receive the €200 electricity credit; the additional measures he will take to address rising fuel, electricity and energy costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10694/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What are the Minister's views on the rising costs of energy and electricity for households? When will households receive the €200 electricity credit? What additional measures will he take to address rising fuel, electricity and other energy costs?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is important that we help our people through what is, unfortunately, an historic period of high international fuel prices caused by international events - not just what we now see as the war in Ukraine, but a variety of factors that are outside our control. At the start, the Government's response was to monitor the situation constantly. This year's budget contains significant increases in social welfare that are designed to help those who are most at risk of fuel poverty. There has also been a significantly increased allocation for energy

efficiency measures, which target those on low incomes in particular. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has given my Department all the capability it needs to help people become more energy efficient in that way.

It was appropriate of us to deploy various other additional measures: the reduction in public transport fares, increased help with medical prescription charges and, of more importance, the direct credit payment of €200, which is likely to appear on most people's bills this April. That payment was the most effective and fastest measure and, in comparison with what other European countries are doing, is in line with best practice and with what was recommended by the European Commission.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister for his reply. I did not pick up the date on which the €200 credit would land on people's bills. Perhaps he will clarify it.

It might seem a secondary consideration in light of everything that is happening, and our primary concern is for the welfare of the people of Ukraine, but will the Minister clarify the role of Russian gas in our supply? The Tánaiste stated that our supply was 50% from Corrib and 50% from Moffat. Previously, the Minister stated that it was one third from Corrib and two thirds from Moffat, with 3% of the latter possibly being Russian gas.

Does the Minister expect gas prices to increase? At what point, if any, will he consider the carbon tax and excise duties – the Government has ruled out VAT – if prices continue increasing for people?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Bill to allow for the payment of the credit still has to come back to the Dáil. It was amended in the Seanad this week. Subject to it being able to return to the Dáil, which I presume will be next week, the Business Committee will have to decide. That would bring us into early March. It will have to be signed by the President and the various regulations will have to be put in place, so it will be the end of March and into April that we should start seeing bills being adjusted.

In recent days, I was speaking with colleagues in the European Commission about Europe's ability to manage our gas supplies during this crisis. Nothing is certain; we are in a completely uncertain moment. We are not reliant on Russian gas. Of the gas that we use, only a relatively small percentage, in the low single digits, comes from Russian gas fields. In 2006 and 2009, we went through a similar Russian gas crisis when the pipelines were cut off. At that time, Europe was much weaker. We have improved our systems since then. We are still not protected but I am informed by the Commission officials to whom I spoke yesterday that we will be able to manage. There is latency and capability for us to progress even if some of the gas pipelines are shut off.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: One of the ways we can help people with their electricity and energy costs is to empower and enable them to generate their own energy. When will we have the long-awaited updated regulations to exempt schools from the planning conditions in terms of solar PV? We heard from the Taoiseach that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage would have them ready in two or three weeks. We then heard from the Minister of State at that Department that the timeframe in that regard would be months because the Department is still awaiting an environmental impact assessment. My first question was in regard to missed targets. This is the low-hanging fruit. We need to empower communities, schools and farms to play their role. The State is acting as an impediment.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the regulations, my understanding is that they were to be ready in weeks rather than months. I will have to check that and revert to the Deputy. He is correct that our response in reducing our emissions and our dependency on imported gas, regardless of where it is from, has to be in every different location and every school building. We have to avail of every opportunity to make the switch in our heating systems particularly and in our power generation. The heating plan we are working on with the SEAI will be developed and published in the near future. That plan will play a key role in giving clear guidance, particularly to public authorities, as to the changes we need to make.

Legislative Measures

82. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will consider an amendment to legislation to allow local authorities to use closed-circuit television, CCTV, footage as evidence to prosecute persons for illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10692/22]

Deputy Noel Grealish: Will the Minister consider an amendment to legislation to allow local authorities to use CCTV footage as evidence to prosecute people for illegal dumping?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My Department published the general scheme of the circular economy Bill 2021 on 15 June last. It is my intention under this Bill to facilitate not only the use of CCTV but the use of a broad range of audiovisual recording, AVR, equipment to assist local authorities in their efforts to combat litter and illegal dumping. Drafting of the Bill is well advanced and the final report of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action was published on 16 December last. The Bill will be published in quarter 1 this year and enacted as soon as possible thereafter.

A combination of legislation and guidance will help to ensure that the processing of personal data obtained through the use of CCTV and AVR equipment may be carried out by local authorities tasked with enforcing litter and waste legislation thus providing an important deterrent to protect our environment from the scourge of illegal dumping while, at the same time, respecting the privacy rights of citizens.

I have seen in my constituency, as I am sure is the case in the Deputy's area of Galway city and county, that even where CCTV cameras are available very often the evidence cannot be used and prosecutions cannot be pursued. It is a real problem not just in regard to the issue of waste management but, I imagine, in a wide variety of different policing issues. We have to strike the right balance between the rights to privacy and how data is used, shared or stored. We cannot allow flagrant breaches of public environment, waste management and other rules to continue and a situation where there is no mechanism for local authorities to enforce that. The circular economy Bill presents an opportunity to address that issue. I am confident it will get the support of the Dáil. We will then have to put it into practice.

Deputy Noel Grealish: This is the fourth time in the past two years that I have raised the issue of illegal dumping in the House. It continues to be a major scourge on the landscape and it is particularly a problem in rural areas. Penalties for those caught in the act of illegal dumping are not strict enough. We still have the ridiculous situation whereby a person caught on CCTV in the act of illegal dumping cannot be brought to court. It was recently reported that illegal dumping is costing local authorities up to €90 million per annum. This does not factor

in the time and effort of Tidy Towns committees and volunteers working in local communities on clean-ups.

When I raised this issue with the Taoiseach last March, he indicated that in his opinion privacy rights in regard to the CCTV footage of those caught in the act of illegal dumping should not apply and he would request legislation to be drafted to address this. Will the Minister please bring forward that legislation? He mentioned his constituency. The level of illegal dumping along a 1 km stretch of road on the outskirts of the Galway city is appalling. This has been going on for the past five years. This has to be dealt with it. It is destroying the rural countryside.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree. In that regard, the circular economy Bill, which will be published within weeks, will be critical. My understanding is that alongside that it is proposed to implement mandatory codes of practice that will ensure relevant data protection legislation is complied with by any local authority. The combination of legislation, non-statutory guidance and the use of mandatory codes of practice will ensure that the processing of personal data can be carried out by local authorities tasked with enforcing litter and waste law and compliance with GDPR and will address concerns previously raised by the Data Protection Commissioner. That then gives us the opportunity to unlock the enforcement mechanism that we all agree is needed.

Deputy Noel Grealish: On two separate occasions I have asked that a task force, comprising An Garda Síochána, departmental officials and local authorities, be put in place to deal with this issue. Such a task force would need to be given powers, including to use CCTV footage and to seize all vehicles and equipment involved in illegal dumping, with severe penalties imposed for those caught in the act in respect of the release of their vehicles. Once again, I am asking for a commitment that a task force to tackle this problem will be established as a matter of urgency. The only way to adequately tackle this problem is to hit those involved where it hurts. We can do this through the use of CCTV, the seizure of vehicles used for illegal dumping and the imposition of substantial fines in respect of the release of vehicles seized.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what we need. An Garda Síochána and the local authorities have been hindered previously for the lack of legislation that provided real clarity on data protection and privacy protection and, at the same time, allowed for enforcement. As I said, the combination of legislation and the codes of practices we propose to introduce will resolve that problem.

Climate Action Plan

83. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the consultation process by his Department for the draft territorial plan necessary to access funding under the European Union just transition process; the number of submissions that his Department received during the recent public consultation process; when he envisages the final version of the territorial plan will be completed and submitted to the European Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10535/22]

Deputy Carol Nolan: My question seeks from the Minister a report on the consultation process by his Department in respect of the draft territorial plan necessary to access funding under the EU just transition process, the number of submissions his Department received during the public consultation process and when he envisages the final version of the territorial plan

will be completed and submitted to the Commission?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The EU just transition fund is a newly established fund for the 2021-2027 period operating within the framework of the EU cohesion policy. The fund is to address the adverse socio-economic effects of the climate transition by supporting the most affected territories and workers and ensuring a fair transition.

Ireland must prepare a territorial just transition plan and accompanying programme for approval by the European Commission to secure access to our allocation of €84.5 million under the fund. I have appointed the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly, EMRA, as managing authority for the fund. My Department and the EMRA are jointly developing the territorial just transition plan and programme.

I launched a public consultation on a draft of the territorial just transition plan on 20 December, which was open until 14 February 2022. The draft plan provisionally identifies east Galway, north Tipperary, counties Longford, Laois, Offaly and Westmeath, west Kildare and County Roscommon as the functional territory to be targeted for investment under the plan. Feedback on the draft plan was gathered through an online survey and online workshops. My Department and the EMRA have also held dedicated briefing sessions for Oireachtas Members and members and staff of relevant local authorities in the identified counties. It is planned to publish a report summarising all responses received. Responses to public consultation will be used to develop further and finalise the draft territorial just transition plan before it is sent to Government for agreement and subsequently submitted, together with the EU just transition fund programme, to the European Commission for approval during 2022.

11 o'clock

Deputy Carol Nolan: Unfortunately, the Minister's response poses more questions than it answers. How many submissions has the Department received to date? I do not think the Minister gathers how serious this matter is. I remain opposed to the transition, which is not fair. The Minister mentioned its fairness but I can tell him it is far from fair. The Government is nonetheless steamrolling ahead and imposing this cost on people who are suffering from all sorts of issues, such as the cost of living. The Government is still imposing this cost. My main concern is we get a fair level of funding into the counties that are bearing the brunt of this.

The Minister also mentioned the publication of a report. Can we have a date for that? We need a plan here. We need dates and timeframes and, unfortunately, the Minister has not provided any of those.

Nowhere is it more applicable than County Offaly, which is expected to bear the brunt of the majority - 53% - of job losses associated with the just transition process. That is clear for all to see. It was also made clear to me by the cathaoirleach and chief executive of Offaly County Council and the corporate policy group of the council that the following issues require urgent consideration. Only 30% of the 47 strand 2 projects have received their final offer from the Department. Many strand 2 projects are still not finalised. Some 70% of projects are not yet at contract stage.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will give the Deputy some of the numbers involved in response to her question about the survey. There were 82 responses to the online public consultation survey and 41 submissions from individuals and groups. We are only just assessing those at the moment so I do not have a timeline yet for the delivery of the report, but as soon as I do, I will

share it with the Deputy.

With regard to the existing projects, 55 just transition projects have entered into contract and are delivering. The total value of projects in delivery mode is €30 million, with €20.5 million in grant funding. We estimate there are 154 direct jobs in those grantee organisations and there will be 932 indirect jobs. There are three remaining projects yet to have their grant agreements finalised. My Department is working closely with those remaining projects to try to finalise them as soon as possible. That work shows we will deliver. We will deliver new jobs and opportunities in the midlands that I believe will be able to deliver on the just transition.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I hope the Minister escalates the process of delivering the funding as much as he escalated the process for the transition, which was, as I said, totally unfair. I remind the Minister that only 30% of the strand 2 projects have received their final offer from the Department. There are still too many strand 2 projects - 70% of them - that have not been finalised. Those 70% of projects are, therefore, not at contract stage. I was informed by the local authority that a number of projects have encountered difficulties in accessing matching funding. From the council's perspective, the situation that arises in Offaly is serious and raises the question of the viability of these projects. I repeat my concerns that Offaly County Council is not in a position to provide direct funding to just transition projects in terms of the matching funding the council is seeking. All interventions to expedite the finalisation of these outstanding projects with the Department should be done. This should be done by the Minister's Department so that solutions for communities can be found. It is no good for the Minister to tell us he has delivered a handful of jobs when we are losing hundreds of jobs. That will not wash. It will not cut it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I had the pleasure of visiting County Offaly late last year and meeting council officials, the people involved in organising these transition fund projects and a number of those who are involved in the projects. Rather than it being a story of a lack of success, what I heard from both the council and the people involved was that this is working. It took time. If I was in here saying the process around the spending of public money did not have every i dotted and t crossed, I would be lacerated. We have done that and are now seeing that those projects are starting to deliver. They will not all survive or succeed but many will.

We are also seeing a transformation and revival of Bord na Móna. There has been a massive increase in investment and significant numbers of new jobs are being created. That is the model to follow. Our Department is working closely with Offaly County Council to ensure it has a key role in managing, monitoring and delivering these projects. That is the right way to go. We are also working with the eastern midlands region on the European just transition plan. I think it is working.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Departmental Schemes

84. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he plans to have a higher rate of grant and higher threshold of cost for householders, together with a lower threshold of turnover for contractors, based on islands under the national home energy upgrade scheme and the retrofit scheme to ensure the challenges of island life

relating to cost, scale and income opportunities are taken into account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10467/22]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister might remember a previous time he was a Minister and there was a higher rate of grants for retrofitting on the islands through the warmer homes grant and so on. Is the Minister going to go through the same process now? Will there be higher ceilings for the maximum expenditure and lower thresholds for island contractors who would not have turnover of €1 million? Those changes are required so we get work done on the island. Much of that work would be done by islanders, which would have a double effect. As the Minister knows, the islanders are very keen to reduce their carbon footprint. They are very creative in doing so.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is right and I remember the role he played in those grant schemes. We favoured the islands for a number of reasons. The islands are demonstrable. They are particular geographic areas so one can show and measure effects. The likes of Inis Mór and the Aran Islands have been progressive and have showed leadership in demonstrating how communities can come together. The islands were also favoured because of the issue of energy security. Shipping fossil fuels - gas, oil, coal or any other fossil fuel - to an island is inherently expensive and brings risks with it. We did provide those higher grants and they delivered. Some 300 home energy upgrades have been supported on the islands since 2014 under the community energy grant scheme. In the same time period, there have been 29 applications for the better energy homes scheme and 37 for the warmer homes scheme. It has worked.

I believe we have now moved to a different phase. The new grant levels of 50% and up to 80%, which we introduced two weeks ago, are the sort of grant levels that will make the case for themselves on the islands or onshore. That level of grant facility overcomes the cost impediments and the economic case is there.

The experience of the islands in the past built up abilities and skills. It also provided examples. That was what those initial higher grants were put in place to deliver and I believe they did so. I do not believe it appropriate to extend them. The new grant system we are introducing is sufficient and is the right measure.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am very disappointed with that reply, which seems to fail to recognise that getting any goods or labour onto the islands is far more expensive than trying to do the equivalent on the mainland. For example, to bring cargo from the mainland, one has to pay a cargo fee and VAT on that cargo fee. Those are extra costs. Thereafter, one has to move the cargo from the harbour to wherever on the island it is going.

I ask the Minister to meet a delegation from Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann. It is anxious to outline to the Minister why his policy is not treating all the people of not only the island of Ireland but also the territorial islands in an equal way because of the difference in cost. As the Minister said, the islanders have been innovative in what they have been doing. There has been considerable success. Why not build on that success and make the islands micro models of carbon neutral societies? We could bring Irish people and others from across the world to the islands to show them how a carbon neutral society actually works.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I would be happy to meet the representatives of the organisation the Deputy mentioned to discuss this issue. If we do that, I would also like to broaden the discussion because I think there is a lot we can learn from the islands. As the Deputy mentioned,

there are island-specific skills. Islanders have the ability to be innovative and flexible. They do a variety of tasks that often involve the community coming together. We want to protect and enhance that. We want to deploy some of those things on the mainland as well as maintaining their existence on the islands.

I do not want to give false hope when going into such a meeting. We are talking about grant levels of 50% and 80%. In fact, for the warmer homes scheme and other projects, the grant level is 100%, which means the full cost is covered. That will still apply to a lot of the housing on the islands. Anyone on an island who is in receipt of the fuel allowance, disability allowance, living alone allowance or any other allowance will be able to get that 100% grant. I do not think it is necessary, to make the leap we need to make, to have a separate grants system for the islands. I agree with the Deputy, however, that islanders face particular circumstances, and I am keen to support them in whatever other ways I can.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Many people living on our islands are not in receipt of fuel allowance because they have incomes. This is something we have been working hard to address over the years. There are huge extra costs involved in living on an island.

There were three parts to my question. One concerns the need for a higher rate of grants and the second relates to the maximum cost allowed. It is more expensive to do things on islands than to do them on the mainland. Therefore, the ceilings in place of €50,000, €2,000 and so on should be higher on the islands. The third issue is the turnover of contractors. There is no way one will find an island-based contractor, whose main focus is energy work on that island, who has a turnover of €1 million per year. Will the Minister address the second and third parts of my question?

I welcome his agreement to meet with the organisation to which I referred. The people involved have sent a letter to him and I hope the meeting will happen in the next few weeks. As he knows, islanders probably are the greatest enthusiasts in the country for making their part of the world carbon neutral.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will look at the threshold for turnover. I do not want to have such a complex bureaucratic system that we create a separate issue. However, if the turnover is a difficulty, we will look at it.

There are a variety of issues when it comes to higher costs. Obviously, cargo ferry costs are one of the most significant. My Department, in a variety of ways, is keen to support, and is supporting, the islands, particularly in terms of management of those ferries and the contract arrangements around it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is not a matter for the Minister's Department.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government supports it. Regarding grant levels, a key grant would be for something like a heat pump. In that instance, the grant will stay fixed but the overall building costs may change. It is appropriate for us to have a mechanism whereby there is a set level in order that people have certainty. We do not want to create a completely different and separate system for the islands, which might end up adding expense. I will come back to the Deputy and the islanders' organisation to see what can be done outside a separate grants system.

Cybersecurity Policy

85. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the preparations being taken to protect against further cyberattacks such as that experienced on the health service in May 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9295/22]

Deputy David Stanton: This morning, we have seen attacks by land, sea and air on the people of Ukraine. It is unbelievably awful. However, there is another arena of attack, which is cyberspace. Given that we experienced such an attack on our health service in May 2021, what has been done to date to strengthen our defences in this area? That attack cost tens of millions and showed we are vulnerable to this very new area of attack.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, which is located in my Department, has a broad remit across the cybersecurity of Government, ICT infrastructure and critical national infrastructure. In the immediate aftermath of the ransomware attack on the HSE, the NCSC led the national response process and took measures to protect other critical infrastructure operators. This included rapidly disseminating indicators of compromise and relevant guidance to ensure the cybercriminals behind the cyberattack could not threaten other vital services. The NCSC has worked with the HSE to learn lessons from that incident and these have been incorporated into the centre's ongoing engagement with operators of essential services in the health and other sectors. The NCSC continues to support the HSE as the latter enhances the security and resilience of its network and services.

The NCSC has a particular focus on supporting Government networks and public bodies. In collaboration with a cross-departmental group drawn from across the public service, it recently published the baseline cybersecurity standard to be applied by all Departments and Government agencies. In addition, the computer security incident response team, CSIRT, based within the NCSC, has developed and deployed technology on the infrastructure of Departments to detect and warn of certain type of threats.

The Government has committed to the further development of the NCSC, including through the provision of a new permanent facility at my Department's redeveloped headquarters in Beggan's Bush, funding to support a five-year technology strategy, and the drafting of primary legislation to provide a clear mandate and authority for the NCSC. This is in addition to the expansion in staffing at the centre, which will see staff numbers increase by 20 before the end of this year and to more than 70 in the next five years. There have been three dedicated recruitment competitions launched in recent months by the NCSC, with another opening later this week. The Government will provide all necessary support to the centre to ensure it can fulfil its important role in the years to come.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response, the work being done in this area and his acknowledgement of how critical it is. He talked about State and Government bodies being protected. What are his views on the security of mobile telephone platforms? How sure is he, for instance, that his own mobile telephone has not been hacked when he has visited other jurisdictions, or even here in Ireland? I was recently told that a number of people in this jurisdiction have had their telephones hacked in a way that meant they were not, and could not, be aware of it. Such hacking methods mean people's mobility, location and whom they are with can be tracked. Hackers can even listen into people's conversations. An expert approached me recently who is extremely worried about this, stating our mobile telephone platforms are very

vulnerable. In the context of the whole cybersecurity issue, will the Minister give us some assurances or information on what is being done regarding those platforms?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is right to raise concerns about security on mobile telephone devices. Everyone, even within the industry, recognises it is a real issue. There is much public debate on issues such as Ministers having a Garda driver and so on. In discussions with officials recently, we all agreed we need Garda security on our mobile communications system as much as we need a Garda driver. That sort of protection and advice is being developed and put in place. No individual should assume his or her device is fully secure, regardless of whatever security measures might be taken. My understanding is it is better to err on the side of caution and, as I say to anyone to whom I give advice on this issue, to presume that anything one does online, which is what our mobile telephones are increasingly used for, could be made public and should be treated as such.

Deputy David Stanton: The Minister has acknowledged that this issue is extremely serious. Has any communication been entered into with the mobile telephone operators in this regard? They control these platforms and are mainly based outside the jurisdiction. Has any contact been made with the very large IT companies that operate here? Their expertise might be availed of on this issue. It is an extremely serious matter. The mobile telephone can be a window and avenue into gathering other information, including very sensitive information, especially on people working in business and industry at a high level as well as Ministers and others who are part of the State apparatus. I urge the Minister to treat this matter very seriously and come back to us at a future date with what is being done on mobile telephone security.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister give an update on the information the NCSC gave to critical infrastructure companies in the past while? Given the difficulties that exist at this-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): It is a stretch to call the Deputy's question supplementary to the question that was put. I will give him a couple more seconds but it is a stretch for sure.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not sure it is. I ask the Minister for an update in that regard, given this morning's events involving the Russian invasion. Beyond that, a task force on telephone scams and hacking is meeting at this time. Does he have any update on how it is operating?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said, I have been in touch with the director of the NCSC in recent days to get an update on the particular situation we are in at the moment. I agree with Deputy Stanton that we have to do more and we are looking and working in co-operation with network operators to improve our security and to make sure they maximise security on their networks.

The NCSC publishes a lot of its material. It is well-regarded internationally because it is seen to be trustworthy and prompt in sharing information. A lot of its online communications are accessible, well-regarded and well-used. It has to be careful that it does not publish everything and it has to have levels of what information it can give out and it has protocols for same. We have to follow those protocols as well in what we can say.

24 February 2022

National Broadband Plan

86. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if an update will be provided on the roll-out of the national broadband plan, NBP, in Cork city and county. [9607/22]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I ask the Minister to provide an update on the roll-out of the NBP in Cork city and county.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There are over 276,000 premises in County Cork of which over 80,600 are within the NBP intervention area and they will receive access to high speed broadband under the NBP. Government investment in County Cork in the NBP will be in the order of €314 million. National Broadband Ireland, NBI, has made steady progress on delivery of the new high-speed fibre broadband network under the NBP. In County Cork surveying is under way in the deployment area of Clonakilty and surveying is complete in the deployment areas of Templemartin, Tallow, Kanturk and Fermoy. Main works are under way in the deployment areas of Middleton and Youghal and network build is complete in the deployment area of Carrigaline.

As of 11 February, over 35,000 premises in County Cork have been surveyed, with over 10,500 premises under construction and there are more than 4,500 premises than can today order a fibre broadband service. I welcome the provision of detailed status reports on the roll-out of high-speed broadband by NBI. My Department has worked closely with NBI to include a page on the NBI website which will provide county statistics updated on a monthly basis, starting in March. Broadband connection points, BCPs, are a key element of the NBP, providing high-speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll-out of the fibre to the home network. As of 11 February 2022, some 22 BCP sites have been installed in County Cork by NBI. In County Cork 15 schools have been installed by NBI to date for educational access and my Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high-speed broadband within the intervention area.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Steady progress is being made as the Minister says but there are huge parts of my constituency that are still without broadband and that are waiting for it. We rely on the Internet for so much, including security, education, entertainment and working from home. People who are without broadband are at a distinct disadvantage. I am hearing from my constituents in areas like Blarney, Tower, Kerry Pike, Donoughmore, Glenville and areas of Glanmire that not having broadband has serious implications for them, especially for working from home because they are not able to do so. I have a situation where a man has contacted me and he has no broadband but his neighbours on either side of him on the same street do. In this day and age a lack of broadband has huge consequences and the mismanagement of the scheme so far has had a serious impact on people's daily lives.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will make a broad point. The NBP is of critical importance and it is hugely important that we have the whole country covered but it is not the only investment that is taking place. There is huge investment taking place in a competitive market with operators like Eir, Virgin Media, SIRO and others. They are chasing after customers and investing all around the country and we are starting to see some of the benefits. The digital economy and society index is one of the key measures in Europe for the digital performance of different countries and it tracks the evolution of how member states are doing. In 2019 Ireland was placed eleventh on that index of European countries and we are now up to fifth as of last year. Some 99% of the

country has 4G coverage and our fixed high-capacity network coverage has gone from 35% to 83%. We rank first in the integration of digital technology dimension and we have a leading position in how small businesses are using it. We need to get perspective on this. We need to deliver this faster and we cannot have a situation where on one side of the road someone has coverage but on the other side someone else does not. That is why we have the NBP but we are radically improving and enhancing our digital communications network.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I also want to raise an issue experienced by those waiting for high-speed fibre to the home. Thanks to ComReg's decision D10/18, Eir will not tell people when they will have high-speed Internet. It will not give people a timeline beyond saying, for example, that it will be in 2026. I fully understand the need for fair competition but some compromise has to be reached on this because there are apartment blocks in the centre of Cork city with over 160 apartments that have no high-speed Internet connection. For those people, who have worked through Covid-19 from home and who could not work through Covid-19 from home, this is a disgrace and it is in the heart of the second city in the State. When these people look to sell their homes they have to tell potential buyers that at some stage in the next four years they will have connectivity, which is not good enough. Covid-19 has completely changed the way we live and if one does not have high-speed broadband, there are serious implications.

Deputy David Stanton: What kind of an understanding exists between the Department, NBI and the commercial operators to guarantee that the commercial operators will service the areas they say they will service? Is there a timescale available from the commercial operators for when they will do this? The Minister mentioned a number of areas in my constituency like Cobh and he said he might come back to me on that. A lot of that is marked blue but we have no idea when the work will be carried out there.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The point I was making to Deputy Gould is that we are seeing fierce competition between the other providers to get to customers because Eir is investing and significantly expanding and as I recall it had an additional 300,000 rural houses that it went to get to. Having done those it is moving to the next block and it is also moving into urban areas because it sees that it is at risk of losing business to the likes of SIRO, which has announced a major expansion in the number of houses it is targeting, as has Virgin Media. Those are just three of the operators so competition is starting to evolve to get to those households. It is in their interests to get to houses as soon as they can for fear of losing that market, particularly in urban areas, to other competitors.

Deputy Thomas Gould: But there is no timeline.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It comes down to each individual house and that is how companies plan to roll out the network. In the timeframe that was mentioned we will go to a situation where the vast majority of houses, be they in rural or urban Ireland, will have access to fast fibre-optic cable broadband. That will position us well in the provision of public services, helping small businesses and as the Deputy rightly says, in responding to this Covid time when people can work from home.

Energy Production

87. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the plans he has to develop the capability of the State to produce and store green

hydrogen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10260/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister the plans he has to develop the capability of the State to produce, store and use green hydrogen; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The role of hydrogen and the actions needed for its development were considered as part of the development of the climate action plan 2021. The plan, published in November, identifies green hydrogen as having the potential to support decarbonisation across several sectors and, in particular, as a source for high-temperature heat in industry and flexible generation in electricity. A key target set out in the climate action plan is to carry out a work programme to identify a route to deliver one to three TWh of zero emissions gas, including green hydrogen, by 2030. The plan includes a suite of actions relating to green hydrogen across the electricity, enterprise and transport chapters. These actions include testing the technical feasibility of safely injecting green hydrogen blends in the gas grid; assessing the potential for system integration between the electricity and gas networks, which will include the production, storage and use of green hydrogen; and progressing research and pilot studies regarding the use of hydrogen in the transport sector.

In addition, the SEAI is developing a number of initiatives on the role of green hydrogen in decarbonisation. The 2021 SEAI national energy research development and demonstration programme call included a number of projects relating to green hydrogen and the development of floating offshore wind foundations coupled with hydrogen storage.

The SEAI's national heat study, published this week, examines options to decarbonise the heating and cooling sectors in Ireland to 2050, including options for green hydrogen. In accordance with the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, the climate action plan will be updated on an annual basis to reflect ongoing developments and targets achieved. I expect a strategy focusing on the development of green hydrogen to be included in the 2022 climate action plan.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Everybody agrees that there is, potentially, a considerable opportunity with green hydrogen. I see it across the political spectrum and that is welcome. The concern of my party and me, which is shared by people in the wider community who have an interest in green hydrogen, is that the focus, ambition and urgency is not there from the Government. I acknowledge everything the Deputy has said in his response and I know the Department of Transport has issued a call which is welcome.

One of the things the sector says to me is that a strategy is very important. It needs to outline a commitment to green hydrogen. It should indicate an auction in the near future for industry to decarbonise and should point towards and deliver, in the first instance, hydrogen refuelling infrastructure throughout the State for transport. Can we expect to see that in the near future?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is critical that we develop clean electricity because it can only be green hydrogen. As a State, we will not go down the route of hydrogen coming from natural gas which would only worsen our energy security issue. Some 90% of our energy is imported into this country at the present time. We have to change this for climate and other reasons.

The green hydrogen strategy goes hand in glove with the renewable strategy. Renewable electricity will give us the power supply, through electrolysis, for green hydrogen. We are looking at a variety of different areas to accelerate that, to answer the Deputy's first question

today on how we start to accelerate carbon reduction. I am working within the public service to establish new fast delivery teams that would bring together agencies and different Departments which have a key role in that acceleration.

One of the acceleration task force teams will be on the offshore renewables side. That is to make sure we get our auctions for offshore renewables up and out and get the ports in place to be able to deliver it. Green hydrogen will be connected to that because, as the Deputy said, the two go together. That will give the certainty industry is looking for.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will focus on my supplementary questions on the haulage sector. One of the potential significant opportunities with hydrogen is to decarbonise the heavy goods sector. With regard to the current schemes the Minister has in place, I met with the haulage industry in the past couple of days and it points towards a deep frustration within the sector in terms of the engagement with the Minister and the Department to manage the transition. It points to the heavy duty vehicle grant scheme, which was oversubscribed. In the region of 60 lorries were purchased with it which are laid up. Hauliers cannot afford to run them because the price of gas has gone through the roof, as we all know, and compressed natural gas is not covered in the rebate scheme. Where is the sense and logic in terms of that scheme or system? Will the Minister engage with the sector to make it make sense for it?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): Deputy Stanton wants to come in on this.

Deputy David Stanton: I agree with the Minister on the importance of this green hydrogen initiative. In my area, a number of companies are very interested in this and linking with offshore, as the Minister has said, EI-H2 being one of them. I encourage the Minister to develop and publish a green hydrogen strategy because that is what the sector is calling for, as Deputy O'Rourke has said. Will the Minister comment on the safety aspects of green hydrogen? We know it is a very volatile gas. Have studies been done on its safety? Can the pipeline withstand the pressures? I understand there are increased pressures on the gas pipeline from green hydrogen. I know some of it is blended, but if it is not, increased pressures are needed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy asked a variety of questions. Obviously, safety has to come first. One of the issues with the networks is that green hydrogen has different characteristics such as much smaller molecules. Therefore, when it comes to the distribution gas network, even though ours is very modern, leakage becomes a more significant issue. Ports will be central to our hydrogen strategy because that will be the point where the offshore wind comes ashore. Most of our heavy industry and power generation plants, which will be the first application, can be found in ports such as the Port of Cork, where there are industries like biopharmaceuticals, refinery and power generation, and in Shannon Foynes Port, where there are companies like Aughinish Alumina and Irish Cement and the Moneypoint and Tarbert power stations. All the infrastructure is in the ports and they are likely to be the centre of this development.

We see transport as another key application. I will be honest. It will take a longer time. It will not be as easy to transition the haulage fleet. Electric vehicles, compressed air, gas or hydrogen will take longer. I am sitting down to work with the haulage industry to see what ways we can help it, which we immediately need to do in this difficult transition period. We have not found that mechanism yet, but I am confident we will do so in the coming weeks. We need to help the industry in this transition. It will take longer in haulage. We will still be-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Will the Minister look at the current scheme?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes. We are looking at a variety of schemes.

Cybersecurity Policy

88. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of staff currently working at the National Cyber Security Centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9283/22]

Deputy David Stanton: This question focuses on the number of staff currently working in the National Cyber Security Centre and their qualifications, experiences and roles.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The role of the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, is to support Departments and other public bodies to improve the resilience and security of their IT systems to better protect services upon which people rely and their data. The NCSC has a number of vital functions, including co-ordinating the response to large-scale cybersecurity incidents; supporting public sector bodies and critical national infrastructure to safeguard their systems and mitigate cyber risks; and sharing advice and guidance on cyber threats with its constituents and the wider community.

The NCSC avails of external expert support, as required, including a number of third-party incident response services. It also engages, on an ongoing basis, with relevant partner agencies in the EU, as well as in the US and the UK. In July 2021, on foot of memorandum for the Government, the Government agreed to implement a number of capacity-building measures in the NCSC. The overall full-time staffing complement of the NCSC will also be increased to at least 70 over the coming five years, with 20 additional staff to be recruited by the end of this year, bringing the serving complement to 45.

In addition to the creation of 20 new permanent posts in the NCSC, a cybersecurity graduate training programme was initiated last year, with four computer science graduates to be recruited each year on contracts for a three-year duration. Currently, there are 29 staff members in the NCSC, the highest level of staffing since its establishment.

Deputy David Stanton: It seems that number is quite small, given the threat that is out there and its scale and complexity. I brought up the issue of mobile phone platform security in a question earlier on. Will the Minister tell me whether the NCSC has a responsibility for security of the mobile phone network with respect to hacking and, if not, who does?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The first responsibility there is on the network providers. I have seen in the past how they work on a collective basis, including with the NCSC and other agencies, to make sure their networks are as secure as possible. They have the primary responsibility for the networks. However, the NCSC has overall responsibility. It is the centre of excellence and expertise in the State, to which the Garda, the Defence Forces, other corporations and, in particular, Departments and public agencies can have recourse to seek best advice. Its job is not to manage and monitor each and every network. It is to oversee and make sure that the best information is shared and the best practices put in place. As I said, the team is expanding. I said in response to an earlier question that we had a further round this week. It is a difficult environment because it is a very well-paid area. Cybersecurity is a very large industry in this

country. My experience is that we were able to get very capable people who were inspired by national interest in their work.

Deputy David Stanton: I am getting back to it again. I am sorry for focusing on this but it is very important. Is there somebody in the Minister's Department at assistant secretary or principal officer level who has responsibility for and a focus on the security of our national telephone platforms, many of which are based outside the State? Is there somebody whose focus is solely on this or who has a responsibility in this area; a go-to person who is co-ordinating it? The Minister agreed with me earlier that this is a very important and sensitive area in which we are exposed. Is there somebody in his Department who has expertise and who is focusing on this?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The first person I go to is the Secretary General in the Department. There is, however, a specific assistant secretary who I go to in terms of anything related to our network system. It is our responsibility in our Department to oversee the development, deployment and security of the networks. Both that assistant secretary and the director of the NCSC are directly responsible to me and to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth. They are our first port of call in terms of seeking advice or making sure our networks are safe and secure.

Question No. 89 replied to with Written Answers.

Environmental Schemes

90. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the one-stop shops for home energy upgrades will be available; if the locations of same have been decided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10450/22]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The retrofitting scheme was both welcome and ambitious but the public are anxious to know when the one-stop shops for the home energy upgrades will be available and if their locations have been decided. I am hopeful there will be an even spread across the country. It is so important that information is available in our area of Carlow-Kilkenny.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The recently launched national home energy upgrade scheme introduces a new, highly customer-centric way to undertake home upgrades. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, registered one-stop shops will provide an end-to-end service for homeowners. This includes surveying, designing the upgrades, managing the grant process, helping with access to finance, engaging contractors and quality assurance. The scheme offers unprecedented grant levels, increased from approximately 30% to 50% of the cost of a typical B2 home energy upgrade with a heat pump.

It is expected that the one-stop shops will be distributed across Ireland with a considerable number offering services nationwide through their network of contractors throughout the country. Other one-stop shops will likely work within geographic regions. This will ensure that every home can benefit from the one-stop shop service on offer.

Following Government approval, the SEAI registration portal for companies to apply to be a one-stop shop has opened. A number of one-stop shops have already applied and it is expected that following the necessary process, the first will be registered in the coming weeks.

Homeowners will then be able to make applications for upgrades under the new scheme.

To summarise, a number of one-stop shops have already been approved. We will not announce them until the registration process is properly concluded but they will be in place in the next few weeks.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is very welcome. A network of one-stop shops that will handle all the work involved in carrying out a significant energy upgrade is really good for homes. I know that people have to apply for this. Will there be a recruitment campaign for apprenticeships? How long will that take? That is the biggest issue. We know there is a lack of apprenticeships here.

The turnaround time will obviously depend on the response time of these organisations as they scale up to deliver the task ahead. Are they ready to hit the ground running or are homeowners going to be waiting years to get someone to look at the job? Again, communication is key here to give people in every area an idea of what is happening, the timescale, the details of the grant and how much it costs.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To give details on the skills issue, in last year's budget, the Government provided €22 million for the green skills action programme with a particular focus on near-zero energy building and retrofitting, with a significant increase in course places. The Minister, Deputy Harris, actually came up to me after we launched the national retrofit scheme to say that not only did we have a massive response from householders who were interested but that the telephone was ringing off the hook in those centres. Some 5,000 apprenticeship places are there now.

The very attractive thing about it is that it does not have to be a prolonged process. Much of the skills training in this can be done in a relatively short period. People with existing skills can upgrade or new people going into the industry can benefit. We are seeing a real uptick in interest. The change in the CAO process that the Minister, Deputy Harris, also announced in November, which puts those apprenticeship options before young people, will also be transformative. I am confident that in the next three years we will get the 17,000 places the Minister set as a target and we will have the workers to deliver the retrofits we need.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: That is very welcome. My other concern is that as we know, people get very confused by the different types of grants on offer. I am concerned about the communication. The scheme, for example, is offering a payment of 80% of the cost of doing simple works such as attic or cavity wall insulation. These latter grants mean these jobs will only cost approximately €300 each but together could knock approximately 20% off the annual heating bill. Again, people have been ringing me about that. Many people will probably still opt to go directly to a contractor for smaller jobs even though the one-stop shop will offer the expertise and skills needed for deeper retrofits.

Can the Minister tell me more about the options for smaller jobs that perhaps homeowners would like to take on themselves without a contractor? Can they do that? Can we ensure there will be no price hikes? We have seen with contractors how things have gone with premiums and prices. We cannot afford to have prices go higher. That again is a huge issue about which people have contacted me. I welcome this. It really is so important with energy costs and fuel bills. At this stage, however, we need to make sure the information is correct.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To be clear, that 80% grant was done very specifically in response to

the immediate price crisis in terms of high fossil fuel prices due to those international factors. It was, therefore, done very deliberately and involved targeted measures that could be done quickly and relatively cheaply such as attic and wall insulation.

I do not think householders will be or should be doing those jobs on their own. There are issues around going into the attic to put in insulation and making sure there is still ventilation so as not to cause other issues. Injecting insulation is how it would work in a cavity wall. No householder would have the equipment. That would be a better job for a skilled contractor.

I recommend the SEAI website as a way of going through the complexity of this issue. The one-stop shops will help tremendously because the whole idea is that a person can go to someone who will give advice on the overall picture as to what can and should be done.

Horticulture Sector

91. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagements he had with stakeholders that informed the contribution of his Department to the working paper to address challenges related to peat supply in the horticulture sector. [10362/22]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to ask the Minister about the peat extraction situation, particularly for the horticultural industry. The horticulture industry in Ireland is worth almost €500 million and employs more than 12,000 people and yet they have an issue where the growing medium, which they require to have and sustain this industry, is under serious threat. There was a report from the working group but the Government's action plan does not seem to match it practically. The key issues in it are not in the action plan that is coming forward. This critical situation needs to be resolved as quickly as possible.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My Department engaged with all stakeholders through the deliberations of the working group on the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry. In addition, on foot of a request for direct discussions with my Department, my officials met with representatives of the professional horticulture sector, including the mushroom sector, to discuss the legal position regarding peat extraction and the impacts on the horticulture sector of the diminishing supply of peat.

As part of that discussion, the question of a guidance document regarding the regulatory requirements for peat extraction was raised. Guidance along such lines was subsequently commissioned by my Department and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, as referenced in the working paper, which is available on *gov.ie*. My officials have also been engaging regularly with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I should say that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has taken a real lead recently, which is appropriate because the horticulture industry is obviously central to its functions. I believe the Department is now working effectively with local groups around the country to identify sites that could be developed for use in the industry. It has to be within European environmental regulations and rules. We can no longer continue with a system whereby peat is extracted but is not recorded, the environmental conditions are being breached or we are in breach of what we committed to under the functions of the treaties of the European Union. I believe that can be done. We will have to devise a mechanism to wean ourselves off the use of peat in the medium term. In the short

term, I am confident that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, working with the horticulture and peat industry, will be able to find material that we can use in a sustainable, legal and environmentally correct way.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am aware of the work that has been done. I know the recommendation here is that it should involve pieces of bog that are less than 30 ha. The difficulty when applications are going in is that when there are non-adjacent plots, they are putting them all in as one and saying that they are connected underground. There are serious issues here.

At the moment, the application process that is in place will take up to six years between having to go through the EPA process, the planning process and possible judicial reviews, etc. It simply will not work. There is recognition by everyone in the industry, from the people who provide the peat and from the industry in the horticultural sector that requires the peat. This is also particularly the case for the mushroom industry, which is one of the key industries that is suffering most because of this.

There needs to be legislation to change those requirements. That is one of the key recommendations that came from the working group, but the Government has failed to recognise it or to put it in place. That was supposed to happen before the end of last year. Will the Minister commit to work with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ensure such legislation will be put in place as quickly as possible?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I rarely disagree with Deputy Kenny. I find that he speaks a great deal of sense in this House. However, in this instance, I have to disagree with him. In this instance, we have seen the benefits of a judicial review process, which pointed out that what we were doing was completely illegal. I do not believe any attempt to change legislation that would unwind our commitments under the European directives would be appropriate. We would find ourselves straight back in the European Court of Justice, and rightly so. People would say that Ireland cannot try to work around environmental protection by setting up legislation which is not in compliance with European law. I believe we are far better than that. I do not believe it will take six years, but it is appropriate. Everyone recognises now that we will have to go through the dual consenting process and that we will have to do it properly. I believe we will be able to find peat for our horticultural industry. We will not be able to find it for the massive exporting of peat, which has been going on in an unregulated and, effectively, illegal manner. That has to stop.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am not suggesting it should be a free-for-all. Everyone knows that the practice in the past did not work, should not work and cannot continue. That is beyond what we are talking about here. Really, what we are talking about here is an emergency situation. The people who want to provide the peat, as well as the people who need the peat, are being prohibited from doing so by the strict adherence to this particular legislation. The Minister needs to come up with a solution and to be solution-driven. It is inappropriate to suggest that somehow or other it will simply not be allowed to happen. There are too many jobs at risk here. We cannot allow that to happen. I think Deputy Carthy wants to come in.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome the fact that the Minister is here to answer this question, because for far too long this has been fobbed off to a Minister of State. There has not been the serious intervention that is required at Cabinet level. This whole process has been marked by delays, as has been mentioned. The Government set up an expert working group to examine these issues. The length of time the working group took, as well as the length of time the Gov-

ernment then took to deliberate on its findings, was excessive in my view. As Deputy Kenny has said, the Minister has ignored some of the central findings of that working group. Essentially, we need to ensure we end the practice of exporting peat from Ireland. That was a scandal. It should never have been allowed to happen. However, it should be noted that the chief culprit in that was a State-owned company which exported with the approval of the Government. We also have to stop the scandal of the importation of peat coming from places where we have no say whatsoever about the environmental regulations overseeing that process. We can do that by allowing the limited extraction of peat, in order to service our domestic horticulture and mushroom sector in particular.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I agree.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Will the Minister step up to the plate?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Just for clarity, what I hear Sinn Féin say is that we should not adhere to environmental law----

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not what we are saying and the Minister knows it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please let the Minister respond.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what I hear. I do not believe that would serve the interests of the horticulture industry or this country. For too long we have turned a blind eye to environmental regulations. For too long we have said, “Ah, sure, no one will notice” or, “We will sort that out some other time”.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is purposely deflecting. Nobody is suggesting that we should be in breach of environmental law.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I believe-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please will the Deputy let the Minister respond?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what I heard. We can and we will. We need a horticultural industry. It is very important that we protect those jobs. It is very important that we find alternative solutions. I am confident that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, which has key responsibility in this area, will be able to find the peat stocks which we can use in the interim period with adherence to environmental law to be able to see that industry through a transition period. It has to be just transition, but we will not succeed if we turn a blind eye and think we are immune to European environmental regulations. That would not serve anyone’s interests.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is deluded.

Energy Policy

92. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to ensure the retrofit industry will be incentivised to grow to deliver the capacity for 500,000 homes by 2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9872/22]

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Matthews will introduce Question No. 92.

Deputy Steven Matthews: The energy retrofit scheme, which was announced last week, has been broadly welcomed by almost everybody across the country. It is a huge Government investment and a long-term plan over the next decade for how we will retrofit our housing stock. Could the Minister outline to the House how he will attempt to encourage or incentivise those who are involved in the energy retrofitting scheme to participate in it, so that we can meet our capacity demand?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The first step was the launch of the scheme the week before last. I think it caught the public imagination. We know from our own constituencies and from elsewhere that the public is interested this for a variety of reasons. It wants to play its part in helping to tackle climate change. It wants better, healthier and warmer homes. It has also seen the shocking scale of fuel bills, with the high prices of gas and oil. This is the mechanism.

Deputy O'Rourke asked earlier how we will meet our climate targets. Bill Gates famously said that most people overestimate what they can do in a year and underestimate what they can do in a decade. I think that will be the case in this area. We have set an ambitious target of 500,000 homes. I am confident that we will meet it. I am confident that we will get the workers to be able to do the work. We have committed €8 billion in funding. That is why I said to Deputy O'Rourke that we have the funding. Some €5 billion of that €8 billion is from the carbon tax. That will give industry the certainty. It will give the householder the support to make it happen. The key elements are in place. The SEAI got an additional 50 workers last year. It will get another 50 more this year. It is orchestrating it. That again gives me confidence that we will be able to do it. We have been 22 years at it. One could say we have been slow to warm up, but we are about to hit our stride.

More than anything else, the reason I am confident is because of the Irish householder and the average Irish home. People are now thinking that they have been putting this off. They were thinking "maybe, maybe not". Now, with 50% grants, they are saying, "maybe yes". That first initiative is the most important prerequisite. It is in people's heads across the country at the moment. We will engage in a communication strategy to help them to go to the SEAI so that they can find out what the best solutions are for their homes. I think it will happen.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I agree with the Minister. My phone has been ringing off the hook since it was announced. That is really positive. I know of people in the trades who want to get involved in it. It sends a really clear signal for the next decade that this is a line of work that they can go into. My colleague Deputy Ó Cathasaigh visited the site of excellence in Waterford. He was impressed with it. The message to existing tradespeople is that a couple of days of training are needed in order to perfect their skill, so that we can advance retrofitting and energy upgrades. To people who are considering apprenticeships, I would highly recommend this to them. An area that we should consider is mature apprentices. I trained apprentices for many years. There is a real, clear path for mature apprentices who may be transitioning from high-carbon output jobs into other lines of work. There is a real, sustainable future, as well as good, long-term employment in well-paid and green jobs into the future for the next ten, 20 and 30 years.

12 o'clock

I encourage anybody to think about getting into that line of work.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said in response to an earlier question, not only were the phones ringing off the hook from the customer side but I have been informed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science that the new centres of excellence have had a similar experience. One of the attractive aspects of this, as the Deputy pointed out, is that it does not necessarily require a protracted training scheme. Many people might be able to come into the industry for a relatively short number of weeks, go into the likes of the work I mentioned earlier, such as attic and cavity wall installation, start there and learn by doing. Those companies will be busy on other projects, so having mastered that, people can then extend their capabilities. This will be a lifelong process of learning and skills development. It will take us 30 years. This is a three-decade project, with 1.5 million homes having to be retrofitted. It makes sense for many people, who could get a well-paid, secure job and will be able to go to different places and apply the same skills. The Deputy is correct. This is a matter of lifelong learning, and small steps will bring many people into the industry.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom a rá go gcáineann Sinn Féin gníomhaíochtaí na Rúise agus iad ag sárú teorann agus ceannas na hÚcráine. Seasann muid le muintir na hÚcráine ag an am iontach deacair seo, agus is cinnte go seasann an Dáil leo fosta.

I begin by expressing on behalf of Sinn Féin our complete opposition to the actions of the Russian Government in its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and internationally recognised borders. I am sure all of us in this Dáil are united in our condemnation of the latest actions of Russia overnight in initiating a military invasion of Ukraine. I extend our solidarity to the Ukrainian people at this time. This morning, we all witnessed distressing scenes of families fleeing their homes and early reports of casualties. A humanitarian response needs to follow. What work is under way at this early stage by the Department of Foreign Affairs, and by the Government in its capacity as a member of the UN Security Council, to co-ordinate a humanitarian response to affected people and areas?

Significant and severe economic sanctions must follow this latest action and such breaches of international law cannot pass without response. Sanctions need to be targeted not only at the Russian Government but also at the assets of those connected to Putin's state apparatus, many of whom live or hold significant assets in European capitals. We expect the Irish Government will do what it can in this regard. Will the Tánaiste give an update on the tranche of sanctions that are under consideration and those that would be supported by the Government?

Of course, we also have our own responsibilities in this regard. Russia and Putin's inner circle possess large amounts of offshore wealth. The International Financial Services Centre, IFSC, is a major source of finance to the Russian economy, with €118 billion having been funnelled from the centre to Russia between 2005 and 2017, second in Europe only to Luxembourg.

Often, this has been through section 110 structures, an issue that has been raised repeatedly by my colleague, Deputy Mairéad Farrell. For example, VB, a Russian state investment company whose supervisory board has been controlled by members of Putin's government, raised €9.3 billion between 2010 and 2013 through a section 110 vehicle here. Will the Government end the use of these section 110 companies, many of which have charitable status, that are being used to channel funds that could be connected with Russia's state apparatus and Putin's inner circle? The Taoiseach is in Brussels, so the Tánaiste might give assurances as to whether this is one of the issues that will be under consideration and discussion later today.

It is inevitable that recent developments will result in further spikes in the cost of energy, and the price of crude oil and gas has already spiked in recent days. Of course, this comes at the worst of times, when people are already under severe financial pressure due to the rising cost of living. I again implore the Tánaiste, therefore, to bring forward further targeted measures to support workers and families, who will bear the brunt of these costs.

To return to the events that are, unfortunately, unfolding in eastern Europe, given our status, position and military neutrality, and our seat on the UN Security Council, Ireland is uniquely placed in Europe and at the UN to make a case for the intensification of efforts to find a peaceful way forward. Will the Tánaiste outline on this very difficult day the next steps in the State's diplomatic response to this crisis?

The Tánaiste: I want to say on behalf of the Government that today we stand in solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. Ireland is militarily neutral, but in this conflict Ireland is not neutral at all. Our support for Ukraine is unwavering and unconditional. At this moment, in a European nation not too far from here, families are leaving their homes, children are being bundled into cars and martial law has been introduced in the face of an unwarranted and unjustified attack. This is an act of aggression, it is unprecedented in the 21st century, and it gives us grim echoes of a much darker past. As President von der Leyen said this morning, President Putin is responsible for bringing war back to Europe. Ireland has much in common with Ukraine. Many people of Ukrainian origin have made their home in Ireland, and they and their families are in our thoughts.

The first wide-ranging package of EU sanctions will come into effect today. This includes an EU travel ban and asset freeze for all 351 members of the Russian Parliament, the Duma, who voted in favour of this violation of international law. There will be an asset freeze and travel ban on senior decision-makers, business figures, military officers and persons involved in leading a disinformation war against Ukraine. An asset freeze will also apply to three private banks and an entity responsible for disinformation. The package also targets the ability of the Russian state and government to access the EU's capital and financial markets and services, and this limits Russia's ability to finance further aggressive policies and actions. The new measures will also target economic relations between the European Union and the two breakaway regions, Donetsk and Luhansk. The European Council will meet later today to finalise further sanctions against Russia and to discuss how to protect the rules-based international order, how to hold Russia to account for its actions and how the EU can provide further support to Ukraine. I want to be very clear that the Government will fully support any additional sanctions against Russia, including those of a financial nature relating to banking and financial services, aviation and any other matters.

As a committed European, in some ways I find it very hard to absorb what has been happening in Ukraine today. The tide of history towards peace, multilateralism, democracy and

international co-operation and European integration through the EU has brought more than 70 years of peace to countries within its borders. In a globalised world, aggression and belligerent behaviour always lose in the long run, in my view. Ukraine is a sovereign nation, it has the right to determine its own future and it has been independent for 30 years. It can trace its history back more than 1,000 years. We believe it has as much of a right to exist as any of the other successor nations of the Soviet Union, including Russia itself.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Tánaiste for the response and for the clarity regarding the support of the Government for economic sanctions, including banking sanctions. Will the Government this afternoon put forward an argument for some of these sanctions with its European counterparts? We are learning through media reports that there is disagreement, or at least there was, with some countries looking for carve-outs for diamonds and other luxury goods, banking services, railways and so on. Has the Government a position on this? Given our unique position of being both neutral and having a seat on the UN Security Council, is it the view of the Government that we are best placed to bring forward a resolution for consideration by the Security Council?

The Tánaiste: Events are happening very quickly, as the Deputy will appreciate, and the Taoiseach, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and I need to speak today. I think it is fair to say we are all united in our abhorrence of what is happening in Ukraine, and Ireland will not be putting any selfish or economic interests ahead of a response that is required. We will support whatever sanctions are necessary, including those that would disrupt the banking and financial services that are used by Russians, whether it be in the State or in other states. The same applies to aviation.

I particularly welcome the support of Deputy Pearse Doherty's party on this matter. I remember when I was Taoiseach in 2018 when Russians murdered somebody in England, the Deputy's party leader, Deputy McDonald, being very critical of us for expelling a Russian diplomat at the time. Deputy McDonald said it was a violation of our neutrality for us to expel a Russian diplomat.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: It is here, and the Taoiseach raised it previously. I have never said anything about it. For a long time, the Deputy's party has been soft on Russia. As recently as three years ago, Sinn Féin described the expulsion of a Russian diplomat as a violation of our neutrality. I welcome that on this issue Sinn Féin has finally come to its senses and finally realises what Putin is and what the Russian regime is.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: This is not a time for political scoring from any side of this House.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The world is watching with alarm the shocking events that are unfolding in Ukraine. What we are witnessing is unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War - a full-scale assault and invasion of one state by another. This attack is unprovoked and unjustified and will cause needless death, injury and suffering among the Ukrainian people. As the violence escalates and bombs explode across Ukraine, there is growing panic among the population as they attempt to flee to safety.

24 February 2022

Over the past few weeks, Ukrainian citizens living in Ireland have been pleading with the Government to allow them to offer a safe place of shelter for their parents and family members. In most European countries, there is no visa requirement for visitors from Ukraine. This has meant over the past few weeks people have been able to take in their parents and offer them somewhere safe to stay to protect them from war. It is no more than any of us would want to do for our parents if they were faced with the same terrifying situation.

What they requested was simple and straightforward. They asked that the Government would waive the visa requirements so that they could take their parents into their homes and provide them with somewhere safe. Irish people living in the Ukraine with family members who are Ukrainian citizens have been unable to get visas for the family members, including for their sons and daughters. This has meant that they have been unable to leave and come home to safety in Ireland. Their lives are now being put at very serious risk.

The response from the Government to these pleas for assistance was to say that all visa applications would be dealt with as quickly and humanely as possible but the reality is people have faced significant bureaucratic hurdles making it extremely difficult to obtain a visa. Being asked to surrender your passport to the Irish Consulate for a period of up to ten weeks at a time of war has made the application process virtually impossible. With the country under attack and with martial law declared, it will now be extremely difficult for anyone to leave the country.

I acknowledge the hard work done by the Department of Foreign Affairs in recent weeks in assisting Irish parents whose children were born to surrogate mothers in Ukraine. Consular teams worked through the night to ensure that those families could get home. The same support needs to be given to families seeking to bring their loved ones to safety in Ireland.

I welcome that a waiver of visas for Ukraine citizens has finally been announced by the Taoiseach in the past hour. Regrettably, this announcement has come very late. Is this waiver in place immediately, what practical support will be given to families to help them get their loved ones to safety in Ireland and will Ireland commission more flights from Katowice in Poland?

The Tánaiste: My understanding is that waiver is in place as of today. There are a small number of Irish citizens in Ukraine. We need to make sure that they can leave if they choose to do so and we also need to make sure that their families can get out if they need to do so. There is ongoing engagement today involving the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to make whatever arrangements are necessary to enable the family members of Irish citizens to leave Ukraine if they need to do so in the coming period.

Our ambassador and her team are currently in safe locations in Kyiv. The Department of Foreign Affairs will remain in close contact with them in line with its procedures on ensuring the security and safety of embassy personnel.

The Government is closely monitoring the situation in Ukraine with our EU partners and other international partners. In light of recent developments, the Department of Foreign Affairs is now advising all Irish citizens currently in Ukraine to shelter in a secure place. However, citizens should consider leaving Ukraine if they judge it safe to do so depending on their location and prevailing circumstances.

The Department of Foreign Affairs remains in direct contact with Irish citizens in Ukraine who have registered with the embassy. Currently, there are approximately 70 Irish citizens in the country. The safety and security of Irish citizens and their families is our priority.

The capacity of our embassy to provide consular assistance to citizens in the period ahead unfortunately may be extremely limited due to the security situation but the Department will issue regular updates as the situation develops and anyone requiring consular assistance and support can contact the Department of Foreign Affairs headquarters.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I asked the Tánaiste specifically about Ukrainian citizens living in Ireland hoping to get their family members here and what assistance would be given to them.

During the pandemic, Ukrainian citizens in Ireland showed up for us. They kept our supermarkets open. They were working in front-line services in healthcare, working as care assistance and working as nurses. They were looking after our family members.

For the past few weeks, they have been trying to look after their family members and get them here to take them into their homes. They have not been assisted in terms of the bureaucratic processes. Will we be giving them practical support now to help them get their loved ones to Ireland? That is specifically what I am asking the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I agree that we have the benefit of a Ukrainian community here in Ireland who are an important part of our country and have served us well, not only during the pandemic but also before. We are keen to make sure the family members of Ukrainian citizens who have settled here in Ireland are also assisted to leave Ukraine if they need to do so. It will be complicated. We have a very small mission on the ground in Kyiv. Our ambassador and staff are currently in a safe location so what we can do is relatively limited. However, we want to do it. We will make arrangements today to provide whatever practical assistance we can to help the dependants of Ukrainian citizens here in Ireland to make sure that their family members are safe. The Deputy has my commitment in that regard.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to raise with the Tánaiste the provision of the Shannon liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal on the Ballylongford Landbank on the Shannon Estuary. A planning application is being processed at present by An Bord Pleanála. We need this terminal to have energy security into the future. We are leaving ourselves very exposed - given the current situation in Ukraine - importing coal from Russia and Europe importing 30% of its gas from Russia. We see now what this is doing to our fertiliser costs. Wind turbines are fine, but no good when the wind does not blow such as last summer, which was almost totally windless. In Europe, all countries touching the sea have LNG terminals, for example, Portugal, Spain and Holland. Even Malta has an LNG terminal.

The Corrib gas field does not have that much more left. Moneypoint, gladly, is going full belt, but the coal to keep those fires burning is coming from Russia. Where are we with that source now given the conflict between Europe and Russia? Anyway, gas is cleaner than coal.

We have eight gas-burning stations in the country when they are working but we need gas to keep them going. We will need gas for at least 30 or 40 years. We need to have our own terminal so that we have the option of buying gas from other countries, such as the US, which would be inclined to sell it to us.

Now we have the totally reckless act by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who, I see, has disappeared, who has made a submission to An Bord Pleanála against the Shannon LNG application. I believe that this is a misuse and abuse of the Minister’s powers as he has demeaned the position of Minister for the Envi-

ronment, Climate and Communications. Deputy Eamon Ryan is trying to sabotage one of our options of energy security. I believe that part of the job he is supposed to be doing as Minister is to ensure that we do not run out of electricity. I believe that Deputy Eamon Ryan's objection is ethically and morally wrong and in total contraction of his portfolio. I am calling for an investigation into what the Minister has done.

The Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, stated on Kerry Radio that he was in favour of Shannon LNG yet the Tánaiste has stated he will not support it, but that he will not block it either.

The Taoiseach has gone back on his work to the people of north Kerry when he promised that he would support Shannon LNG while canvassing with the Minister for Education, Deputy Norma Foley, in the last general election. He has gone with the wind. He believes in wind energy only now. They closed down Bord na Móna, our own independent energy source, and will not support Shannon LNG. Are they intent on leading us into the dark? It is totally unacceptable to be exposing the country to the lights going off. We have very few options and we do need to get gas from other sources like the United States.

The Tánaiste: The lights are not going to go off. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications has signed off on the commissioning and construction of nine new gas plants in Ireland in the coming years. We acknowledge that natural gas is a transition fuel that we are going to need over the next 20 or 30 years while we decarbonise the country and the economy. If the crisis and the war in Ukraine do anything, they expose once again our vulnerability to fossil fuel dependence. Even if there was no climate crisis, we can see now more than ever how vulnerable we are and how dependent we are on oil, gas and coal that does not come from here or even from western Europe; it comes from places like Russia, the Gulf region in the Middle East and South America. It is not right that we as a country should be so dependent on fossil fuels. Even if it was not for the climate crisis, for economic and security reasons, we need to wean ourselves off our dependence on fossil fuels.

As the Deputy said, there is a planning application for an LNG terminal in Tarbert in north Kerry. I am familiar with that project, which is currently at planning permission stage. It is not supported by the Government but if it gets planning permission and if the company that has applied for planning permission is able to fund it, then it will be in a position to build it, but I do not think that is the right investment for that site. This is an area that is close to the mouth of the Shannon Estuary. It is very close to our offshore wind resources in the west, and it is very close to the national grid, which is plugged into Moneypoint and Tarbert. What I would like to see happen there over the next ten years is the development of offshore wind. The wind would be brought ashore and if electricity is needed, it can be plugged into the grid and used to power our homes, factories, farms and businesses and when it is not needed, it can be turned into hydrogen. It can also be turned into fertiliser as well. This is the future. It is using that offshore wind resource for electricity, for hydrogen as a replacement to natural gas and for green and sustainable fertilisers. Those kinds of investments that are potentially happening in north Kerry should not be seen as five- or ten-year investments; they should be seen as a 30-year investment. In my view, the right investment is not LNG; it is LHG, liquid hydrogen gas. That is what we need on that site.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: All those ideals are fine. It is like live horse, and you will get grass. The Tánaiste talked about ten years down the road, but what are we going to do in the meantime? I am in favour of wind turbines in the right place, not near houses. Like everything,

there are objections to them, and I support the people who object to wind turbines near their houses, but the wind does not blow all the time and we cannot store the energy that is created by the wind. It is very clear to everyone that since Bord na Móna was closed down by the Government the price of electricity has gone mad. We cannot depend on wind energy for the constant supply of electricity. We cannot depend on Russia for coal and gas and now the Government does not want gas to come in from America or other places. What does it want to do? Is the Government setting us up to leave us without any electricity? When it closed down Bord na Móna, it did not provide us with any other option, only to import gas and coal from Russia. That is what we are doing.

The Tánaiste: Thankfully, we do not import very much gas at all from Russia. Roughly half our gas supplies come from our own source north of Mayo and the other half comes from the UK, mainly via Qatar and the North Sea. Thankfully, we are not particularly dependent on Russian gas in this country, but obviously if the gas were to stop flowing into eastern Europe, that would have an effect on the price and that is very likely in the period ahead.

I know the site in Tarbert in north Kerry well. At the time, I remember meeting with Hess when it was the developer ten or 15 years ago. Whatever happens in Tarbert, it will be a ten- or 20-year process. It takes time to build a terminal or facility. I honestly do not believe that a natural gas terminal is the right solution for that site. The site should be used for LHG.

What the Deputy said is true. The problem with wind power is it is not dispatchable. The wind blows when the wind blows and that might not be the time when we need the energy. That is the problem with wind; we cannot store it and it is not dispatchable. The good thing is that there is a solution. Because of technological developments, we can now store wind power either in the form of a battery or as hydrogen. Some of the plants in the midlands that the Deputy mentioned will be transformed into battery storage hubs as they move away from peat to battery power. The solution to the problem with wind whereby it cannot be stored or dispatched is hydrogen. When the wind is blowing and we do not have a demand for energy, we can turn that wind energy into hydrogen, a fuel that can be used in the way we use natural gas now. That is the investment that should be happening on that site. That is the future thinking. That is where the jobs are going to be. That is where the economic development is going to be and that is the kind of project I want to support on that site.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: In the meantime, we are exposed.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I also wish to discuss the issue of security. Up to now we have lived in a time of unprecedented peace and security in Europe, including energy security and food security. All of that seems to be questionable and questioned now.

I agree with the Tánaiste's vision of bringing offshore energy onto our western shores and storing it in the form of hydrogen because obviously we cannot store energy. I do not know if he has spoken to some of the people involved, but the technology to do it is not there now. Everybody is hopeful, even confident, that it will be there, but it is not there now. There is technology for anchored turbines, but they are primarily suitable for the east coast. Any turbines off the west coast will have to be floating. There is an appropriately named high winds platform off the coast of Scotland, but the technology just is not there for what is proposed off the west coast now.

I share the Tánaiste's optimism. I greatly look forward to when Moneypoint is not burning

coal and when vast volumes of wind energy are being turned into hydrogen and stored there. Perhaps we could be self-sufficient in car and vehicle fuel as well, but that is all down the road. Is the Government going to decommission the biggest power station in this country before we have an alternative? That is what it is currently planning.

The Tánaiste mentioned the nine new gas power stations, with one in Northern Ireland and eight here. When they were announced, they were to be built by 2024. Where are they and how are we going to buy the gas that is going to fuel them if gas prices rise? The vast majority of the energy that fuels Germany, the biggest economy in the European Union, comes from Russia.

We mentioned LNG, but I understand that America imports Russian gas. It uses LNG but it also imports gas from Russia. I do not think the Americans are talking about the same level of sanctions that we are. What is the plan for energy security in this State? What is the plan for food security? Ukraine has a population of 40 million and produces enough food to feed 600 million. Obviously, it is expected that there is going to be an interruption in that food production, which will lead to a huge increase in food prices. For millennia, we have always produced enough food in this State to feed the people here, but that does not mean people did not go hungry because they could not afford food. Farmers are facing unprecedented costs. The biggest exporter of fertiliser in the world is Russia while Belarus is a major exporter as well. The biggest exporter of grain in the world is Russia and Ukraine is a major exporter. Both the rising cost of grain and fertiliser will have a knock-on cost for farmers and unless the Government helps with the cost this year, they are going to have to pass it on next year. We are looking at a real possibility of food shortages across western Europe. What, if any, is the Government's plan?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is correct that these are emerging technologies, but they are not that far away. There is enormous confidence that we can do what we want to do off the west coast, which is a floating offshore wind plant plugging into Moneypoint and Tarbert where the grid connection exists and where we can store wind energy in the form of battery power and hydrogen. It is not our intention to close Moneypoint or Tarbert until we are ready to do so. I do not like the fact we are burning coal in Moneypoint, I do not like the fact we are burning oil in Tarbert, but we do actually need to do so and we may need to do so for many years to come. Those plants will not be decommissioned until we are confident we are able to replace them with secure supply and secure renewables. That might take a bit of time but that is very much the plan.

In regard to food security, I do not believe there are going to be food shortages. I appreciate the Deputy raising the concern but I do not believe that is going to be the case. It is true that both Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of food, particularly of grain, but so are we. I am proud of the fact we live in a country where our farmers and our food industry produce nine times more food than we need. It is all part of an international market. In that context, where we produce nine times more food than we need, we do not need to be concerned about food security or shortages here in Ireland.

Prices may rise, and the Deputy is right about that. Inputs, energy costs, fertiliser - the price of all of those things is soaring, and we know that. I know farmers are telling the Deputy that and they are telling me that too. We will try to help farmers in any way we can but we also need to be realistic. These are international developments. The price of energy is going to rise and that will have a knock-on effect on the price of food and the price of other things. The Government has intervened to help and will continue to intervene to help, but we need to be

realistic too. We are still a country that is not balancing the books at the moment. Borrowing the people's money to help them out is ultimately self-defeating, and we have to be cautious as to what we do in that regard.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I welcome the Tánaiste's new-found concern about borrowing the people's money to help them out. To go back to the issue of food security, I never suggested we would have such food shortages in Ireland. I said we would have food shortages in western Europe and that is going to lead to huge price increases in Ireland. Is there a plan for that. What I do not want, in 12 months time, is to see one section of the economy or society pitched against another, with people finding they are being priced out of basic food products and farmers saying they simply cannot produce the food for any less. Prices are rising but we know farmers in Ireland are very much at the mercy of multinationals and they are producing on a very tight margin. That is my concern. There is a horrible precedent for Ireland producing a lot of food yet people not having food in Ireland. I want to know the Government is planning for that now to make sure that does not arise and we will not see food produced in Ireland being out of the reach of Irish consumers because of pressures on farmers. It is not that they are profiteering from this; very far from it.

I welcome the reality around Moneypoint.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy makes a very reasonable point around the cost of food. Like him, I do not believe food security or food shortages are going to be a problem, in Ireland anyway. However, if what is happening with energy prices continues and if what is happening in Russia and Ukraine unfolds, then there is a real probability that the price of food will go up here in Ireland and in western Europe. We have benefited from cheap food for a very long time. I think the price of food is going to go up, and the question is how we deal with that. That is going to be about helping farmers with costs, and we will do that, but it is also going to be about incomes policy. There has to be a recognition that if the price of things rises, if the cost of living rises, then incomes are going to have to rise as well. I know that when we wrote the budget back in September, we planned the budget based on the idea that inflation would be somewhere between 2% and 3%. We have to acknowledge that, when it comes to the next budget, we are in a different place and that will have to be reflected in what we do in terms of pensions, the welfare package, personal taxation and incomes policy.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want to ask about the rights of citizens with disabilities. Documents released to me under freedom of information show that, for years, the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal has called on the Minister for Finance to change the criteria of the disabled drivers and passengers scheme. It warned that it excluded and discriminated against citizens with genuine, permanent and severe disabilities. Despite the repeated warnings since 2018, no action has been taken and the board often did not even get a response to its concerns. It made it clear it could no longer be involved in the scheme on moral and ethical grounds. As a result of repeated inaction by the Minister for Finance, this board of medical professionals all resigned *en masse*.

There was no action by the Minister. It was not a priority, yet thousands of people with disabilities were left grounded or stranded. What is the Tánaiste's response to the inaction of the Minister for Finance over a period of five years and the damaging consequences for so many of

our citizens with disabilities as a result?

The Tánaiste: The disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme provides relief from vehicle registration tax and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, is very aware of the importance of the scheme to those who benefit from it. He is also aware of the disquiet expressed by many in respect of difficulties in accessing the scheme. Accordingly, he is now committed to a comprehensive review of the scheme to include a broader review of mobility supports for persons with disabilities. It has been agreed that the disabled drivers and disabled passengers scheme review will be brought within the 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. We believe this is the most appropriate forum to meet the mutual objectives in respect of transport solutions and mobility supports for those with a disability.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yesterday, I raised in the Dáil the issue of Ireland being the best small country in the world for Russian oligarchs to channel their money, with €118 billion going through the IFSC since 2007, much of it through section 110 vehicles. On the back of the very worrying and dangerous situation that is developing in our world, I want to ask what we, as legislators, are going to do collectively to deal with Russia as much as we can. Do we need emergency legislation to deal with section 110? Do we need to bring in legislation to deal with the way in which this money is being funnelled? Do we need to bring in legislation to seize assets, either temporarily or, potentially, permanently? Is any of that being considered by the Government as part of a wider European plan whereby we would have to legislate ourselves?

The Tánaiste: Whatever we decide to do, we will do on a European level because that is the only way it is going to be effective. We need to hit Russia and we need to hit Putin where it hurts, and that is going to include financial sanctions and sanctions against the flow of money and banking activities. That may have a negative impact on our State, but we have to do it because it is the right thing to do. We will do it on a European level, because if we do it unilaterally, the money will just flow elsewhere and it will not have an effect.

There is going to be an emergency meeting of the European Council and I believe the Taoiseach will attend that this evening. Certainly, he has my support, the support of the Minister for Finance and the full support of the Government in signing up for any EU sanctions that are necessary, even if they, unfortunately, have a negative impact on us.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Families who lost loved ones at the Stardust have been waiting 41 years for truth and justice. They want to know the truth about the fire which claimed the lives of 48 young people who never came home. Given the length of time the inquest will run for, it is essential the jury is paid. It is also very important that the jury is selected from the electoral register. Last night in the Seanad, a Bill passed Second Stage that would allow a jury to be selected and paid. Will the Government support this Bill going through the Dáil quickly? Will the Government bring in its own changes to legislation to ensure a paid jury is put in place that is selected from the electoral register? When will this be done?

The Tánaiste: It was the Attorney General in the previous Government who determined that inquests should take place in regard to the Stardust fire and tragedy. I very much support that decision. The Government wants to make sure the inquests happen and that they are conducted quickly and conducted properly. We fully support the work of the coroner in that regard. It is

not something we can interfere with because, of course, the coroner is entirely independent, but that matter of paying jurors is something the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is going to examine. We are weighing up the pros and cons of that. It is not a matter of cost. In the greater scheme of things, it will be small in terms of the cost of the inquest, but there are other issues - legal issues and precedent issues - and she is trying to tease them through at the moment.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to express People Before Profit's solidarity with the people of Ukraine. They are facing a horrifying imperialist invasion. Will the Tánaiste give a guarantee that no limit will be placed on the number of refugees fleeing Ukraine who will be accepted into Ireland? Does the Tánaiste agree that any NATO escalation will simply make the situation worse, threatening descent into a deeper and bloodier conflict? What we need now is to build a global anti-war movement, independent from and in opposition to both imperialist camps, to demand the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and the withdrawal of NATO battle groups and missiles from eastern Europe. I call on people to join the Irish Anti-War Movement protest today at 5.30 p.m. in front of the Dáil.

The Tánaiste: Certainly, Ireland will accept refugees from Ukraine. Whatever we do will have to be done on a European basis as part of a European agreement. It is fair to say that we were one of the leading countries in the EU when it came to accepting refugees from Afghanistan. This is a European country. It is much nearer. There is a significant Ukrainian community in Ireland already. We will be willing to accept people but that will have to be agreed on a European-wide basis. We will be happy to step forward as a country in that regard.

I must entirely disagree with the Deputy on any suggestion or allegation of a NATO escalation. That is not what happened here. In 2014, Ukraine pressed forward for democracy and decided that it wanted to be on a European course. It is an independent country. It has the right to decide to join the EU or NATO if it wants to. That is not our business; it is Ukraine's decision. When that happened in 2014, Russia and Putin seized Crimea and Sevastopol. It is now happening again in the Donbas region. That is what happened in Moldova in relation to Transnistria. It is what happened in Georgia as well. It is not an issue of NATO aggression. It is Russian aggression. It happened in Moldova and in Georgia and it is happening in Ukraine now. Let us not pretend that there is any equivalence.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Last July the Government passed a long-awaited affordable housing Bill. I have heard numerous promises and predictions of how many affordable houses will be provided in the years to come as a result. While the Bill passed through the Oireachtas seven months ago, today we still wait for regulations to be issued by the Department that will finally set the wheels in motion.

Thousands of young couples, families and individuals on modest incomes cannot get a mortgage through commercial banks. They are waiting anxiously for application forms and progress on the affordable housing scheme. Will the Tánaiste outline when the regulations or further information will be made available to local authorities and subsequently to people waiting anxiously to own their own affordable homes.

The Tánaiste: I will have to check that out and come back to the Deputy. I think the regulations are done. I am not sure if they have been officially signed off or published. South Dublin County Council is advertising affordable homes for people to purchase. It will happen in Waterford quite soon. I had thought they were done but I will find out and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Irish Dental Association is in crisis. Many dozens of dentists have left the scheme because the contract has not been updated for years. Families are struggling. In many counties they cannot get dentists under the scheme. They must travel to different counties, maybe 100 miles away, to get an appointment. Will the Government do something for the dentists who are there? I salute them for the hard work they do and the great care they take of young and old. We will have a huge crisis. If young people are neglected there will be huge costs to the State in future. Dentists need support. They need a modern contract that reflects what they do and the service and facilities that they provide. That is not being reflected at all and they are being ignored. They are leaving. Unfortunately, they are voting with their feet and going into private practice or going abroad. The public who depend on medical cards are left abandoned and cannot get dental treatment. Action needs to be taken on this.

The Tánaiste: I want to acknowledge that we have a problem with the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS, the medical card scheme for dental services. We have about 1,150 dentists who are part of the scheme. About 300 have left in recent times. That means that in large parts of the country people cannot get a dentist or the dental care that they need. However, it is not fair to say that nothing is happening or that people are being ignored. Negotiations are underway between the HSE, the Department of Health and the Irish Dental Association. Some €56 million goes into the scheme every year and there is €10 million on the table for dentists if they accept the offer that is being made. That is currently under negotiation.

Deputy Joan Collins: I wish to raise a specific issue on the cost of living which we discussed again this morning. Is the Government considering setting up a hardship emergency fund? I raised this two weeks ago and the ESRI has also raised the need to establish an emergency hardship fund to help meet exceptional need payments, such a fund to be administered by the community welfare officers based in the community not in Intreo offices. That would allow for emergency payments for individuals and families most affected by the rise in energy bills and the general cost of living as close to the community as possible. It would be a crucial measure to target assistance to those who most need it. In recent days, Barnardos has also called for community welfare offices to distribute a particular emergency fund in the communities.

The Tánaiste: We have given that issue some consideration. It has been discussed with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. Her view, which I agree with, is that the existing community welfare service is the service that we should continue to use to issue exceptional needs payments. It does not require a separate fund because there is already a fund for exceptional needs payments which is worth around €40 million a year. It is not capped or budget limited but demand led. I encourage people who have a genuine need who are struggling to pay a utility bill to engage with their community welfare officer. Exceptional needs payments can be made and there is no cap on the budget.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an outrageous attack on an independent country. It is a proud, peace loving nation with a rich history. The attack undermines the rule of law, breaches the UN charter and has the potential to create another humanitarian crisis across Europe. Ireland and Ukraine have strong political ties as well as social ones. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and our diplomats are working in Ukraine to evacuate Irish citizens caught up in the conflict. However, there are many Ukrainians here with ties to Ireland, who have family there, who are very worried about their safety. Will the Government waive the visa requirements and offer them humanitarian assistance to come to Ireland in the coming days and weeks?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Devlin for raising this. We have a small but active and very welcome Ukrainian community here in Ireland, many of whom are established here for some time. There is a moral obligation on us to assist them to have their relatives, especially those who are dependent on them, to come to Ireland. It is complicated because we have a very small embassy in Kyiv. It only opened in the last couple of years with only two people on the ground. They are currently in a safe location for their own safety. It is not as simple as it might be but I absolutely agree, as does the Government, with the principle of what the Deputy put forward, namely that Ukrainian citizens who are established here in Ireland should be assisted to get their relatives here safely.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Will the Tánaiste confirm that the Government will not only seek wide ranging sanctions on Russian officials and entities but also officials and entities in Belarus, occupied South Ossetia and occupied eastern Ukraine which have aided and abetted this invasion? Will the Tánaiste elaborate on the preparatory work that has been done by the Government to accept large-scale refugees from invaded Ukraine. We are under no illusion that there is war in Europe today due to Russian aggression. Will the Irish Government expel the Russian ambassador?

The Tánaiste: This is genuinely one of those moments where I am glad that we are part of the EU and we do not stand alone. The EU does not just ensure and underpin our economic prosperity but it also helps to underpin our security and allows us to act with solidarity when it comes to issues such as this.

There will be a meeting of the European Council this evening in Brussels. The Taoiseach will attend. Whatever we do on sanctions, refugees or on the Russian ambassador and diplomats will be done at European level because Putin and the Russian regime have no fear of small countries. They have no fear, even, of large countries. Ukraine is not a small country. However, it might have a fear of the EU and of the EU, the USA, the west and democratic nations acting together. It is really important that we act in consort with our European allies. Let me be very clear, that when it comes to accepting refugees and to financial and other sanctions, Ireland is willing to be at the forefront of doing what is right, regardless of any selfish or economic concerns that we might have for ourselves.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In recent days I have been contacted by large numbers of Malahide residents. They are very concerned about a sudden spike in antisocial behaviour in the village and surrounding areas. This happened before, and a very increased and visible Garda presence really helped in the resolution of it.

I draw the Tánaiste's attention to two tweets from the Minister with responsibility for housing on 10 and 26 May last year. On 10 May he said there would be an announcement in the coming weeks regarding community CCTV for Malahide and Swords. Sixteen days later he said he was, "Delighted [delighted no less] to report that CCTV has been approved for Malahide Village and Swords Town and will be installed by the June Bank Holiday Weekend." There is no CCTV in either Swords or Malahide at the moment. The programme for Government commits the Government to "Externally review the legal and organisational framework governing community CCTV". Will the Tánaiste advise us about the subject of the Minister's tweets? Are we going to see the CCTV pilot in Malahide and Swords and are we going to see a manifestation of the commitment in the programme for Government that will "Prioritise visible policing in both rural and urban communities".

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. We are doing that. There are more members of An Garda Síochána than was ever the case before. A very significant recruitment campaign is under way, having been launched by the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, only a few days ago. That will help us to continue to increase the visibility of policing in urban and rural areas, especially when it comes to community gardaí.

On CCTV, we have a problem and we are working through the issue at the moment. It is all around data protection. You can have CCTV. There is lots of it and we need more of it but somebody must agree to be the data controller. It is not good enough for public bodies to say they want CCTV-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Or indeed to announce we have it when we do not.

The Tánaiste: -----but then not to want any of the responsibility around being a data controller, because this is video footage and it can be misused.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Perhaps the Minister with responsibility for housing could volunteer to be the data controller.

Deputy Alan Dillon: There is genuine concern around the changes being made to non-domestic water charges. There is strong opposition among rural communities to increases in water charges for non-domestic customers and the changes to the standing charge per water meter. On the one hand, we see the effective doubling of the volumetric charge on water, and on the other, while the standing charge is decreasing for many customers, a charge per meter will see many receiving significantly higher bills, especially farmers. It will be particularly impactful for farmers, who face a standing charge on every field water meter on their land. This especially impacts farmers with fragmented landholdings. It is a very unfair charge and both Irish Water and the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU, need to engage with local authorities and representative organisations on this issue.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. A new non-domestic water tariff framework was introduced by Irish Water on 1 October. The CRU determines the charges and charging arrangements that apply to non-domestic customers. There will be three-year transition arrangement. What is happening essentially is 57 different charging regimes and more than 900 different charges are being consolidated over the course of the next three years. Under this arrangement, any annual bill increase above €250 will be spread across three years. It is important to say that when it comes to the new tariff system, 46% of customers will see a decrease, 50% of customers will see an increase of less than €250, 1.6% of customers will see an increase of between €250 and €500, and 1.7% of customers will see a bill increase greater than that. It is going to be phased in over a three-year period to help people adjust to the change.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Will the Tánaiste support the calls of the Irish Postmasters' Union to secure the future of our post office network? More than 500 post office are in locations where there are no banks within 5 km. Examples in my constituency include Oilgate, Taghmon, Ross-lare, Clonroche and Ballycullane, to name but a few. They act as custodians of the community and provide a safe place of trust and security for rural people, many of whom are OAPs. They provide a one-to-one, face-to-face service no other SME service could compete with. Through local knowledge, they also save the State millions as they are often first to detect fraudulent claims and scammers. They are asking for a small budgetary sum to secure more than 1,409 permanent SME jobs. That is not to mention shop staff, who expand the workforce to more than

4,000. Will the Minister commit to funding this very important local and vital public service for rural communities that, according to the Grant Thornton report, has a social value of more than €344 million and underpins the economic activity of 885 communities, both rural and urban?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The matter is currently under consideration by Government. I agree with his basic argument that it is important we maintain a strong post office network throughout the country. It may be the case some post offices just are not viable because of a lack of customers but we want to maintain as many as possible, especially when the redundancy or retirement arrangement comes into place in early 2023.

I very much agree with what the Deputy said on welfare fraud. Sometimes people dismiss welfare fraud. There is at least €40 million worth of social welfare fraud detected every year. The truth is it probably much more than that. It could be twice, three or four times that. The fact people who go into the post office must turn up in person to sign on and present themselves probably saves the taxpayer and the Department of Social Protection tens of millions of euro. That never appears in financial statements but it is very true.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: As a student of European history I am strongly supportive of the Government's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I ask that everything be done to assist in every way we can.

On a related matter, I ask the Tánaiste about an issue he has been reported as having commented on in the past, namely, that the Government should adopt an inflation strategy. This should cover how to deal with house price inflation, fuel price inflation and all the issues likely to arise from the Russian aggression and the invasion of Ukraine. Is the Tánaiste in a position to advance that cause and develop a strategy accordingly?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Durkan for raising this issue. We all appreciate the extent to which prices are rising and the cost of living is going up. We see it at the pumps. We see it in our electricity bills and gas bills. We see it in the cost of buying groceries, and of course we see it in the correspondence we all receive from constituents. There are essentially two ways to deal with inflation. We can try to chase it by increasing everything, that is, pay, welfare and pensions. That needs to be done but it only drives inflation. It needs to be done because the symptoms of the problem must be treated, but it does not solve it. What is needed underpinning that is an anti-inflation strategy that brings down the cost of things. That includes the competition legislation I am putting through the Dáil at the moment. It includes consumer protections. I will be publishing new legislation on that very shortly. It also includes bringing down the cost of things the Government has some control over, such as the cost of childcare. We are also working on bringing down insurance costs. While we might not be able to control the cost of oil, gas or energy, there are costs that are partially under the Government's control and we need to bring them down.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This is from a local school:

We have applied for Exceptional [need] Reviews ... [on three different occasions with] 3 different demands of paperwork. All were refused. We have now appealed but are so disheartened and have low expectations.

Throughout the process, not one SENO/NCSE staff has visited our school. Our own SENO has in fairness been supportive but had no role in the reviews which were conducted remotely without any contact with the school.

24 February 2022

We already know that the support which is already inadequate for our current group of children ...

It is not enough to say that the government are prioritising children with additional needs- the current system of allocating SNAs is simply not.

It goes on to say:

Why do we have to wait for children to fail to apply for support?

Where is the support for early intervention in primary school and setting up for success as they miss key milestones?

As exasperating as this is for school staff ... [how must it be for parents?]. In our area, most are waiting over 3 years to get access to support from the Children's Disability Teams.

Schools are well placed to support these children but [they] need ... [the supports].

That is after 11 years of the Tánaiste's party being in government-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: -----and that is what these schools, which are our schools-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. Your time is up.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: -----in his constituency are facing.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. If we look back over the past 11 years, we see there has been unprecedented investment in education for children with special or additional needs. We now have more special needs assistants, SNAs, in the country than even gardaí - more than 14,000 or 15,000.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: This is this week in the Tánaiste's constituency - our constituency.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Tánaiste: I appreciate there are issues and I am certainly engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, on them. I would be happy to take any details from the Deputy.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Tánaiste outline to the House the legislation we as a Government have passed that empowers local authorities to build public housing on public land? Does he reject what happened yesterday in the Chamber when several terms like "sweetheart deal" and "blackmail attempts" were used deliberately to misrepresent what is happening with O'Devaney Gardens? This was a democratic decision of Dublin City Council in 2019. It was negotiated on its behalf by officials with the successful bidder for the first refusal purchase of 30% of the 50% earlier earmarked for private sale.

1 o'clock

Those units would be purchased so that they could be used for affordable rental accommodation. The State is simply being given the option to exercise that first refusal purchase. I chaired the meeting - there was no corruption, only an attempt to improve an already tendered contract, the parameters of which were set by a Sinn Féin-controlled council. Yet, Sinn Féin

went on to vote against the improvement to its own deal.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Where was the question on promised legislation in that?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Can the Tánaiste outline to the House the legislation we have passed that empowers local authorities to build public housing on public land?

An Ceann Comhairle: We heard that at the start.

The Tánaiste: What happened in the House yesterday was wrong. Aside from the intemperate and bad behaviour, it was factually incorrect. What Deputy McAuliffe said was true: it was a democratic decision of the council in 2019; and it was negotiated between the council and the developer, Bartra, that the council would be given first refusal for 30% of the 50% of units that were earmarked for private sale purchase so that they could be used for affordable rental homes. All that is happening now is that the State is being given the option to exercise that first refusal. Deputy McAuliffe was spot on in that regard.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: In yesterday's *Irish Examiner*, Aoife-Grace Moore reported on the continuing controversy surrounding Donegal County Council's acquisition of five houses that, as the council's engineer stated in writing prior to the purchase approval, have mica and will require significant remedial work. At the crux of the matter is openness, transparency and accountability and whether proper procedures and due diligence were followed.

This is not the only murky cloud hanging over Donegal County Council. The Mulcahy report, which was commissioned in 2015, has been gathering dust on the Minister's desk for over five years. Members of this House, including, ironically, the Minister, have called for its publication more than 40 times but to no avail. I have asked more than 35 parliamentary questions and submitted two freedom of information requests on the mica issue during this Dáil term. The standard of reply to most of those has left much to be desired.

The veil of secrecy surrounding mica and planning matters in Donegal is destroying trust in public administration in the county. Will the Tánaiste commit to publishing the Mulcahy report in full and urging his fellow Minister to embrace a culture of openness?

The Tánaiste: I am afraid that I do not have any information to hand on that matter but it appears to be very serious so I will raise it with the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and ask them to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The growing shortage of carers will paralyse the health system. The Government must take practical steps urgently to address the recruitment crisis. More than 5,000 people are waiting for home care packages because so few carers are available. What is the Government doing to deal with the waiting list for packages and what progress is being made on carers' pension provisions?

The Tánaiste: This is an issue that some of my constituents are suffering from as well. In recent years, we have seen a significant increase in the budget for home care. Money used to be the issue but it is not anymore. We have increased the budget by, I think, 40% in the past couple of years but we are struggling to find people who are willing to work in the sector. That requires action in two areas. First, terms and conditions need to be improved so that more people are willing to work in this field. Second, we are examining the question of whether we can issue work permits to people who are willing to provide care for those who need it.

Deputy David Stanton: Due to the massive economic growth in my area, there has been considerable job creation, which has led to a big demand for housing. Unfortunately, much of the planned housing in my area, particularly in Water-Rock where 3,500 houses are being planned, is at risk because of the road infrastructure. The N25 upgrade has been stalled. I am told that the decision is being reviewed. I hope that the upgrade will happen. The Tánaiste might tell me whether it will proceed. Some €1.3 million has been spent on the plans so far and €4.5 million has been made available under the local infrastructure and housing activation fund, LIHAF. Developers are very nervous that the work may not go ahead after so much has been spent on planning. The IDA's site in the area has been there for 12 years. It is 56 ha but is lying idle and cannot be used. The road is very unsafe, with 30,000 vehicle movements per day. When will the decision be reviewed and when might this road project be allowed to proceed?

The Tánaiste: That matter is currently being reviewed by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is examining whether it will be possible within Transport Infrastructure Ireland's budget to reallocate some funds to allow the project to continue to progress through planning. As the Deputy pointed out, it is an important road project because it accesses a significant IDA site - the former Amgen site - and can open up land for housing. There is also a road safety issue involved. The Minister is very much seized with these matters and is reviewing the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two Deputies remaining. We are out of time but I will take a 30-second question from each.

Deputy Patrick Costello: Yesterday, I met the PhD workers' alliance, which was looking for fair treatment and an end to the exploitation of PhD researchers. Will the Government take steps similar to those taken by other EU countries like Belgium, Sweden and Holland, which have moved to recognise PhD researchers as workers with employee status, contracts, pension contributions and collective bargaining rights?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Two years ago, the Government finally committed to ensuring pay equality and pension entitlements for school secretaries and caretakers. They are invaluable members of our schools and communities and often work above and beyond their job commitments. They work on the front lines and are the first port of call for parents and students. Without them, our schools would not function. Despite this, they have faced unequal pay and poor terms and conditions, with many working for amounts barely above the minimum wage. The current position of the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, is that school secretaries should sign on during the summer. This is a fact. At the 11th hour, will the Tánaiste urge the negotiators representing the Government to drop their position that secretaries should sign on during the summer and agree to paying them over the summer?

The Tánaiste: I understand that the issue involving school secretaries and caretakers is before the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, today. I hope that it will be possible to come to an agreement to regularise their employment, which we would all support.

I am aware of the issue regarding PhD candidates. I cannot make any commitment on it today but I will ensure that the Minister, Deputy Harris, knows that it was raised in the Chamber. It is important that PhD candidates be treated fairly. We want more people to do PhDs and secure doctorates because that raises the floor for everyone.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.07 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.49 p.m.

Town Centre First Policy: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I welcome the opportunity to come before the House to discuss the recently published Town Centre First policy. We all have particular towns that are close to our hearts, places we wish to see grow and thrive. Unfortunately, many of our towns are in need of attention and action to improve their appearance and attraction. The aim of the town centre first policy is to address the problems of our towns and to provide a route to their regeneration. This policy, launched on 4 February in Moate, represents an important step in supporting the future development and regeneration of towns across our country. It is a key element of the programme for Government and it recognises the importance of towns as a focus for enabling the social, economic and environmental development of our communities.

The development of a town centre first policy is also a key measure under the Government our rural future policy. The town centre first policy was jointly developed by Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Rural and Community Development and was also informed by the work of a town centre first interdepartmental group established in November 2020 to consider the regeneration of towns and villages nationally. A town centre first advisory group was also established, which I chaired, to bring in a broader group of stakeholders to inform the new policy. The town centre first policy contains 33 unique actions, which collectively will create the necessary framework to support our towns the tools and resources they need to become more viable and attractive places in which to live, work, visit and run a business. While the time allotted for this debate does not permit me to discuss all of these actions in detail, I will give an overview of the key elements of the town centre first approach.

The town centre first policy recognises that a solely top-down approach to the development of our towns is not appropriate to the challenge that we face. Instead, the policy sets out an innovative approach, where local communities and local businesses can be central to re-imagining their own towns and planning their own futures. Every town is different and, therefore, the policy acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work. By recognising and supporting this diversity, the policy can deliver the outcomes we all want, tailored to the unique and individual needs of our towns. The town centre first policy is focused, therefore, on supporting the town team of the local community in taking action to develop and regenerate their town. The town teams are drawn from local residents, business people, community representatives and others, all united by a shared will to improve the place in which they live and work for the benefit of residents and visitors alike. The town team has a unique position in the community as the local experts on their area and will be empowered and supported to take a lead on the development of interventions that can make positive long-term changes for their town.

The town centre first policy tasks the town team with preparing a town centre first plan. These are non-statutory plans that will identify challenges, actions and integrated responses across a number of themes, including business-commercial, community-cultural, housing, built environment and heritage. The development of high-quality town centre first plans will serve to maximise the impact of investment from a range of funding streams available for town regen-

eration across a number of Departments and agencies, including the flagship urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, and the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, which are already investing more than €600 million in regeneration projects in towns throughout the country. In December 2021, €2.6 million was provided by the Department of Rural and Community Development to deliver town centre first plans in 26 towns. This first phase of funding will support each local authority, working with a town team, to develop a bespoke plan to guide the development of a town and to develop learnings and best practices to assist other towns to develop plans in future. Further towns will be selected for town centre first plan funding in future as the town centre first policy is rolled out.

There will also be a third call for project proposals under the URDF fund in the second half of 2022. This will include invitations to projects specifically focused on the implementation of the town centre first policy. In addition, the Department of Rural and Community Development launched a fourth call for category 1 projects through the RRDF last December. This call placed an emphasis on town centre first policies, which include driving economic growth, combatting dereliction and breathing new life into town centres. The town and village renewal scheme, also under the remit of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, now funds large-scale projects of up to €500,000 to support the town centre first policy and focuses on vacancy, dereliction and town centre renewal. A 2022 scheme will be launched in the coming months.

The town centre first policy recognises the critical role the local government sector will have in co-ordinating and driving the town centre first agenda locally and in accessing the funding streams that will enable development initiatives to be realised and in connecting locally based projects with national funding programmes. Local authorities are well positioned to work with their local communities in formulating specific actions at a local level through the town centre first plan process in order that proposals are firmly based on local knowledge in combination with technical support and concrete measures, including access to funding to successfully drive the implementation of the town centre first policy. To support this work, local authorities with towns will be provided with a dedicated post to lead town centre first implementation at a local level, including supporting local town teams. Funding of €2 million has been provided for town regeneration officer roles.

The town centre first policy recognises that many towns are successfully undertaking regeneration actions and initiatives. They have already organised locally to progress local development projects and programmes to improve the town's environment and economy. The town centre first policy appreciates the significant benefits that can be gained by communities and their towns learning from each other and sharing experience, particularly towns that have similar characteristics and contexts and which inevitably face common challenges. There is great value in exchanging and developing best practice approaches to the many aspects of town regeneration, helping all to progress and develop, hearing from those who have made mistakes and learning from them.

One of the key actions of the policy is the establishment of a town centre first national office to drive and co-ordinate the implementation of the policy across the country. A key responsibility of this office will be to lead on and develop best practice guidance and facilitate the town regeneration officers and town teams to follow exemplary practice. This guidance will form part of a national town centre first toolkit. The toolkit will inform local approaches to town regeneration and will encompass specific strands targeting key factors such as urban development, economic enterprise development, community engagement, digitalisation and climate

action. The town centre first toolkit will build on work developed by the Heritage Council in collaboration with others in establishing and delivering the collaborative town centre health check programme for many of our heritage towns.

The national town centre first office will also support the work of the local authority town centre first officers through the establishment of a national town centre first officer network. This office will be co-funded by the Departments of Rural and Community Development and Housing, Local Government and Heritage and will be housed in the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA. Discussions between our Departments and the LGMA on its establishment are well advanced, with the first step being the imminent recruitment of a national director for town centre first.

To further ensure that effective best-practice drives the implementation of town centre first, a number of pathfinder or early-stage towns will be identified nationally to act as early priority demonstrators of the town centre first policy approach. These selected towns will be at different stages of the town centre first process, from background research and analysis, preparation of the town centre first plan and project development to plan implementation and delivery. Pathfinders will also be subject to a focused collaboration with funders and the relevant agencies involved. A central objective of town centre first is to assist those towns that in the past have not had sufficient capacity to shape their own development. The pathfinder towns will help to inform the approach to supporting towns that are at an early stage in the town centre first process. While the town centre first policy recognises the critical role that local authority and expertise will play in the successful delivery of our targeted outcomes. It is also clear that success will require governance and oversight structures.

2 o'clock

To that end, town centre first will establish a national oversight and advisory group to set the agenda, prepare a high-level action plan and ultimately oversee the implementation of the overall programme. This group will include representation from local government, Departments, agencies and wider expert representation and will also link directly with town teams to provide a feedback loop on the progression of the overall programme.

The enabling framework I have outlined will be established through town centre first and will support the delivery of key outcomes across a wide range of policy areas. I will draw attention, in particular, to housing, local economic development and heritage-led regeneration, areas in which I feel town centre first has the potential to be particularly impactful. Through the town centre first policy, there is an opportunity to collaborate and continue the provision of much-needed new homes in the heart of our communities. Many local services people need homes that are available on their own doorsteps, close to their neighbours and within a short walking distance.

Considerable housing potential in towns is tied up in existing buildings and premises that may have fallen into disuse and disrepair. We are all aware of buildings around our towns that appear to be vacant and are falling into dereliction, contributing to a poor appearance and not reflecting local pride of place. Town centre first has a strong focus on measures to assist this type of underused building stock to come back into residential use and breathe new life into our towns, with additional people living in and around the town centre and the new footfall and opportunities that this creates. What are known as backland and brownfield sites are often underutilised and can be developed for quality housing to a high design standard. Nothing

represents the health of a town better than people visible on its streets and public spaces, going about their daily business.

Through targeted programmes such as the Croí Cónaithe fund and others focusing on tackling vacancy and dereliction, new homes will be delivered in our towns, with a variety and choice of accommodation for a range of household types, whether families and individuals, all with different housing needs. There are many current examples where disused buildings have been successfully redeveloped as homes. The learning from these projects can, through the town centre first toolkit, help to scale these activities up and deliver on a more widespread basis to meet the strong desire of many people to live in our towns.

Successful towns are underpinned by a strong local economy and the creation of sustainable employment for the local community. Supporting businesses of all sizes, whether indigenous enterprise or foreign investment, can act as a real catalyst for town regeneration, strengthen the local economic activity and provide footfall within the town centre. We have seen over the past two years the value of our towns in their role in generating economic activity and enterprise. The attraction of our towns for people to visit and spend time in can be enhanced through the town centre first process, seeking to raise the quality of the town environment and its appeal as a place for businesses and investors.

The local economic and community plan, activities of the local enterprise office, LEO, and other local and national agencies can feed into the economic and employment aspects of the town centre first plan. Wider national Government supports for businesses, such as grant aid, mentoring, skill development and fostering innovation, can also be focused through town centre first at a town level.

Changing work and commuting patterns resulting from the pandemic are an ongoing opportunity to regenerate our towns. Many enterprise and connected working hubs are being created throughout the country, providing important workspace for local employment and also generating footfall by bringing people into the town for work purposes with consequent beneficial impacts on economic and social activity.

Local heritage is often what provides distinct character and interest in a town, built up over generations. The local community cherishes a church, historical site or local monument, taking great pride in the meaning and the connection it can often provide to the history of the town and events that have taken place there. Many towns are now realising the potential for their local heritage to be a central part of their town regeneration plan. Heritage can provide a strong sense of local identity and interest that can be an attraction for visitors and businesses alike. Towns such as Clonakilty, Westport and Kilkenny have shown the way in reaping the reward of such heritage-led regeneration through investing in their heritage, complemented by public realm improvements and cultural and social events to distinguish their town as a place of interest and activity. They have become destinations in which people want to spend time. The town centre first policy recognises the value and potential of local heritage and seeks to ensure it is a key element of the town centre first plan in enabling a town's future development.

Tourism centred around the heritage and cultural attraction of a town can be an important driver in the local economy, supporting local businesses in the hospitality and entertainment sectors in particular, which, in turn, are of benefit to local residents. The town centre first policy provides an opportunity for enhanced measures to protect and preserve local heritage but also for it to be properly recognised and valued as a potential economic driver for the wider overall

regeneration of the town.

I firmly believe that the town centre first policy, as it has been developed, recognises the dynamic and multifaceted nature of what makes Irish towns vibrant and enjoyable places to live. It also recognises that this very dynamism means that there can be no single one-size-fits-all solution to the challenge of town regeneration and, therefore, successful solutions must be drawn from the expertise and pride of place of the local communities. By developing a national framework, through the establishment of the national town centre first office and the national oversight and advisory group, town centre first can disseminate the lessons learned from successful grassroots projects, informed by experience, expert opinion and advice, to town teams across the country. The development of the town centre first officer role at the local authority level will serve as a vital lynchpin in the delivery of the wider town centre first policy, particularly by supporting town teams in the development and delivery of their town centre first plans. Town centre first will enable towns of many different types and scales across the country to prosper and develop, providing the proper supports and resources for all to benefit and for the result to be experienced by all the community.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is there a copy of the Minister of State's speech available?

Deputy Peter Burke: There is.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not think it is available at the moment.

Deputy Peter Burke: I think it is available. It should be.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I do not know that it is.

Deputy Peter Burke: I will check with my office immediately.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Broin. I am not sure how he is sharing his time. I have a list of names in front of me.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We know how we are sharing it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. That is important.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We are as disciplined as ever.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It would be helpful if I knew but it is more important that the Deputies know.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to discuss this important issue and for his opening remarks. Sinn Féin will welcome any plan, strategy or fund that aims to address the crises in many of our urban centres in our towns and cities. We all have direct experience in our constituencies of urban centres that are blighted by dereliction, vacancy, traffic congestion and poor public realm facilities. One of the consequences of that, of course, has been the loss of population in those urban centres. Many towns and cities have experienced that. The consequence, of course, has been far too much suburban sprawl and unregulated ribbon development in the countryside. The reason I say that is those types of poor developments as a result of poor planning and settlement patterns have a real cost. They have a cost to individuals in increased commuting times, which have a cost in their personal and family lives. They also have a huge cost to our climate. Anything the Government does to try to

reverse those trends of the past number decades will have the support of my party.

It is important to reflect for a moment on why we are here because if any plan is going to tackle the problems, it is important that we clearly understand those problems. We have had, and in some cases continue to have, far too much bad planning and poor implementation of the good planning frameworks in our statutes. We have had, and continue to have, weak local government. I know the Minister is battling hard with his colleagues in government to try to advance the legislation for the directly elected mayor of Limerick. The fact he has had to have that battle shows there is still resistance and we need to be honest about that, within both Departments and State agencies, if we are to devolve and decentralise powers in a way we know makes eminent sense, including for the purposes of achieving the objectives of this strategy.

We have had far too little capital spending, particularly through our local authorities, in tackling dereliction and town centre decline. Until now, we certainly have had limited, if any, lead from central government and weak co-ordination of stakeholders. We need to learn the lesson of the failure of one of the previous Government's key plans in this area, namely, the significant section of its housing plan, Rebuilding Ireland, dedicated to tackling housing vacancy. I mention that because the Minister of State raised the importance of dealing with this issue, on which I agree completely. Rebuilding Ireland had a very modest target of bringing more than 6,000 vacant homes back into use through a number of schemes that were well designed but poorly resourced. In fact, only 1,600 of those properties were brought in over the lifetime of the schemes, which shows us the challenges ahead.

There are many positives in terms of the theory in the policy launched by the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, a number of weeks ago. We support those aspects and will work with the Government on them. However, I want to express our concerns about the policy in a collaborative spirit in the hope the Minister of State will take some of them on board as the plan is rolled out. First, I am not so sure of the merit of non-statutory plans. From our experience as local councillors, we know that when a plan is not statutory, the likelihood of its being fully implemented is reduced. Clearly, with any new approach, there is often a desire to start at a non-statutory level. However, if these non-statutory plans are found not to be implemented, we may need to think about revising that policy.

Notwithstanding that the funding measures the Minister and Minister of State announced recently are welcome, they are also far too modest, particularly given the scale of the challenge. It is a classic case of having a very good theory and plan but if the resourcing for the full implementation of that plan is not in place from the start, it can lead to inevitable problems as we go down the road. We urge the Government to address those problems if and when they happen.

I want to talk about the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, of which I am a member. At the request of the Chairman, we have undertaken a number of very productive public sessions on precisely the issues we are discussing, with the focus as much on cities as on towns and how we can deal with the interlocking issues of dereliction, vacancy and urban decline. Two of the best presentations we had in our deliberations were from Orla Murphy, assistant professor in the school of architecture at UCD, and Giulia Vallone, Cork County Council architect, who has some very direct, hands-on experience. Many of the arguments they made in their submissions have found their way into the content of this plan, which is very welcome. They have expertise and knowledge on how these things are best done, including in locations such as Clonakilty, which the Minister of State rightly referred to as an exemplar of how to proceed in a predominantly rural town. Ms Murphy also talked at

great length to me, the Chairman and others about the great success in this regard in Scotland. If the views of these experts are listened to as the plan is implemented, we will all be better off as it progresses in subsequent years.

One of the key issues I urge the Minister of State to do more on, and we will work constructively with him on it, is, as I said, the question of having statutory plans or even plans that may start off as non-statutory but, through some form of procedure, can become statutory. It is also crucial that we properly resource local authorities. Commitments were given in the past, for example, to have dedicated vacant homes officers in every local authority. For far too long, however, that has not been the case and the figures are still very low. It would be much better to ensure we have dedicated town centre first officers in local authorities from the outset. The Chairman of the housing committee has a wish list he keeps reminding us of and this is one of issues on it, about which he is reminding his Government colleagues. He has my full support in that. We need more than town centre first officers. We also need dedicated vacant homes officers in every local authority, particularly the large urban ones. In fact, there would be an argument in Cork city and Dublin city to have more than one, given the vacancy rate.

We also need more county architects. For instance, the lesson from Cork - I was really impressed by the council's presentation to the committee - is that where there are dedicated county architects with real experience in this field, they can bring a level of expertise in terms of good-quality place-making alongside the work of town centre first officers and vacant homes officers. There is a need to co-ordinate efforts in the best interests of all. Between now and the next budget, the Government will have to undertake a serious review of the levels of capital investment in these projects, particularly with respect to vacant homes. The target of 2,000 homes to be returned from vacancy through the compulsory purchase order, CPO, programme and several thousand through Croí Cónaithe over the lifetime of the Government is simply too low. We do not have proper data, as the Minister of State knows, on the full level of vacancy. GeoDirectory probably gives us the most accurate estimate, which is 90,000 at this time. As we know from the Scottish system, however, even if there are 90,000 vacant units, within that number will be different types and that needs to be addressed. The Government should seriously consider setting a target within its public, social and affordable housing programme of a set number of units every year, which should be at least 20%, to come from vacant and derelict stock. This would present a real challenge to local authorities but it is cheaper, quicker and more climate-friendly to use existing structures and stock than to rely on new builds. Of course, the key in all of this is affordability. If the work we are doing in our city and town centres is not affordable, people will not be able to afford to live there.

This is a project on which we will work with the Minister of State. We would like him to listen to the concerns we express and any constructive criticisms we make. We are all united in wanting to see our town centres returned to vibrancy, population growth and affordability as soon as possible.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Transforming how we see towns will be at the heart of how we deal with our changing world. In both rural and urban areas, we need to bring people back to the town centre, close to services, shops and schools and able to walk or cycle wherever they need and leave the car behind. There has been much talk of the 15-minute city but we need the 15-minute town as well. This fund has potential in a situation where dereliction is a major blight in many of our towns. Deputy Ó Broin has clearly outlined some of the issues that need to be resolved to ensure the plan meets its full potential.

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Many towns in my constituency can benefit from this strategy in the future, including Carrigaline, Crosshaven and Passage West. I am particularly keen to see regeneration of the docks site in Passage West. We need a plan to transform it to become the new central hub of the town. As a massive 8-acre site in the middle of the town, it has huge potential. The county council should proceed with a master plan for the site and go from there. This is something for which I have been pushing for several years. It is key to the regeneration and revitalisation of a marvellous town.

The master planning process that is proposed to be funded is welcome but, on its own, it will not work. A more aggressive strategy on dereliction is needed from the local authorities. Deputy Ó Broin's point about dereliction officers is well made. We need councils to take on properties and property owners where those properties are derelict. They must use the powers they have, including, if necessary, CPOs. I welcome that Cork City Council has shown this more aggressive approach in recent weeks in respect of North Main Street and Barrack Street. However, it cannot avail of this fund for urban villages and towns that could benefit from it in tackling dereliction and restoring life to them. I think of areas such as Barrack Street, the Bandon Road district, Douglas village, the South Parish and Middle Parish. These urban villages and towns could benefit from the fund. Many small but densely built streets, with small houses, in these areas have great potential. They were once at the heart of thriving communities. Again, the council should take an aggressive approach and use those properties for young families, not just to tackle the housing crisis but to revitalise the areas and bring about those 15-minute cities and 15-minute neighbourhoods. It would do incredible good to see that happen in areas such as Bandon Road, Barrack Street, Friars Walk, the South Parish and Middle Parish, Evergreen Street, Albert Street and all the surrounding areas that made up the traditional heart of the south side, middle and north side of Cork city. They need to be made once again into thriving communities and key to that is tackling dereliction. These properties need to be used for social and affordable housing as well as for private development and use in a private capacity. We need to bring communities back to these neighbourhoods and bring life to them.

The fund is welcome but it is a shame there are communities in cities that cannot benefit from it. When we think of towns and villages, we need to think of urban towns and villages by the same token. I urge the Minister of State to consider that and we look forward to engaging with this fund for the towns that can qualify for it at the moment.

Deputy Mark Ward: Rowlagh is in north Clondalkin and it is the parish I grew up in. The area is 40 years old and it has seen many changes. When we first moved into the area, there was nothing there. It was an area of huge disadvantage and a victim of bad planning, and this created many socioeconomic problems in the area. There was no transport, shops or schools and everything the area had we had to fight for as a community. My first experience of community activism was getting involved in the campaign for St. Kevin's Community College. As pupils we were bussed up to Lucan to a building that was not fit for purpose until we finally got a school. Because of its origins, St. Kevin's Community College regularly punches above its weight, and only two weeks ago it became the only DEIS school in the State to offer every student a piece of IT equipment in a scheme that was launched by An Taoiseach.

Why am I telling the Minister of State this? I am doing so because the landscape of our area has changed because of this community activism. I will bring the Minister of State on a virtual walk-through of Rowlagh village, and I will start off with the Dóchas Family Centre, which provides support for children who may have emotional and behavioural needs. Rowlagh Community Centre is next and it was built with funds the community fundraised itself. Áras Ru-

alach is a centre for the unemployed and it also has the Rowlagh Women's Group and a crèche, and it is where I have my constituency offices. There are many vibrant shops and pubs in the area, which create local employment. There is a health centre, which is outdated, but there is a campaign to have a fit-for-purpose modern-day primary healthcare centre in the area. There is a modern credit union building up the road, and the latest jewel in the crown of Rowlagh is the north Clondalkin library. I had the pleasure of turning the sod on this in my stint as mayor in 2018, and this has brought a new energy to our area. We have schools, shops and a lot of residential homes, including older person-specific homes.

Why am I telling the Minister of State this? I do because Rowlagh is a village in everything but name and it has every amenity that a village could want. South Dublin County Council is going through its county development plan and our councillors have made a number of submissions to see Rowlagh recognised as a village. This would lift the area and allow it to avail of additional resources that are outlined in the town centre first policy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I was extremely disappointed last week to learn that Blackpool, in the heart of my community, will not be included in the town centre first policy and therefore will miss out on any funding that will be available. Blackpool is a beautiful and historic village in the heart of Cork city that has so much unlocked potential. I have previously invited the Minister to come to Cork and look at the levels of dereliction in this area, but he has refused to do so, saying he has already seen it. No one who has walked through Blackpool would have excluded the village from this project. While it is beside the city centre, Blackpool has the potential to be a vibrant and bustling village in its own right. It is only this Government's exclusion of it that is preventing this.

The town centre first policy does little to address the failure of local authorities to identify and collect the derelict sites levy. There are still no initiatives from the Government to improve the collection of the levy and I cannot understand why. Collecting the derelict sites levy would create funding streams for local authorities to add and compulsorily purchase more sites and ultimately to reduce dereliction. The Minister of State needs to intervene here because we are seeing wasted potential across our cities and communities and the Government is shrugging its shoulders and blaming local authorities once again, something it always does when it is not doing its job.

The last available data on vacancy are from 2016 and, according to those and a collation of these data by Eoghan Ua Laoghaire Mac Giolla Phádraig, there were parts of Cork city with vacancy rates of 14%. The first action in the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy 2018-2021 was to "Establish robust, accurate, consistent and up-to-date data sets on vacancy", and yet I am talking to the Minister of State today and we still cannot find accurate data. The Government has failed to tackle vacancy and dereliction because Fine Gael and others in government are more interested in supporting developers and land hoarders. In the past week, six families and individuals have come to me with eviction notices. Last Friday, a person went into emergency accommodation in Cork. This person is a college graduate with a degree who is going for a masters in September with a full-time job but has been made homeless because of the Government's policies. How can the Government stand over that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Daly seems to be the last speaker so he has more time.

Deputy Pa Daly: I will rant away for a while so. I welcome the town centre first plan and

the intentions are good. A lot of it sounds great such as the goal of commissioning research to inform the assessment of cost benefit and social return on investment in town centres to better inform public policy interventions. That sounds great if you could understand what it means. I will give two practical examples of why the town centre first initiative is not working and I will give the example of Tralee town centre. It is the only part of the county that between 2005 and 2011 had a population decline at the height of the Celtic tiger.

One problem is that there is a 100% waiver of commercial rates for vacant commercial premises where the owner of the property says he or she is trying to sell the property. This should be the exception rather than the rule. If a premises is left empty for more than 12 months it should either be sold or leased or the owner should be punished by the imposition of full commercial rates. In the UK, where these problems have been seen in the past 20 to 30 years, they have come to the conclusion that it is not good enough just to have people living in the town centre; people must also be working there. Allowing a situation where people can continue to sit on properties has to be unacceptable and the Government needs to intervene to make it impossible for that type of situation to continue.

The other example I will give is of the courthouse on Ashe Street in Tralee town centre. The courthouse has been there since the days of Daniel O'Connell and it was quarried from local limestone in the town park. It is literally part of the town and has been for many years. It saw many trials and is part of the history and social fabric of the town. There is a proposal, with the collaboration of Kerry County Council management, to move the Courts Service to another vacant premises in the town centre, a brown centre site as the Minister of State said. That is a retrograde step and goes against nearly every single one of the recommendations in the town centre first plan. This includes climate change because a new building will have to be built close to the town centre. There is no additional benefit to the town from the land which was given away to the town council at the time by Kerry Group. To advance this type of development in the town centre and to bring jobs into Tralee town centre it should be kept on Ashe Street, where it has been for 170 years. Many people will say it does not fit the needs of a modern court building or that the Courts Service has nothing to do with the Government, which is the last answer I got. I was told I would have to talk to the Courts Service about it, but the Minister of State is in government, so if he is serious about the town centre of the only large town in the whole of Cork, Limerick and Kerry, namely, Tralee, he will have to intervene to make sure there is an additional benefit to the town centre by keeping court services there.

Architects were mentioned and architects have decided that a grade 2 or 3 heritage architectural review must take place before any courthouse is abandoned, but that has been ignored in this situation. There is a plan but it is a bad plan, and to have all the other things that are mentioned in the town centre first plan, such as helping with the social and cultural future of the town, getting people into the town centre, and having people living there, it is important the Denny site, which is free, would be used for that. We should enhance and refurbish the courthouse in Tralee and the Government needs to intervene in that.

I want to mention something I have noticed over the past ten or 15 years. If a council is dealing with a local authority estate, it has an obligation to have proper estate management in place. Far too often I have seen that there is no estate management or proper balance when councils deal with town centres. If there are to be grants for refurbishing houses and getting people to live in the centre of towns, an emphasis should be put on people who will live there as owner-occupiers rather than just having an investment in a property to rent it out to anybody.

I was looking up the census of Rock Street in Tralee town centre. Approximately 400 people were living on that street in their own places according to the census of 1911. Now, there are approximately 25. If we want people living in the town centre, that has to be pushed. We also have to get people working in there, and that means maintaining, keeping, enhancing and developing the structures already there, and if there is an extra space, such as there is in Tralee town, moving to that to encourage new centres where people can, as it says in the plan, enhance the cultural element of the town.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I welcome this Government policy and acknowledge the work that both the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, have put into this policy to deliver it, and to do so quickly. I also acknowledge the role of my Green Party colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, in this. In all the years I have known the Minister of State in his work as a councillor in Kilkenny, he has always pushed this town centre first ideal, based on the Scottish town centre first policy. He worked hard during our programme for Government negotiations to get it in there. I am delighted to see it and a commitment in the programme for Government delivered in a timely manner.

The Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage met recently, to which Deputy Ó Broin referred. Deputy Gould was also at those meetings. We had a series of three meetings on urban and rural regeneration. Over the course of those nine hours of meetings, there was significant engagement from all the committee members, because this is an issue that affects every constituency. Every Deputy and Senator has a view on this and wants to address it and see towns become liveable, vibrant places again.

During the course of those meetings, we had experts and practitioners in, such as architects, researchers and academics - people who were working at the coalface of trying to improve our towns - local authorities and planners. I look forward to that committee report. I hope we will have it ready within a couple of weeks. I would like to bring it to the floor of the Oireachtas to debate because that is something that is available. We had cross-party support at committee and I hope all Members across the House would support me in bringing that report here. Town centre first policy would support many of the views and much of what we heard at the committee meetings as reflected in many of the recommendations that go into the report.

I am especially impressed with the work of the Heritage Council. It is fair to mention the tremendous work Ms Alison Harvey has done on a limited budget. One of the best things we could do would be to clone her and set her out on all the towns. The collaborative town centre health check is critical to how a town develops. It is in that very word - collaborative. It brings all those stakeholders together. It does not become a plan that is led by the chamber, the local authority, the planners or one or two interest groups. It is collaborative. It brings every stakeholder together, such as the voluntary groups, and has input from everybody. The health check programme has very much benefited those towns because it provides the baseline of evidence, so that when you want to proceed with certain works, you have the evidence and stakeholder engagement.

I will read from the submission from the Heritage Council to that Oireachtas committee because it points out the value of the collaborative town centre health check programme. The reason the Heritage Council says it is successful is because, "It is a data driven programme, which is evidence based and creates scientific baseline datasets capturing economic, spatial, commercial, social and cultural activities." We need to capture all of those different facets of our town. The submission goes on to say, "The process creates spatial data, a GeoHive, which

in turn supports the implementation of UN Sustainable Development Goals”, and “It supports creation of data for EU funding streams”. We need to have this evidence base to draw on all the funding streams. The submission further states, “It results in the creation of local regeneration ‘engines’”. It revitalises all those voluntary community and other groups that have their towns at heart. These are people who live in the towns, are proud of them, have grown up there, moved there and are bringing their children up there, who want to be part of it, see their town thrive, and want it to be a nice place to live.

To fund that, we must crack the issue of dereliction and vacancy. It is something that is tangible to everybody. Going through any town in Ireland, vacancy and dereliction jump out and are obvious. On Tuesday, I briefed Members on the vacancy, dereliction and regeneration Bill I produced. That Bill proposes to introduce dereliction and vacancy taxes, which will be key. We make it a tax, rather than a levy.

Our local authorities have not been active enough in addressing dereliction and getting sites onto their derelict sites register and following up with the levy. We saw figures for 2020 of approximately €5.5 million imposed in dereliction levies but less than 10% of that being collected. We have an issue there. If we make it a tax and get Revenue to deal with it, we have that income stream. People react much quicker to a Revenue envelope dropping in the door than they do to a local authority envelope. It will also address vacancy. We have up to 180,000 vacant homes and premises throughout Ireland, so this is key to it as well.

It is critically important we reallocate space for people in the towns as well and that we take those brave decisions to remove parking and restrict the car dominance that has happened in our towns. We need to flip the balance on the proportion of town streets in Ireland given to cars compared with those given to children, elderly people or those walking or cycling. I challenge any town in this country to trial pedestrianisation such as what Mr. Simon Wall did in Westport when he was starting off. It was trialled, there was opposition, people said it would not work, but it did work. That is the value of having a county architect, someone who has that vision to pull all the different strands together and make it work.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I appreciate the comments of my colleagues. I was going to finish on the benefits the town centre first policy has for our climate, but I will start with them, given my colleague has ended with his. I agree with him it is very beneficial to have a county architect involved in these things. As a former councillor, along with my colleague, Deputy O’Callaghan, in the same electoral ward all those years ago, we had a county manager who was an architect, which was very beneficial.

However, we made mistakes where significant out-of-town development, especially retail development, occurred, and that has predicated this policy. Looking back as a former councillor 11 years ago who started back in 2004, I regret that it was the common and done thing. As a result of those development plans that passed in the 2000s and were developed in that decade and into the latter part of the past decade, we saw a lot of development occurring outside of town centres which drew people out of the town and had a very negative consequence, especially when the economy crashed.

It is very positive that the Government has taken this step, which has followed on from a number of other policies done on a smaller scale. This, as an opportunity to link everybody in to a policy driven on a local basis, is a welcome initiative. The town centre first policy, as my colleague mentioned in terms of dereliction, encourages people to reuse their town centre in

terms of spaces above shops and derelict sites, among other things. The Minister has pushed very hard for derelict pubs, for instance, to be retasked as residential without the need for planning permission, which again is a very welcome endeavour, because there are a number of such establishments. I can think of a couple in my constituency that would benefit very much from that policy initiative. I believe this policy will inject new life into our towns and drive local jobs. It will take people out of cars. It will not even require them to use their cars if they are living or working, or both, in a town centre. That is to be welcomed.

The development of the national oversight and advisory group along with town centre first policy officers in local authorities will help ensure the implementation of this policy is as smooth as possible. Throughout the pandemic, we saw the value of our localities, particularly when we were restricted to 2 km. That seems far-fetched now but it was only last year. We saw the potential being delivered in towns and communities throughout the country, with outdoor dining and all the various attributes of the pandemic. The policy will focus on dereliction and vacant properties, bringing great economic advantages to towns.

The 2016 census identified that 58% of people in Ireland actually live in towns and villages, and thus this policy will not leave any community untouched. In conjunction with the likes of the national broadband plan, we will see the expansion of remote working hubs, which again was highlighted this week by the relevant Minister. That has the potential to inject a new lease of life into many communities that perhaps have been a little neglected in recent decades.

My colleague also mentioned the engagement with voluntary, resident and business groups. That in itself as a driver of community-led plans is a real benefit to what this policy offers communities. Lusk in my constituency was one of the first communities under the scheme to receive a grant of €100,000 of the €2.6 million that was allocated in December of last year.

Investing in our towns will also help ease the housing burden on our major urban centres, combined with Government action on rural and urban regeneration and development as well as the LEADER programme. We now have the possibility to improve radically the standard of living within our towns. I anticipate that many of the communities in my constituency of Fingal, particularly in the northern end in Rush, Lusk, Donabate, Skerries, Balbriggan and beyond, and especially the smaller towns sandwiched between the M1 and M2, will have a real opportunity to look at this plan and get together with the county council and their councillors to work out something that will be of benefit to the community and society at large.

The scheme will also help aid our goals in creating more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly towns. The strength of the policy lies within its flexibility and tailored approach. There is a simplified grant process with wrap-around supports and the ability to impact on the biggest challenges in our country, namely, housing, climate action and job creation.

I started with the climate part of it, which is very much to be welcomed because there are great opportunities. If we encourage more people to live in our centres in communities, as I mentioned, they will have less distance to travel. Even things like encouraging them to use public transport becomes much easier to do, particularly in the context of the investment we have seen in public transport throughout the country. Admittedly, it is focused one third or two thirds towards our major cities, but one of the fantastic attributes, especially within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, is the significant spend on community infrastructure like footpaths, cycle tracks and even pedestrianisation. While I agree with that in principle, it has to

go through the correct legal process, which as my colleague will know, is a bone of contention in my community.

Deputy Martin Browne: I welcome the concept of town centre first. There are too many town centres that just do not work as they could. Town centres are taken away from people because main traffic arteries run through them, like in Tipperary town. This week, the Minister for Transport again confirmed to me that a bypass of Tipperary town will be considered by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, for prioritisation in this context. In his reply to me, the Minister also noted that a consequence of the bypass would facilitate compact growth and improve road safety. Anything that promotes and allows for the development of town centres is welcome but this compact growth must be appropriately planned for. Tipperary town has a great revitalisation task force, which has been studying in detail the demographics of the town, the different needs of its people, its commercial needs and potential opportunities. It is carrying out great work but the supports and funding needed to bring its plans and vision into reality must accompany that work.

The work being carried out by Tipperary town could also be used as a national showcase of how a strategy to reclaim a town centre can be realised if the funding is provided and balanced regional development is really applied. Another town in my constituency, Roscrea, was chosen for pilot funding under this scheme. Again, that allocation is very welcome but it cannot end there. The needs of towns throughout this country vary but one constant is housing and Roscrea, like any other, has this need.

Are community-centred clubs like boxing or ju-jitsu clubs, which work to give young people a positive way of using their time, being considered? A number are either in desperate need of new accommodation or have fallen behind in their recent rent because of the impact of Covid-19. They need help but fall through the cracks in funding streams. For the clubs looking for accommodation but that cannot seem to qualify, it is very frustrating to see empty buildings, including unused IDA buildings that would be ideal, not being made available to them.

Tipperary's rail network is underused, with timetables poorly planned. There have been some good murmurings about the additional service on the Limerick to Ballybrophy line. This must be delivered upon but this attitude also needs to be applied to the Limerick Junction-Waterford line. Our towns centres need to be developed but this also involves the use of rail to connect them, where possible, which would take traffic off roads like the N24 and increase regional trade routes. On this, I notice the silence with which we are being met regarding the suspension of funding for the N24-N25 road development. The counties concerned have serious concerns and deserve engagement immediately.

In all, town centre first is a positive concept but only if it is visionary. Many people in the towns concerned offer that vision and they must be listened to and adequately resourced.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The town centre first policy and concept is very welcome. It is a new departure and we certainly hope it gets the investment it deserves. That is critical to all of this.

Across my constituency, which is mainly in a rural area, we have an awful lot of smaller towns. Sligo town is the largest with approximately 20,000 inhabitants, and yet when one walks through Sligo town, one sees so much dereliction and so many empty shops and pubs and old houses on large streets. They are falling into dereliction. That is the same pattern across all

the smaller towns as well.

I have spoken on different occasions to county managers and people in the planning departments in counties Leitrim, Roscommon and Sligo in respect of issues around this. It comes back to the same thing whereby the people who own many of these properties in many of these towns do not own assets; they own liabilities. They have an awful problem in doing anything with them. They cannot get money from a bank or anywhere to put investment into them to turn them into something that will be an asset. They find it very difficult to do anything with them. It is the same in many towns.

I was driving through a small rural town yesterday and noticed that 15 buildings had “For Sale” signs but nobody wants to buy them. That is an issue we must also recognise because if a person bought that place and decided to turn it into something, he or she might go inside to find that the building was probably built more than 100 years ago. The walls are all three feet wide and the rooms are the size of wardrobes. He or she would probably end up having to toss it and start again. That is the dilemma in which people who own these properties find themselves.

Much of the pressure seems to come from local authorities for people to sell the property to a developer who will do something with it that can make a difference. Some of them sit on very small plots of ground and some sit on large plots with large gardens. There are also opportunities to build and do something with the back buildings behind them. There are, therefore, opportunities.

All this is down to creating the correct investment environment for people to be able to do that. I know the Minister recognises and understands that is really one of the key things we need to do here. Yes, it is about getting new footpaths and new lighting and all those things done, but it is also about being able to unlock them in order that, as I say, the people who own these liabilities can in many cases turn them into assets. That is a challenge. Much of what is in this plan is excellent and very good. We need, however, to put some kind of structure in place to assist people and give them that little bit of seed capital or grant aid or something so they can unlock that and turn it into something that will be an asset for the future.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I welcome the town centre first policy and the measures that are being taken on this. It is positive. There have been some very good points made so far in this discussion. In particular, Deputy Alan Farrell was absolutely right in pointing out that huge mistakes have been made in planning in the past which have affected our town centres and our villages. All of those re-zonings took place for out-of-town development, retail and also for residential, which is away from services and amenities. This meant that the particular land-owners saw a windfall in their land, with prices increasing hugely. Those re-zonings, which were against the advice of planners, such as matrix and leapfrog zonings etc., have been hugely damaging for urban centres and town centres. They have led not only to car dependency, but to dereliction and vacancy in town centres. In recent years, this has been on a very large scale. We have had many of those poor zonings. It is important to say that, because town centre initiatives are important. It is also important that we learn from the mistakes that have been made so they do not happen again in the future.

In the heatwave in Chicago in 1995 which killed more than 700 people, the power systems were caused to melt. The common denominator that was found about the areas with the highest death tolls was that these were areas where people were isolated. It was found that people who were living in areas with good public amenities, good public spaces around them and

good community organisations fared the best, not surprisingly, both in survival and in health outcomes. Of course, we know that is the case. Bad planning creates isolation, breaks down communities, breaks down access to good public spaces and amenities and people become car dependent. Not only does that enrich the individual landowners who lobby for that, it also has real impacts on people's lives. Of course, there is also a huge environmental and climate cost.

Between 2002 and 2006, when a huge amount of building was taking place in the country during the Celtic tiger boom, only 4% of the growth in the Irish population took place in the five main cities, combined. All the rest was outside of them. Much of it was scattered deep into rural areas. The population of an entire city was built in rural Ireland around those years. While we saw Ireland's energy consumption increasing from 1990 to 2007 by 83%, transport energy use increased by 181%. That overwhelmingly happened because of those bad planning policies, because of an increase in car dependency and because of all of the problems that go with that.

Of course, people have to live in the countryside and in rural areas as well and that needs to be supported. I remember a time some years ago when I was campaigning in a by-election in Meath. I spent a Saturday afternoon knocking on doors in what was originally a rural area. It was only at the end of the afternoon of knocking on doors that I met a farmer who was working on the land. Pretty much everyone else who I met was in ribbon developments. Most of them had moved out of Dublin. I will not name the area. There was no sense of community. Many people were living in isolation, with gates, security etc. I could see how the community had broken down. Of course, we need to support people who are living in rural areas, in clusters and in villages, as well as all the supports that go with that. There is huge value in that.

Dereliction and vacancy have been caused by the poor planning policies of recent years. It is worth looking at what has happened. Between 1991 and 2006, the number of households increased by 440,000, but the number of housing units in that time increased by 763,000 units. Some of those are holiday homes, but many were developments in the wrong locations. They were fuelled by tax incentives. Ironically, the section 23 tax incentive was originally brought in to combat urban decay and to promote urban renewal in areas where regeneration was needed. However, those tax incentives were then rolled out to area after area around the country. They fuelled speculative developments, including an oversupply of housing in some areas where it was not needed. It also fuelled an oversupply of housing in areas where there were not good amenities, public transport etc. That is one of the factors that led to the level of vacancy that we now have, as well as the level of vacancy recorded in the 2011 census. In fact, some 230,000 housing units were empty when we do not include holiday homes. That number decreased somewhat by the 2016 census. Hopefully, it has decreased a bit since then as well. However, we know from the *Geodirectory.ie* report in the fourth quarter of 2020 that there were 92,000 vacant addresses. That figure does not include homes that do not accept postage. It does not include apartments. It does not count separately buildings of fewer than five apartments. Therefore, it is more than that figure. We also know from figures in the *Geodirectory.ie* report from the second quarter of 2021 that, in addition to those vacant homes, there were more than 22,000 derelict homes and almost 30,000 vacant commercial buildings that could have been used for housing.

Part of the reason for this vacancy was the overuse of section 23 tax reliefs. It is important that any measures the Government takes now are well-designed and well-targeted so they do not have unintended consequences. Too often policies, and particularly those in housing, which to be fair were well meaning, have had poor outcomes. One need look no further than the

devastation caused in some communities by the surrender grants, which were brought in in the early 1980s. They were designed to free-up social housing, but they had a devastating impact on those community structures by often giving the community leaders a financial incentive to leave. This often then resulted in a collapse in community leadership and organisation. It has taken some time to rebuild that.

It is also worth noting the ground floor vacancy rates in towns, as well as the good work that has been done by the Heritage Council on that, which has shown vacancy rates on ground floors. These figures are as high as 28% in our towns. Much of that has been driven by those same tax incentives, as well as those same bad land re-zoning policies, which have seen out-of-town retail.

The best kind of larger retail developments, and I think we are all familiar with this, that have happened the last 20 years are those that are integrated into town centres, into the main streets and that serve as an extension of those. Yes, these can be more difficult in terms of planning. When people have an easier, green-field, out-of-town, car-dependent option, they will go for that. That is why good planning around this is so important. We know that the most sustainable buildings are existing buildings and that 50 tonnes of carbon emissions generally are generated in building new homes. This is compared with 15 tonnes to refurbish existing homes. There is environmental damage from construction waste and demolition waste. That is why it is important to re-use existing buildings and to enhance our town centres.

The Government should introduce a tax on vacancy and on vacant buildings straight away. The Government should be bringing in compulsory sales orders so local authorities, that do not have the resources, time or finances to go through compulsory purchase orders, can put in a compulsory sales order, like what is done in Scotland. This will get buildings that are falling into decay back into use as quickly as possible. The Government should introduce straightaway compulsory rental orders, so that people who have empty residential or commercial properties that are not being rented out can be forced to rent them.

In my constituency, which is in a new area that was developed over the last ten to 20 years, more than half of the commercial retail units are still empty. I suspect that the commercial rates that the local authority should be levying on those vacant units are not being levied. I am awaiting further information on that.

3 o'clock

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Town Centre First is yet another tool with which the Government can tackle the housing crisis. It aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into town centres. People have reconnected with their communities throughout the pandemic, underlining the importance of high-quality public streets, parks and other amenities in towns that provide space for communities to socialise and recreate. Local authorities have been provided with a number of powers and measures to deal with the issue of derelict properties, in both larger urban areas and smaller rural towns and villages.

Town Centre First contains 33 unique recommendations and actions that will give our towns the tools and resources they need to become more viable and attractive places in which to live, work, visit and run a business. The policy is underpinned by a multimillion euro investment spread across major Government schemes such as the RRDF, the URDF, the Croí Cónaithe towns fund and the town and village renewal scheme. In particular, I welcome that for the first

time, designated towns will get their own dedicated town regeneration officer, who will be crucial in driving the development of the town.

As part of the initiative, each local authority will be provided with €100,000 to support the development of a unique vision for the town, which will also outline specific interventions required to deliver this vision. Each local authority has been provided with guidance as regards the contents of the plans, which aligns with the details outlined in Town Centre First. The Town Centre First plans should be developed collaboratively with local town teams involving community and business, as well as public and private stakeholders. The involvement of various stakeholders is welcome, each bringing different skills and local knowledge to the table. This plan will have to be completed within 18 months.

The URDF has approved €410 million in funding for projects in towns. These projects will be completed over the next few years and will make a fundamental difference to the localities receiving that investment. A funding call for new projects to local authorities will be made in summer 2022 and will be aimed specifically at Town Centre First as one of its key objectives.

Of course, this is not the only measure the Government is taking. Housing for All's forthcoming Croí Cónaithe fund will be aimed at servicing sites for new homes in regional towns and villages and supporting the refurbishment of vacant houses. Public infrastructure agencies such as Irish Water and local communities will work to provide serviced sites for housing. This will help attract people to build their own homes and live in small towns and villages.

In my own constituency of Dublin North-West, and in particular in the villages of Finglas and Glasnevin, the level of dereliction and vacancy is quite high. Policies such as these will make a difference to places like Finglas and Glasnevin, making them vibrant and busy locations once again. I welcome the announcement of the pilot towns in December and look forward to additional towns coming under this policy in future years.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for facilitating the debate. Towns and communities face significant challenges and opportunities that require a co-ordinated and comprehensive response, and I certainly welcome this new policy initiative. One important element of Town Centre First is that it will facilitate a response by towns of all sizes in order that their streetscapes can function as the sustainable and vibrant heart of the communities they serve.

Killala, in the north of County Mayo, is a place that is full of history, having played an important role during the rebellion of 1798, and it now serves as one of the many jewels on the Wild Atlantic Way. I was delighted, therefore, to see that the town was selected under the Town Centre First initiative, announced in December of last year. Killala will be provided with €100,000 to support the development of its unique master plan to map out its future developments. My colleague Councillor Jarlath Munnelly played a key role in banging the drum on this issue for his local community. I am excited to see the results of the master plan and I hope it will serve as a template for tackling dereliction and revitalising our town centres. The master plans will allow for making towns more attractive places in which to live, work, socialise and run a business. I very much hope that in the coming years, they will result in many town centres where the dark shadows of dereliction are but a memory and where the sounds of the hustle and bustle are prevalent after people come back to live at the heart of our town centres.

I suggest that the initiative be extended for 2022, with further towns added. For instance, it

is very important to build on the progress of the town centre living initiative, in which Ballinrobe was a pilot town. Councillor Michael Burke regularly highlights opportunities the town presents. Ballyhaunis is another prime candidate where a master plan is required to address concerns and to capitalise on opportunities in a more co-ordinated manner. Ballyhaunis Chamber of Commerce and Councillor John Cribbin have many ideas for the locality and will be more than willing to share them with the Department.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is good that we are discussing this issue given that, as the document states, our towns and villages are vital economic, social and cultural assets. They provide us with a sense of space and of belonging. That is what the document says and nobody would deny that. Centrally, they are a home to businesses and to people living in them, and it is not just in rural Ireland that these towns and villages are important. Interestingly, the map contained in the document shows town centres with populations of more than 20,000, and there are many such towns in this city, some of which do not even have a proper town centre. For instance, my area, Cherry Orchard, has no town centre or village - nothing. There is a need, therefore, to address the same problems where they exist in cities that are identified here as needing this type of targeted approach.

I have worked on local area plans, including the plan for Cherry Orchard, with Dublin City Council and council colleagues. Likewise, a plan has been developed for the Bluebell area, where I live at the moment. It will soon be surrounded by apartment buildings and office blocks but they are all turning their backs on the town. It is a similar issue to that which exists in rural Ireland, where buildings are being built that force people to look away from the centre. That is why this plan is vital to turn back the clock. Nobody is suggesting that retail parks, at this stage, do not have a role, but it is sad to walk through different towns and villages and see the dereliction. A response is vital, and I do not think there is any opposition from any party to investing in and ensuring our towns and villages will develop.

Some Gaeltacht areas may not have specific town centres, in a similar way to Cherry Orchard, and there may be ribbon development. This is identified in Gaeltacht areas, in particular, where there is a pattern of location. There may not be a town centre in the sense that most people would understand, where there is a crossroads in the middle of one area. Often, it is a case of ribbon development, which many people do not want. We need to ensure we will not leave out Gaeltacht areas purely because some of the villages do not have traditional town centres.

In the context of the housing crisis, the document identifies that it should not be a case of providing housing at any cost. There are opportunities where there is dereliction and where there has been a move away from living over the shop. There have been initiatives by governments over the years to encourage people to live over shops. My party colleague Deputy Martin Kenny earlier described some of the problems. Some of the buildings are dilapidated, having been derelict for so long, and a great deal of investment will be required. Nevertheless, we do not necessarily want the likes of a two- or three-storey townhouse, for example, to be replaced with a five- or ten-storey building in a small village. There is a housing need, but it should not be housing at all costs. It should be appropriate housing in appropriate locations. If we address the dereliction issue with appropriate housing for town and village living, we can take the pressure off some of the urban areas.

The pandemic has shown us the value of working from home and the potential of the hubs that have been developed and are continuing to be developed, whereby people do not need to endure endless commutes to the city. This can breathe new life into towns that were abandoned

because people had to sit in their cars and drive to Dublin or some other city for work. Now we need to encourage people, if they can, to work from home or work as locally as they can remotely. That would breathe life into the local butchers, the local shop, local cafés and other local businesses. They would be staying at home and could ply their trade and spend their money and keep it locally. That would help us in this city because the pressure would be taken off for endless development of large apartment blocks in places where they may not be appropriate. There is a need for a considerable amount of development. This will not solve all of the housing needs of the city. In my area, there is a plan for 70,000 houses or apartments next to us. We do not have a problem with that because it is an area that is in dire need of housing but it needs to be planned properly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I wish to share time with Deputies Paul Murphy and Barry.

It is laudable to launch a policy referring to town centres first to address the often unacceptable levels of dereliction and neglect that many of our town centres have suffered from. The town of Dún Laoghaire is the capital of my local authority area. I remember as a teenager that it was a vibrant, buzzing and dynamic town. For decades it has been commonly referred to, perhaps a little unfairly, as a ghost town compared to what it used to be. That is a tragedy for a town such as Dún Laoghaire, which has an absolute jewel in Dún Laoghaire Harbour. When it was built, it was the biggest human-built harbour in the world. Dún Laoghaire was the location of the first suburban railway in the world. It overlooks Dublin Bay, which was first surveyed by the captain of *HMS Bounty*, from the famous “Mutiny on the Bounty”. The town has an amazing heritage and history, both literary and cultural, but we have rampant dereliction in both the private and public sectors. I will name a few of the derelict sites. Those in public control include Carlisle Pier, from which much of the Irish Diaspora departed. It is effectively derelict and is being used as a car park. The Stena terminal building has been derelict for the best part of a decade. The Carnegie Library in Dún Laoghaire has been empty for years. I could mention many more sites such as the old Kelly’s Hotel building, the old wash house, the former post office, the further education building on Eblana Avenue and the harbour cottages in Dún Laoghaire Harbour which used to house people. I will not go through the full list.

I had a transition year student in with me the other week. First, she discovered, interestingly, that they have rent controls in Paris, which is something the Government could learn about. As another one of her jobs while she was with me for a week, she spent an hour going up the main street in Dún Laoghaire identifying derelict buildings. In one hour, she identified 33 derelict buildings. That is one every 30 seconds going up Dún Laoghaire main street, just left there to rot. There has been chronic failure. This has been talked about for decades but nothing was done about it. What I worry about is that the Government makes a very laudable plan, ticks all the right boxes, but will anything happen? How many plans have we had of this sort? We have had Rebuilding Ireland and Housing for All. The Children First plan also included the word “first”. We have had lots of plans, but are they delivered upon?

It particularly worries me that much of what we are doing in reality belies the plan to renovate, refurbish and revitalise our towns. For example, if Dún Laoghaire town is to be vibrant, it needs decent public transport links. Most of the local public transport bus routes in Dún Laoghaire have been privatised and are now run by Go-Ahead Ireland. I get calls constantly from constituents trying to get to the hospital or to the town stating that the buses have not turned up. Privatisation has been a disaster in terms of public transport links into the capital. Frankly, I doubt there is any real willingness in the Government to address that.

We have had more plans for Dún Laoghaire Harbour than I care to remember. Waves of consultants who have been paid significant amounts of money have totally disregarded the views of the local public, who know exactly what needs to be done in Dún Laoghaire Harbour and Dún Laoghaire. The consultants completely ignore them. They get paid a fortune. They make crazy plans, which, in any event, never come to pass.

I think of some of the derelict sites, such as the old CBS site on Eblana Avenue. We campaigned for years for affordable and public housing on the site on the basis that it would revitalise a central site in Dún Laoghaire. What actually happened was that the site was given to Bartra for 200 co-living apartments, which are, essentially, the modern tenements of the 21st century, rooms that have shared facilities and are only the size of a disability parking space.

It is no good unless we are serious about this. We need to deal with the dereliction by taking over public or private properties and by saying that if there is not a good reason for something to be left derelict for more than six months, we will take it over and provide the resources for it to be refurbished for housing, community amenities, heritage purposes or whatever. Give us the public transport, give us the public housing in our localities, and give funding to the local authority and the local community to deliver on the refurbishment and revitalisation. Then we might have a chance.

Deputy Paul Murphy: A crucial part of developing our town centres is making sure that people feel safe to use them. On Saturday, over 50 people gathered in Tallaght for a street meeting called by community activists in Watergate Park after a series of attacks took place there. People were united in the idea that our parks cannot be a place where people are scared to go. They have to be a safe space, a space for public enjoyment.

We were also united in a clear demand on the local authority for action and on the Government to provide funding for that action - some simple asks to make our parks safer. We need proper lighting in the park so that people feel comfortable to be in there when it is dark. We need investment in facilities to encourage people to use the park - park benches, exercise machines, etc. We need the local authority to help to organise pro-social activities in the park - yoga, exercises, etc. - and we need park rangers to give people a much greater sense of security. We also need to work with teenagers to develop a space for them to hang out and for them to have a stake in the park. The campaign is absolutely determined to keep going to put pressure on the local authority to achieve these asks.

Deputy Mick Barry: I urge people across the country to speak out about the development in their own towns and villages. I encourage the people in Blarney and Tower in County Cork to speak out about their community and the facilities they need. At present, a large number - I suspect a majority - of households in that community have to travel quite some distance to do their weekly shop. Many people travel to Ballincollig. Many people travel to Blackpool. Many people feel that there are not supermarket facilities in their communities which operate at affordable prices. They go to Ballincollig and Blackpool, where the prices are too high in any case but maybe not as expensive as in Blarney and Tower. It is inconvenient for people, and not good from the point of view of the climate, that they are forced to get in their car and drive miles in and miles out every week to do a shop. They want to see supermarket facilities in their own community. For obvious reasons, there is no question that tourism is important for Blarney, but it cannot rule to the exclusion of facilities there that people living in other communities of a similar size enjoy and expect to have.

I am not going to comment on the details of the case, but it is a known fact now that the owners of Blarney Castle are going to take a High Court action against a development that includes a hotel, some residences and a supermarket in the Blarney area, and a second case against a primary care centre. I will not drill down into that here, but as this plays out in the coming weeks and months, it is very important that the voices that are heard are not merely the proposers of the new developments and the owners of Blarney Castle who are in opposition to them but the ordinary people who live and are rearing their families in the communities of Blarney and Tower. They must speak out and say what they want. I have no doubt that one of the things they will say they want is supermarket facilities at something approaching affordable prices.

An Ceann Comhairle: Tá an Teachta Ó Cathasaigh ag roinnt a chuid ama leis an Teachta Calleary.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Before I begin to talk about the town centre first policy, I wish to acknowledge the members of the Ukrainian community that are outside the gates today. Trying to relate the personal stories of the people at the gates to the large scale of the war on Europe is unthinkable. It does not touch on this debate but I wanted to use the opportunity to refer to them.

I thank the Minister of State and congratulate him on this policy. I have read it in detail, and it would have been nice to hear those details referred to in some way, shape or form in the previous contributions. I would describe this as mission critical to the work of the Government. I worked closely with the likes of Mark Dearey, whose role I acknowledge, and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, who was instrumental in this policy being brought through by the Government. Waterford is sometimes described as a microcosm of Ireland in that we have Ireland's oldest urban centre but we also have smaller towns and villages and a very rural environment. This policy has significant potential, in particular in places like Cappoquin, which was previously involved in the town centre renewal scheme and Lismore, more or less right beside it, which has a significant vacancy rate on an outstandingly beautiful main street and in my home town of Tramore, above-the-shop living is not fully utilised.

I also acknowledge the role of the Heritage Council and the collaborative town centre health check model that has been built in to the town centre first model. The town centre health checks demonstrate that our urban spaces are among the least active in Europe. The economic burden of vacancy is felt very heavily in towns and contributes to issues such as sprawl and commuting, as described by Deputy Barry. I very much commend the work of the programme co-ordinator, Alison Harvey who notes: "Irish town centres have a rich critical mass of heritage assets with hundreds of years of living history in our buildings, streets, parks and squares." I see today the collaborative town centre health check programme has been selected as best practice case study in Europe.

The town centre first policy is very good. There are 33 unique actions which will give towns the tools and resources they need to become more viable and attractive places to live, work, visit and run a business. We are talking about a multibillion euro investment, which is a very serious level of investment, that is backing this up, not alone through the TCF programme but also through policies such as Housing for All and Our Rural Future. We are seeing the RRDF, URDF, in certain cases, the Croí Cónaithe fund, the town and village renewal scheme I mentioned earlier and, crucially for me, through the town centre officers and in particular the town teams. What we are talking about is a bottom-up development. We are going to build capacity and skills within communities to allow people to make decisions about their own towns and

villages. These are the people who know their towns and villages best and they are the people most invested in them and if we upskill them and build capacity within communities that can only lead to good.

I find it exciting to see the level of policy coherence now evident, between the likes of town centre first, Our Rural Future and Housing for All. We are drawing different strands and different Departments together in a real and meaningful way that will unlock significant potential across the country and help us with the balanced rural development piece, which is so important for places like Dublin. I acknowledge what Deputy Ó Snodaigh said, we also need to build our urban towns and villages. That is very important as well.

I thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for selecting me for a Topical Issue matter later when I will deal with sustainable development goals in more detail. In talking about policy cohesion I want to reference the excellent sustainable development goals toolkit for business, which was developed by Chambers Ireland. As well as town centre first, it gives the kind of first principles-led, bottom-up approach whereby we can begin to build in the sustainable development goals or other principles into policies in a coherent way that will help to draw things together and maximise the benefits.

I am very excited to have the opportunity to debate the issue today. I very much commend the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, on the work he has done on what is an excellent policy. I look forward to him holding his feet to the fire to have it implemented over the remaining time of the Government.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this policy. I also welcome the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and that of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, on the co-ordination and cohesion referred to by Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. That is all very fine though at ministerial level, the difficulty is when it gets down to the ground. The ambition the Government and this House may have for town centre renewal and rural renewal is not being met on the ground.

Deputy Ó Cathasaigh can probably speak to this, but I was intrigued by the recent RTÉ "Prime Time" report about what is happening in Waterford city and the very proactive and aggressive way the local authority is chasing CPOs. That is in contrast to most local authorities, which seem quite lazy and intimidated by law and by lawyers. I will return to the issue later. I saw figures indicating that Waterford City Council acquired 45 properties that were empty or derelict through CPO, got funding from the Department and put them into housing. That is the kind of proactivity we need to see from every local authority, not the usual story about there being a CPO and the council is trying to find the owner or there is a derelict property and the council does not know where the owner is, it does not have any details and it does not want to go to court. We need far more ambition and dare I say, aggression, from local authorities around the country taking on CPOs. It would be worth the Minister of State's while to encapsulate what is going on in Waterford and to set targets for it to be repeated right across the country.

We need this policy. Following a survey, the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has concluded that there are nearly 45,000 empty properties in the west, north west and Border areas. That is an extraordinary figure. The report uses such language as: "The region faces 'catastrophic' economic and population decline unless the trend is reversed." It is nonsense to sit on an asset of 45,000 empty properties while we have a housing and homelessness crisis in the country and given the opportunities we saw in the past two years for remote working and

relocating to rural areas. We have all of these national policies and the recent supports announced by the Minister for Housing, Heritage and Local Government yet we need to see them being implemented on the ground. Local authorities need to stop diagnosing the problem but refusing to treat it. As the old phrase goes, there is no sense in having a dog unless he barks or even bites. Local authorities are good are barking about dereliction, but they are not very good at doing much about it, even with the powers they have.

I welcome the notion of a town regeneration officer but what backup and support will they have? One person on his or her own cannot do that. In many communities there is a lack of knowledge and opposition and a downright refusal on the part of the owners of derelict properties. Town teams are doing some very good work around the country but, again, what kind of backup and support is there?

One of the worst things done by the 2011 to 2016 Government was the abolition of town councils. There is no sense in us talking about town centre first unless we commit to restoring town councils and the element of democracy that went around that. That set towns back enormously. Faced with international decline, with things like online trading, the fact that we in this country have taken away that element of local democracy has deprived our towns of something very important.

It should be town centre first, but not at the cost of the communities around them either. Towns, in particular rural and provincial towns, depend on a healthy community around them and that is the basis on which they work. A healthy town needs a healthy community. I am all for the town centre but I am not going to say town centre first at the cost of rural communities, at the cost of rural families not being able to plan to live in their own rural areas, or at the cost of farm families not being able to live on their farm but being forced to commute 40-mile return trips to attend to their farms and farm animals, because they have to live in the town given the current planning guidelines. Town centre first, but communities first too. Healthy town centres need a healthy community around them. Until we recognise that part, the Minister of State is going to have a very difficult few months ahead of him in terms of the development plans that are coming at him. These are development plans that have the endorsement of locally elected representatives but are then being overturned by unelected people. I am all for town centres, and we have a huge amount of work to do in that regard, but not at the cost of rural communities.

There is huge potential around some of the recent plans announced for the pathfinder towns. I am thrilled to see Killala in County Mayo chosen. The Minister of State was down there with us during the summer, although he did not get a chance to go into the town. There is massive potential in that town, which has a high level of dereliction for such a small town. A focused, cross-Department investment programme can transform its fortunes and can give homes to families who want to live in that area, homes that are already there but are vacant and, in some cases, derelict. It can regenerate the town, given the fine history, the ecclesiastical history, the history of the French-Irish tradition and the use of Killala Bay, Killala Port and Killala Quay around it. All of those together, with people actively and proactively working together, can deliver.

We want to do it in this House and the Minister of State wants to do it in his Department, but it is about getting that into the work programme of our local authorities and getting them to deliver on this and provide whatever supports and powers are needed. As we have seen in Waterford, the powers are there if they want to use them, and I want to re-emphasise that point.

There is a continuing need for ongoing infrastructural investment. To get people to our town centres, we need proper public transport. Things like active travel are working but, once again, I want to use the opportunity to say that for towns like Claremorris in east Mayo, Ballina and Sligo, it would be wonderful if we had rail connections to get people to them along the western rail corridor. We need a proper bus service and a proper public transport service to keep populations moving between towns and within towns. Within our small towns around the country, yes, we encourage living and we are encouraging people to come back into them, but we are not providing public transport that is suitable to towns. We have transport in our cities but in our towns there needs to be a far more proactive local transport policy so people do not need a car to get in and out of local towns and local shopping centres.

It is time to be proactive around how we support local independent retailers. We cannot put up the white flag in the face of online trading. We need to take measures such as taxation measures, investment measures and rates support measures to give local traders the upper hand. The notion of state aid rules meaning we do not defend independent local and rural traders from the might of the major multinationals is wrong. That is not what state aid rules were for. Let us proactively support our town centres by proactively supporting town centre retailers, proactively supporting town centre democracy and proactively supporting town centre transport, but not at the cost of communities that make the town centre the healthy place it needs to be.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The ongoing failure to tackle effectively the issue of derelict properties and vacant properties in our town centres and across the State is unacceptable when we have a housing crisis. Let me talk about north Donegal. It is not that long ago that people could have rented a family home in the towns of north Donegal for €600 per month but now they would be lucky if they got it for less than €1,100 or €1,200 a month, and that happened within a very short period of time. This is due to the policy of not building public housing for many years, forcing families into the private sector, as well as the unavailability of properties in the private sector. A key issue is the failure to go proactively after buildings that are derelict or vacant to turn them into housing or a resource for the community.

What we see in town centres in the north of Donegal are great community activists. They are in every single town and every single community. They are salt of the earth people but they are being let down by the failure of local authorities to work to turn derelict properties into viable resources. This is repugnant at a time when we have a profound housing crisis but, of course, in north Donegal, when we add the mica crisis and the houses that are crumbling around families, we have a perfect storm. Now, we are going to have to re-house families for a year or a year and a half while they are waiting for their homes to be rebuilt. They are now looking for the scarce resource of a private rental property to live in while their homes are being rebuilt at a time where there just are not any. If the Minister of State talks to Threshold or the Simon Community, he will know they cannot secure a house to rent in north Donegal. If somebody is on the housing assistance payment and is waiting to receive a council house or a public house, and they are told that the landlord is going to sell the property in six months, and it is all perfectly legal and proper notice has been given, that person cannot secure a home. There are good hard-working people who present and say they are going to be homeless soon or are homeless.

This is the scale of the crisis but I have not seen in recent years the urgency and the awareness to deal with that. People ask how we can have such a profound housing crisis, how we can have a scenario where rents are unattainable for working families, not just in the cities but even in places like Donegal, yet we allow so many properties and so many buildings to lie derelict. There is the issue of the failure to deploy these buildings to address the housing crisis but there

is also the failure in letting down community activists.

For example, we praise Tidy Towns volunteers up and down the country regarding how they paint all the buildings that are lying empty and the fences and the walls, and how they restore civic pride in our communities, yet we allow a situation where there are derelict buildings. I will not pick out individual towns as that would be unfair but there are beautiful towns in north Donegal where people come in from the outside and ask what is going on. They ask why there are so many buildings that are derelict, lying empty or unused. The powers that be - the legal infrastructure, the local authorities and the Government of the land – have failed to put in place the environment where this is addressed. They have let down the community activists, let down our volunteers in the community and, most serious of all, failed families.

I take this opportunity to say very clearly to the Minister of State that this is unacceptable in a profound housing crisis where young people are leaving this country not because they do not have work, as was the case in the past in places like Donegal, but because they cannot afford to put a roof over their heads. Now, they cannot afford the rent. While all of that is happening, there are a huge number of empty, derelict or vacant properties that are not utilised by the State. It has to change and I hope this debate leads to that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick is sharing time with Deputy Seán Canney.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: Since I was first elected to this House, one of the issues that I have constantly raised is that of town centre regeneration, in particular the regeneration of centres in towns like Dundalk and Drogheda. Anybody travelling through any town in Ireland today is sure to find a vast number of vacant properties. Indeed, the main street in my home town of Dundalk, Clanbrassil Street, has vacant shop units and, overhead, many vacant living spaces. Everyone knows that we are in the middle of a housing crisis. Time and again I have asked why more is not being done to regenerate the vacant properties in towns such as Dundalk and Drogheda and, not only that, to regenerate the living quarters that are often over the retail units in the main trading places.

On mainland Europe, it is quite common to see town centre properties used for living accommodation, particularly the overhead living quarters. In Dundalk there is a major problem among multinational companies trying to recruit workers because there is no suitable accommodation. Nothing is available and this is making it increasingly difficult to attract workers to the town. I have spoken to a number of these employers and they all tell me the same story that accommodation is a problem when trying to attract employees to the area. That is why I fully support any initiative that might help. I welcome the town centre first plan and will fully support it as long as it produces the right outcomes. We do not want another talking shop with lots of different people talking and nothing happening on the ground. It is time for action. We need the plan to be successful. Our town centres need new life pumped into them. Towns like Dundalk have great potential. All that is needed is for local people to be given the resources to put measures in place that can regenerate the town centres and, therefore, I am glad the Minister of State said that the one-size-fits-all approach will not work.

What we need is for people to work together locally to identify the areas that need help and to direct resources to where they are badly needed. A lot of work continues to be done in Dundalk in the northern end of the town and we are starting to see results. I have no doubt that the regeneration will transform the towns like Dundalk and can see it happen already in the northern quarter there.

The bottom line is that every town needs a vibrant town centre to act as both a social and economic area. Town centres should be safe places for us to live and to work. If schemes like this succeed we will all be winners with people and businesses in the town centres. When we go on holidays abroad, we all see how vibrant town centres can be at night and during the day. Why can all town centres not be like that? We just need Government support with funding and the support of the local authorities with planning. Then the rest will fall into place. I welcome any initiative that can get real results and transform town centres, including Dundalk and Drogheda.

Dundalk has been lucky in attracting multinational companies. Some years ago I met the managing director of and asked him why the company opted for Dundalk. He said that there had been a lot of investment in the town centre. He said he had visited the town with his family before they picked their site. They had walked around the town centre and got a feel for the people in the area. They visited the local college, which we were lucky to have, Dundalk Institute of Technology or DKIT, and it was excellent. They looked at the schools, shops and everything else. When he visited the local auctioneers he saw a lot of vacant properties in Dundalk and wondered why the Government did not seem to invest in it. As I said earlier, when visiting Spain or Portugal, for example, the number of people who live over shop units is unreal. If we can get multinational companies to come to places such as Dundalk and Drogheda or the Minister of State's own town of Mullingar, it will be a win-win for everyone.

The Dundalk business improvement district scheme, BIDS, works very closely with the local authority, which, to be fair, injects a lot of money. I mentioned the northern part of Dundalk. I recall how it used to be a doom and gloom area but in recent years a lot of money has been injected into the area. Initiatives such as BIDS have helped to improve the derelict and old buildings and a lot of money has been spent on painting and decorating them. When coming into Dundalk, the Crowne Plaza can be seen and it gives a nice feeling for the area.

I fully support the Minister of State. I have known him for some years. He is a very up-and-coming young politician and I think that he has a good future ahead. It is good to have people like him who have a business perspective. We need help. I mentioned DKIT earlier. The workers and skills it has provided these multinational companies has been unreal. The institute is looking for university status. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is doing his best to help us. We were top of the list for years and then suddenly we just dropped to a lower level. However, a lot of work has been done.

To conclude, there are many vacant properties in Dundalk, Drogheda and other towns. I hope that the Government injects the necessary funds. It is common sense that to make money, money has to be invested. Many multinational companies will come to Dundalk and attract many people with them. Those people will come with families, children and everything else but they have nowhere to live. These shops may not suit young families but single people or married people just starting off could move in. I have full confidence in the Minister of State and I support him.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the publication of the town centre first policy. It brings together many of the existing schemes and supports. It brings the town and village, rural regeneration development scheme and the urban regeneration development scheme together into one document. These schemes have been in place and they have been very effective. When I think of my constituency of Galway East, Athenry, Gort, Loughrea, Tuam, Kinvara and a multitude of small villages have been supported and are being transformed with the infrastructure going into

them. However, sadly, when walking the new footpath, people still find themselves looking at boarded up buildings. What do we need to do for that?

Page 15 of the policy refers to Irish Water and an investment of €8.5 billion funding package over the lifetime of the national development plan. The Minister of State needs to take some of that money and fast-forward it to put in municipal treatment plants into these towns and villages that cannot develop. I will be parochial about it and refer to my constituency and places such as Craughwell, Corofin, Abbeyknockmoy, Ardrahan and Labane, which are yearning for houses to be built in an affordable way but cannot do so because they are not allowed build by the local authorities or An Bord Pleanála. There is one small little village where six in-fill houses are to be put into an existing housing estate. When I think of what it would do for that village but it has been refused by Galway County Council on the basis that it is supplied by a private waste water treatment plant. Even though it has the capacity and is properly functional, it is not being allowed. The policy is there but the practice on the ground does not make sense.

The policy is missing something, which is how we are going to support people. I am talking about first-time buyers entering the housing market. We are discriminating against first-time buyers who would like to buy a second-hand house and do it up. First, the help to buy scheme is not available to them. That is a major omission if we are trying to regenerate town centres. Then there is the local authority housing scheme, which does not support refurbishment costs to a property and only supports the capital purchase of the property. Again, buying new property is put ahead of buying a property that is vacant. Third, why do we not encourage people by exempting them from planning development levies in town centres and on vacant sites. A pilot scheme could be run for three years to see what the take-up would be. We need to incentivise young people to come into towns and live in them. At the moment we are trying to stop them living in rural areas with daft planning regulations coming down the road. Many people are being refused planning permission in rural areas. Some are being refused planning permission adjacent to the village because they are just outside the speed limit. Crazy stuff is going on. This policy here will not solve it. The planners and local authorities need a talking-to to get things done instead of saying how they cannot be done.

If we are to make this a success, which I hope we will, I point to the fact the North and West Regional Assembly has done an analysis for the Department and we now have a database of 44,905 vacant properties in the north and west of our country. The target for the number of houses we need to build every year is 33,000. If we were to take this regional assembly area as one example, take on board the analysis that has been done and the information that is there and convert that into a conversion rate of maybe 50% over the next three years, we would deliver 22,000 units in existing sites. We must take this by the scruff of the neck. We must ensure we provide supports for first-time buyers. It is okay to say we should CPO a property, and we should do that if somebody will not sell it, but at the moment people are not interested in buying them because it will cost too much money to do the planning permission to comply with building regulations. We need, therefore, to decide to take a simple approach to this. Let us take the protected structure element out of it. Let us see how we can make this a living space rather than a derelict, boarded-up protected space, as that is what is happening. We seem to have converted ourselves over to thinking that if we protect something we are doing the right thing. We are not. We are actually causing decay and rotting our towns and villages through that.

I am very passionate about this. We have an opportunity here. That is beyond doubt. Everybody talks every week and every day and criticises the Government about housing. I do not criticise the Government about housing as it is going to take time to build it. However, we

certainly have real potential here with the derelict sites we have. Let us start converting them. Just think what we are going to save in emissions by using existing structures. I go so far as to say first-time buyers should also be given double the grant from the retrofit to help them fit out these houses so they become living spaces. It is not a pipe dream; it is practical. Coming from a construction background, it really frustrates me when I walk and drive through towns and villages all over the country and can spend my time counting how many places are boarded up with a bit of nice bright paint on the plywood. It should shame us all that we are leaving it like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Words of wisdom from Deputy Canney. Deputies Leddin and Bruton are next.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Minister of State and his team for the work they have done to develop Town Centre First. It is a very good policy and is going to be critical in driving development across Ireland for many decades to come. It is going to be a very positive and sustainable development. I am minded to think of Éamon de Valera's words from 1943 in his famous speech, the "comely maidens dancing at the crossroads" speech. It was the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Gaelic League and de Valera expressed in the speech a vision of Ireland. I will not read from it in depth but will take a bit from it. De Valera foresaw: "a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age." This romantic and idealised vision, probably infused with a zeal of nationalism as Ireland was coming out of its struggle for independence, was a destructive vision. It informed thinking and policy for the next half-century or more. Perhaps it still does. I would like to think that with this policy we are putting to bed that vision of a poor, agrarian and isolationist Ireland. This policy represents a very positive, strong and progressive vision for the Ireland for the future.

I thought of de Valera's "comely maidens dancing at the crossroads" but what has actually happened in this country might be described in Frank McDonald and James Nix's book *Chaos at the Crossroads*. It was written 15 years ago during the height of the Celtic tiger when we were building ghost estates all over the country and one-off houses here, there and everywhere. I encourage everybody to read it. *Chaos at the Crossroads* described the destructive planning policies of the previous half-century that led to the decline and dereliction of towns and villages and the closure of post offices, schools, banks, Garda stations and pubs - you name it. Towns and villages all over the country went into serious decline. This policy is the way to turn that around and it is not happening before time.

The economic impact of poor planning and the vision that was pursued for such a long time was matched by a significant social impact. We exported our young people. We sent them to all corners of the world. There was a brain drain in Ireland like in no other country in the developed world. It led to a conservatism, a resistance to change and a closed-mindedness in rural Ireland that has not served us well. Ultimately, it drove a race to the bottom. It led to the lopsided development of the country whereby the east coast took primacy. The unwritten "All roads lead to Dublin" policy that Dublin must be a city of scale and everywhere else was a regional backwater is informed by that flawed vision. That thinking still exists and we must tackle it head on. Though our national planning framework is good and speaks about compact growth it needs to be reviewed. We need to be serious about balanced regional development. I refer to the idea our capital city will grow by 30% within the next two decades, despite how

large it already is. Even if the growth of the regional cities is much faster because they are coming from so far behind, we are still going to be left with that lopsided development.

The policies of the past have led to serious costs in servicing rural Ireland. We have the longest road network in Europe *per capita*. We cannot provide public transport. My colleague Deputy Bruton knows much about broadband and how difficult and expensive it is to roll out due to the nature of our settlements and our development. The cost of our sewage, electricity and water networks and the difficulty in providing these services are linked to the poor planning and vision of the past.

This policy represents hope we will change things and rebalance Ireland. There are positive post-pandemic indications that remote working is being embraced. We are seeing people moving back to rural Ireland and that is absolutely positive. We must encourage them to move into towns and villages. We must make towns and villages attractive places to live and places where young people and young families will want to live. That is our fundamental challenge. The role of Government is to manage that challenge as best it can and this policy is a very good start. We can reverse the vicious cycle of decline and turn it into a virtuous cycle of prosperity.

How much time do I have, a Cheann Comhairle?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is six and a half minutes each.

Deputy Brian Leddin: Okay. I need to let Deputy Bruton take over.

I commend this policy. We must ensure we help rural areas grow and prosper by ensuring the vast majority of development happens within the existing urban footprint of our rural areas. Our towns can be the engines of our rural economy and the centres of a rural society that is strong, integrated and resilient.

Deputy Richard Bruton: My few comments will follow on from those of Deputy Leddin without my having planned it. Huge opportunities will arise for rural Ireland and especially our towns and villages if we embrace wholeheartedly the infrastructures of the future. There is a danger that the way we think about rural Ireland is about looking backwards at some of the infrastructure that served us well in the past.

4 o'clock

However, the infrastructure of the future is the national broadband plan with its highways of fast communications; renewable energy, which will transform this country and in which respect we have a unique opportunity; and the retrofitting programme, comprising an investment of €8 billion that focuses particularly on rural Ireland where the greatest problems with poor housing infrastructure exist. Between these, we are discussing a €40 billion investment that is coming down the tracks and will focus largely on rural Ireland. How do we ensure we take maximum advantage of this? Members of the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party have been doing intensive work, which I believe the Minister of State knows about. In a document, we have made 26 practical suggestions on how we can enliven the growth of our towns and villages and bring vacant properties back into use.

What is remarkable in the work that has been done is the considerable variation across counties in the uptake of opportunities offered by some of the existing programmes, for example, the various renewal and lease programmes for tackling vacancies. The strongest per-

forming county has addressed 13% of its vacant units and brought them back into use while many counties at the bottom of the league have addressed less than 1%. Counties have used the incentives differently, so it is important we develop best practice. The same is true of the use of the Derelict Sites Act, compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, and programmes like the town and village renewal scheme and the rural development fund. These programmes are significant. In Munster and Connacht alone, they are funding nearly 1,000 projects worth nearly €300 million.

In what the Government is doing today, I welcome the concept of a partnership that is coherent at local level and will add value to the diverse supports for community initiatives. It is remarkable. I have listed off many of the schemes – sustainable energy communities, active travel, renewal and lease, the Derelict Sites Act, CPOs, business improvement districts, sports capital grants, the community enhancement programme, the historic structure fund and the living city initiative. I could go on and on about the schemes, but what is missing is the glue that pulls them together into a coherent plan. It is important we address this point.

We have allocated €100,000 to 26 towns, one for every county. I will illustrate the differences. In Mayo, Killala is a town with 600 people. In Donegal, Buncrana has 7,000 people. The question will automatically arise as to how the selection of these towns for master planning will influence the allocation of resources. It would be a terrible shame if a dead hand was placed on the valuable community initiatives that are being undertaken in all the other towns and villages while we wait for this better model and its tools to come forward. If it is not impertinent to do so, I advocate that we add a small premium of 5% or 10% to the grants under the current schemes concerned with town and village renewal. In this way, those who take on this work would be rewarded without placing a dead hand on current initiatives.

I welcome the expansion of the town health check but there should be a threshold test before towns or villages are included in it. We cannot just produce plans to sit on shelves. There has to be clear intent from any town that qualifies for the health check so that we genuinely build momentum.

Something is missing. Where is the public service in this? In Scotland where this approach was pioneered, there was a national directive to every public body that it had to focus on town centres. In reviewing its plans, the HSE or any other body would, as a principle, consider town centres first in an attempt to revive them. That needs to be brought into the mix here.

I cannot sit down without making a strong appeal to the Minister of State to consider the new towns that are developing on the fringes of our cities. I represent some of them. Generally, they have crude retail services, underdeveloped education systems – often, they have to wait five years for education or transport – poor childcare and very few sports facilities. The town centre first policy needs to cover these emerging communities and we need to ring-fence funding to allow them to develop. They do not have the natural asset of a strong GAA or soccer club. They must build those from scratch. This must form part of the policy.

The Ceann Comhairle has given me the opportunity to raise a final point. We must open up our publicly funded facilities to enhance communities. This applies to school assets in particular. We must allow them to play a part in developing a campus of activities around the valuable investments we have made in our communities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Patricia Ryan is sharing time with colleagues.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: An effort to address the decay that is obvious if you travel through

many of the towns and villages in south Kildare and the Portarlington area of Laois is long overdue. Portarlington should be a vibrant town, given its population size and transport links. Unfortunately, through mismanagement by successive governments, little has been done to address the widespread dereliction.

Councils have tools such as the derelict and vacant sites levy as well as the CPO process. For various reasons, though, they do not use them in any meaningful way. Has anyone bothered to challenge the councils as to why they do not use the tools at their disposal? It seems not. I have heard various excuses but it generally boils down to manpower. Councils barely have the resources to do their day-to-day work without worrying about the actions they would like to take, such as addressing dereliction.

This might explain why I recently received a reply from Kildare County Council regarding a representation I made more than six weeks ago. The representation related to a lady who had spent more than six months trying to get on the housing list. The reply read:

It is acknowledged that the response to your enquiry is overdue. This is due to the increased volume of work in the Housing Department, and I regret any inconvenience that this delay may have caused.

This lady is trying to get on the list, and where people do get on Kildare County Council's list, they then have to wait ten years.

A policy like town centre first must be more than just lip service or another fancy announcement. It must be backed up by money. I am sure the situation is the same on other councils, but councillors on Kildare County Council are often told that responses are not available or actions cannot be taken because of a lack of staff or resources. I do not blame the council's management, which has to work with the tools it is given. This policy is not going to succeed if councils are not given the support they need.

Dereliction is a blight on our towns. Towns like Athy, Monasterevin and Rathangan in south Kildare are like the rust belt, with buildings on their main streets that have been crumbling and left to rot for well over 20 years. There must be a carrot and a stick to encourage property owners, but there is not enough of either in this policy.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome the publication of the town centre first policy. In particular, I welcome its recognition of the fact that one size does not fit all and that we need unique solutions for the unique challenges each and every town faces, given they are all different. I also welcome the idea of tailored plans for towns. It is important for buy-in that there be consultation not only with the town teams, but also with local businesses and residents in towns and villages. There are many wonderful rural development groups, town teams and others that do so much good work in our towns and villages. Last week, Creggs Rural Development in County Galway launched a village plan in conjunction with Galway County Council. That is the level of consultation we need to see, namely, towns and villages creating their own plans with, importantly, the support and backing of their local authorities. In conjunction with the local credit union, the enterprise centre in Ballinasloe does a great deal of work on the development of the town, which is suffering from derelict and vacant properties.

The initial report on the six pilot towns identified that the main issue had to do with complications arising from the ownership of vacant buildings, particularly in town centres. Perhaps older people owned them and, instead of selling them to their local authorities, they intended

to leave them to sons or daughters who might not have even been in the country, for example, in England or further afield. Many complications like these arise where vacant buildings are concerned. This is going to be a major challenge. It was identified in the pilot report but I am not sure it has been given the focus it needs in terms of this policy. It will be an important element so we have to get it right.

I would like to make one other point that has been already raised. There was mention of a €30,000 grant to help people to purchase derelict properties. I have received a number of queries with regard to when that grant will be available and the criteria around it. The grant is badly needed, in particular for young people starting out who cannot afford to build or buy but would like to go the route of restoring a derelict property.

There are many references to digital transformation in this document. Remote working has been a lifeline for rural Ireland. It provides us with huge opportunities, but we have to get the remote working legislation right. We need to ensure the Minister for Rural and Community Development plays her role. We have to get that legislation right if the remote working hubs, many of which have been already established, are to work.

An Ceann Comhairle: In the absence of the speakers in the next slot, I will allow Deputy O'Reilly two minutes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for accommodating me. I welcome the publication of the town centre first policy. Like most of the Members who have spoken this afternoon, I look forward to its implementation. The policy is a good idea. It looks good on paper. I would like to see it in action in our towns and villages.

I was somewhat disturbed by the recent remark by the Tánaiste that retail has changed and people are shopping online. He appeared to give up on retail. We need to get behind saving retail jobs. For that reason, I would ask the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, to consider engaging with the Mandate trade union and its proposed forum on the future of retail. As an Oireachtas, we need to fight for those jobs and to make them decent jobs. Let us not give up on retail. Let us make our town centres the type of places in which people want to live and spend time and, for those who have money, where they want to shop and spend some of it.

On the concept of making our town centres accessible for everyone, we need to look at this in the round. In recent times, we have had many discussions in this Chamber in regard to making our streets safe for women. Our town centres have to work and they have to be accessible for people with disabilities and accessible and safe for women, families and older people. They have to be places where everyone in the community wants to be. Towns and villages in my own area such as Rush, Lusk, Skerries, Malahide, Portmarnock, Balbriggan and Swords are wonderfully vibrant towns with fantastic young populations. We want to see our towns and villages thriving. These towns are crying out for remote working hubs. While the legislation around that did not get off to a great start, we are working to make it fit for purpose and to ensure the remote working hubs, when established, are accessible to all workers. This means they cannot be too expensive if they are to accommodate all workers.

The multi-stakeholder town teams are a very good idea. On Monday last, I attended a networking event organised by Dr. Lucy Michael as part of She Leads - We Lead, Fingal. This is a group that is working with women who are marginalised but are active in their communities and want to step up that activity. I urge the Minister of State, when putting together those

teams, to look to organisations and initiatives such as She Leads - We Lead, Fingal and similar organisations in other areas to ensure we take in everybody and not just the people we would traditionally think would be involved. We need to bring in all voices, in particular marginalised voices, to ensure we are all working together to make our town centres better.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The ideas and aims contained within the town centre first policy are positive. I am particularly struck by the level of cross-party support that has been expressed today, which I hope is a good omen for the success of this policy.

Our towns and villages have shown remarkable resilience throughout the recent crisis. The move towards remote working has changed how many people not only work but live. It is a change most people have welcomed. We had reached a stage where many people, in particular young people, felt their only option in terms of career progression was to move to a bigger city, to be in the hubs of social and economic activity, and this led to overstretched cities, in particular Dublin, and, sometimes, deserted or neglected towns and villages.

Town centre first represents a new approach to the development of our towns where local communities and local businesses can be central to reimagining their own towns and planning their own futures. I welcome this policy commitment to reinvigorating those towns and villages, acknowledging that each town is unique and requires unique solutions to the challenges and opportunities it faces. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work. The ambition of town centre first is one few people could argue with. We had many impressive and interesting submissions and recommendations to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. All were constructive. I am glad to note a number of these recommendations are included in the town centre first policy. It is important as town centre first progresses that we look to those examples of best practice to inform our policy. We should learn from the areas where bad planning does not serve communities properly.

As has been said by many of my colleagues this afternoon, for the town centre first policy to work to its full potential, we need to crack our approach to derelict housing. We must nail down our policy for returning vacant and derelict housing to the housing stock. Regenerating our towns and villages, unlocking vacant homes and bringing them back into use will increase the supply of housing, deliver economic renewal for towns and villages, bring environmental and social benefits, and allow for more balanced regional development. On behalf of Fine Gael, I have chaired two provincial public meetings on dereliction, one for Munster and one for Connacht-Ulster, which were a great means of hearing the views of residents and industry experts on how action on dereliction can help to revitalise their towns and villages.

I welcome the recent expansion of the vacant homes officer role in local authorities. This will ensure greater action is taken on vacant homes across all local authorities. While all county councils already have vacant homes officers in place, in many instances they are part-time roles. The 20% increase in funding will allow these officers to dedicate their time to tackling housing vacancy on a full-time basis.

I welcome the Government funding for the development of Adamstown town centre in Lucan. The urban regeneration and development fund has provided €9.7 million in funding to provide for public infrastructure and amenities that will facilitate the development of the Adamstown town centre. It will create a Boulevard Park, library and a town centre plaza. These are amenities that will make Adamstown an all-round nicer place to live. It will support the continued roll-out of homes around the town centre because, on foot of this funding, more than

580 new homes will be constructed in my community. This will add to the provision of much-needed social, affordable and private housing in the Dublin Mid-West area. Everyone wants to live in a vibrant useable space where their needs are met and they and their family can thrive. Town centre first will achieve this.

I again welcome this initiative. I thank the Minister of State and his team for all their hard work in getting us this far and I wish them the very best with this project.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Whip's office is observing, as we are almost half an hour ahead of schedule, we will be getting to Topical Issue Matters a lot earlier. I hope all involved will be here to deal with them.

Am I correct that the next slot is being shared by Deputies Harkin and McNamara?

Deputy Michael McNamara: And possibly Deputy Pringle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Pringle is on my list, not Deputy McNamara.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The publication of this town centre first policy document is a much-needed call to action. In so many of our small, medium and large towns there are derelict buildings in need of regeneration. Today is a good news day.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly recently published a vacancy and dereliction analysis for the region. It makes dismal reading. I will give some details in regard to a number of towns in my constituency where there was an increase in vacant commercial stock between 2015 and 2020. In Carrick-on-Shannon, there was a 25% increase. In Manorhamilton, there was a 34% increase. In Sligo town, the capital of the north west, there was a 26% increase. In Ballymote, there was an increase of almost 19%. Boyle saw an increase of 38% while Ballyshannon and Bundoran fared better, at 5% and 6% respectively. In truth, not all towns had such sizeable increases in vacant commercial properties. However, the average for the entire region was 13.3%. That gives an overall picture of what is happening. It is also worth saying that the report did not capture the impact of Covid-19 on commercial vacancy rates in 2021. In that context, this policy document is a response to the historic and more recent decline of towns throughout the country.

The policy can have many benefits, including derelict properties being brought back as homes where people can live and thereby contribute to vibrant and sustainable communities. People talk about the increase in rents and the cost of buying a home. Normally they are referring to the larger cities but the Minister of State and I know that those increases in rents have, in recent times, been higher in counties such as Sligo and Donegal than in other parts of the country. This is hitting everywhere and, therefore, making derelict homes liveable homes, in which families can live and help to build and contribute to communities, is important.

In this particular report, which I have scanned through, a number of pilot town initiatives are mentioned, two of which happen to be in the constituency I represent. One is in Boyle, County Roscommon. The report refers to the town centre living initiative project. Some €2.1 million has been approved for Boyle regeneration, which will facilitate the refurbishment of the old Royal Hotel premises to create an enterprise centre, remote working hub and community space. Funding has also been approved for King House and the former premises of the *Roscommon Herald*.

Sligo is also highlighted and the success of the business improvement district is noted. Sligo has had a purple flag award since 2015. It is an internationally accredited award for reaching a standard of excellence in the evening and night-time economy. Sligo has also been approved for €48 million in funding under the URDF. That approval is in principle and a lot of work must be done. There are some very exciting projects being planned. There are seven public realm projects, which include street and town enhancements, and a cultural and learning hub or city campus in the Connaughton Road and Stephen Street centre. All of that is positive but there is one crucial issue, which is match funding. The local authority has to come up with 25% of the cost of URDF projects. In the case of Sligo, that is €16 million. It is a big issue for all local authorities but for a local authority such as Sligo, which has considerable historical debts, €16 million is a massive amount of money. The last thing any of us wants is for the €48 million, or any part of it, to be lost because of the extreme difficulty the local authority will face in coming up with match funding of €16 million. The Minister of State and I know that certain local authorities will find that money more easily than others. I ask the Minister of State to take that into consideration when this funding is being rolled out.

I also highlight the fact that Sligo County Council has been asked to prioritise the towns of Tubbercurry, Ballymote and Enniscrone, all of which badly need investment and regeneration. I will be carefully monitoring what is happening.

I echo the words of Deputy Calleary around the point that Town Centre First is important but cannot come at the expense of one-off rural houses. We are told there is no ban on such development but in reality, getting planning permission for one-off rural homes is like pulling hens' teeth. The Minister of State and I can discuss this matter further. We talked in the past about a pilot programme for building one-off rural houses in Leitrim. What progress is being made in that regard?

Deputy Michael McNamara: I welcome the Town Centre First policy document, which I looked at initially when it was launched and in more detail thereafter. I welcome the focus and attention the Minister of State has brought to bear on the need to develop our towns and address the problem of dereliction, an issue many Deputies have raised. I welcome that focus. However, I must say, as other speakers from both sides of the House have said, I am quite concerned by what is not in the plan.

To discuss what is in the plan, one of the main actions is that a town regeneration officer will be appointed to each local authority. That is great but what is it really going to achieve? All local authorities have plenty of staff. It is not as if they do not have any employees. They do; they have lots of them. Some local authorities do not seem to have the political will to address the problem of dereliction. That is what I would like to see tackled. What is the problem? Some local authorities are quite proactive. Those in Limerick and Mayo were particularly proactive in 2019, according to the figures provided by the Minister of State. Other local authorities have been much less proactive. Some of them did not issue any derelict site notices. I find it hard to believe there are any counties in Ireland without derelict sites. It is a blight in every area. It is not as bad as it was and things have improved in the two years since the general election, I think it is fair to say, in most counties. However, it is still a problem that persists.

There is a view in Clare County Council that the problem is legislative and that the legislation needs to be changed. Has the Minister of State or the Department consulted with local authorities to know why the implementation of the derelict sites legislative machinery is so uneven? Some local authorities are able to work it but others are not. Is the problem legislative?

Do we need legislative change? Is the problem a lack of resources in some counties? Is the problem that counties have no resources or that they choose to spend the money on other issues and problems? We need to see derelict sites being brought back into use. I think the Minister of State very much agrees with that and it is an ambition in this plan. I am not saying the Minister of State is a fan of derelict sites because nobody is. The question is what are we going to do about it. I do not see enough about that in the plan.

We also need to see pilot projects. It is obviously very expensive to bring older buildings up to the current building regulation standards. Ms Shelley McNamara, a leading architect in Grafton Architects, is a Clare woman who is no relation of mine. I would not damn her by claiming she supports me in any way whatsoever. However, she has called for pilot projects in our market towns to examine building regulations. Nobody is saying building regulations should be abandoned but to bring older houses to the same standard as a new-build is a big ask, particularly for protected structures. Is there a bit more work that could be done around that? While I welcome what is in the plan, I have concerns about what is not in it. I would like to see more of a focus on legislation and what needs to be done to make the Derelict Sites Act more active.

There is a reluctance in some local authorities to issue a compulsory purchase order because the authority may then be stuck with the building and must expend a lot of money to bring it up to the standard required. In Scotland, there are compulsory sales orders whereby an owner is forced to sell a property within a certain period of time and the market determines what it is worth. Is that something the Minister of State has considered? It would require legislative change but the Department might look into it. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the leeway.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has given some important legal advice.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is not legal advice but it is something to consider. It is done in Scotland and if it is good enough for that country, it might be worth considering in Scariff and elsewhere.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I invite the Minister of State to respond to what has been a very interesting debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputies for their contributions. It has been very interesting and worthwhile to hear different perspectives from all sides of the House.

Towns and villages are at the heart of many important administrative, social, community and recreational functions. They also support clusters of local services, have a significant share of homes and jobs and act as important and vital transport hubs. We want to ensure they remain resilient places, with vibrant, inclusive communities and a strong cultural and social fabric that can continue to deliver a good quality of life for future generations. The Government recognises that many Irish towns have already implemented significant place-making initiatives that have had a transformative effect on the town centre environment and people's sense of place. These exemplars have provided the template that is a starting point for place-making under our town centre first policy. The Government, through this policy, has developed a robust framework to support the dynamic and multifaceted nature of what makes Irish towns vibrant and enjoyable places to live. The 33 unique actions contained in the policy will create a cohesive and effective national framework for town regeneration that will drive supports for our towns,

including the tools and resources they need to become more viable and attractive places in which to live, work, visit and run a business.

The town centre first policy will build on the expertise already apparent in the local government sector to ensure the policy agenda locally is linked to investment streams that will enable impactful initiatives to be realised, through connecting locally based projects with national funding programmes. Local authorities are well placed to work with their local communities in formulating specific actions at a local level, through the town centre first plan process, to ensure the proposals are based on local knowledge and are combined with technical support and concrete measures, including access to funding. This will help to drive and implement the policy successfully. The establishment of a dedicated town centre first regeneration officer post across local authorities will serve a critical co-ordination function at local level. The regeneration officer will play an essential role in mobilising, encouraging and supporting local town teams across his or her administrative area. Provision of €2 million in funding has been made for this role.

The town centre first policy is underpinned by an understanding that the structures developed at both national and local authority level must serve to identify, foster and enable the local expertise, hard work and pride of place that already are found within local communities throughout Ireland. That is why the policy has placed the development of new town teams, or support of existing teams, at its core. By harnessing the drive of local residents, business people, community representatives and others to see their home towns thrive and prosper, for the benefit of residents and visitors alike, the town centre first policy can tap into a unique and irreplaceable resource. I am confident that with the help of the supports established under the policy, town teams across the country will establish themselves as empowered drivers of regeneration and growth.

The delivery of the town centre first strategy at a local level, regardless of the scale or category of the town, will be underpinned by an assessment of the current position of the town and the development of a plan that provides a vision for its future direction. The local expertise and understanding of the unique strengths of individual towns that can be garnered from the town teams will be a critical input into these plans. The national town centre first office and local authorities will support the teams in developing their own town centre first plans and ensuring they are aligned with local, regional and national regeneration strategies. Town centre first plans will serve to maximise the impact of investment from a range of funding streams available for town regeneration across a number of Departments and State agencies, including the URDF and the RRDF, which are already investing more than €600 million in regeneration projects in towns throughout the country. The initial 26 town centre first plans have already been funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development under phase 1 of the scheme. They will provide a vital input into the process as a whole and help to develop a roadmap for future plans.

As I outlined earlier, this focus on capturing and sharing knowledge and best practice established at a local level across a national framework is a key element of the town centre first strategy. We recognise there are already many towns in Ireland that are successfully undertaking actions and initiatives related to regeneration. They are organising locally to progress local development projects and programmes to improve their towns' environment and economy. The town centre first policy appreciates the significant benefits that can be gained by communities and their towns learning from each other and sharing experiences, particularly towns that have similar characteristics and contexts and which face common challenges to development. There

is great value in exchanging and developing best-practice approaches to the many aspects of town regeneration, such as helping all to progress and develop, hearing from each other and learning from mistakes that were made in the past.

The establishment of the town centre first regeneration officer role and the national town centre first office will offer a new forum to identify and share lessons learned with towns and villages across the country. In addition, a number of pathfinder and early-stage towns will be identified nationally to act as early priority demonstrators of the town centre first approach. These selected towns will be at different stages of the process, from background research and analysis, preparation of the town centre first plan and project development to plan implementation and delivery. Pathfinders will involve a focused collaboration of the funders and agencies involved. The toolkit of best practice that will be established will assist towns that have not had capacity to shape their own development. By developing a roadmap to support towns that are at early stages in the town centre first process, we can maximise the impact of investment in town centre regeneration.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to outline the town centre first strategy today. The policy, as it has been developed by both my Department and the Department of Rural and Community Development, recognises the dynamic and multifaceted nature of what makes Irish towns vibrant and enjoyable places in which to live and work. Increasing the availability of new homes within towns is a key focus of the policy. Towns need people if they are to be successful and full of life.

A number of Deputies referred to the problem of derelict properties. Providing new homes for our citizens in towns, close to existing amenities, employment, education and local services, makes sense for everyone. The forthcoming funding schemes to tackle vacancy and dereliction problems in towns, namely, the Croí Cónaithe fund and the CPO programme, will provide practical supports to aid the redevelopment of building stock, thereby bringing life back into the streets of our towns on a permanent basis.

We are acutely aware of the potential to reuse and redevelop existing buildings for new homes. We need to assist people in a variety of ways to ensure the buildings we see vacant and derelict in our towns are brought back into residential use, each becoming a new home with the town on its doorstep. We have signalled, through the Housing for All plan, that by the second quarter of this year, every local authority should have its own full-time vacant homes officer. We have increased funding by 20% to achieve that. When local authorities are making decisions on prioritising their work programmes, it should not be the case that individuals working in the vacant homes office are also dealing with broadband provision, for example, and a variety of other tasks. Councils must be more co-ordinated in seeking to unlock the potential that lies right in front of them.

Deputy Calleary referred to the one-off rural housing policy. We are awaiting the successor draft document on the future sustainable development of rural housing. I am very clear in being aligned with his thinking in terms of how we understand and acknowledge that demand and develop it in a way that underwrites our citizens' rights and gives them the opportunity to avail of a secure rural life. That is very important and I eagerly await the draft document. It is important to understand that the town centre first policy is not only about town centres; it is trying to achieve a balance in terms of making our towns more vibrant, unlocking the potential in our brownfield sites, bringing back derelict properties, place-making and ensuring our neighbourhoods are liveable places. We also need to be very clear in looking after the outskirts of

those towns. There are areas in rural Ireland that need to be accommodated. It is about getting a balance and I am hopeful we will be able to achieve that, with the co-operation of Members right across the House. It can be a divisive issue but we really want to work together to find a reasonable solution.

Several Deputies raised issues around the Housing for All plan. We have a co-ordinated approach with increased funding of €5 billion for Irish Water. This is again seeking to unlock the potential of many settlements that are unfortunately held up because they do not have the key infrastructure. We are getting to a stage where items are plan-led as opposed to having loads of land zoned and the State not being able to predict where to put the infrastructure. We are getting around to that space now.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann 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 Marian Harkin - to discuss a new school for Gaelscoil Chluainín in Manorhamilton, County Leitrim; (2) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss the need for improved public transport links for south Dublin; (3) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the proposed deal on the national maternity hospital; (4) Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh - to discuss Social Justice Ireland's new report, Measuring Success: Sustainable Progress Index 2022; (5) Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú and Darren O'Rourke - to discuss district heating systems and communal heating systems, particularly at Carlinn Hall in Dundalk, County Louth; (6) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for reform of the voids scheme; (7) Deputy Martin Kenny - to discuss children's disability network team service provision in counties Sligo and Leitrim; (8) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss housing delivery in Dublin; and (9) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss how Ireland can aid Ukraine and services for Irish citizens based in Ukraine.

The matters raised by Deputies McAuliffe, Richmond, Ó Cathasaigh, and Ó Murchú and O'Rourke have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Housing Provision

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, for being here for this Topical Issue debate because I know that he, the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, treat this matter with the utmost seriousness. We have had nearly two days of housing meetings with chief executives and housing directors of local authorities across the country with the Minister. I want to point out the massive ambition in this House for the delivery of public housing. We put in a lot of hard work on the Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage; at departmental level; and in the Oireachtas by all parties on the Affordable Housing Act 2021, the Land Development Agency Act 2021 and the publication of Housing for All with all the tools that are in that document. Then there is the €4 billion multi-annual budget. All of that ambition has to be translated to the local authorities;

the approved housing bodies, AHBs; the Land Development Agency, LDA; and the many other bodies that will implement this plan.

Our work is not done when we pass these Bills or budgets. The work has to be continued and we have to continue to focus on almost every one of the sites in each of our constituencies to make sure our ambition is matched by the ambition of the local authorities and AHBs to deliver. The local authorities have to do far more in the delivery of social housing and far more again in the delivery of affordable housing. They have been out of this space for some time, although that is not true of all of them. Dublin City Council built thousands of homes during the Ballymun regeneration project only ten or 15 years ago so there is some legacy of building public housing within our system. They need to get back to having that sort of ambition of seeing a site and being aware that they have the policy tools, budgets and ability to deliver on them.

I mention some of the sites and some of the frustrations I have had with them. The Parkview site is being developed by Ó Cualann in partnership with Dublin City Council but there have been far too many delays in the transfer of the legal title from Dublin City Council to Ó Cualann so it can develop that site. On the Kildonan lands, much of which have been lying idle for many years, consultation has occurred and a project manager has been appointed but there is no clarity on the design and the scheme and timeline are still unclear. The Whitehall car park site has some local issues that need to be ironed out with residents. People have accepted it will be built on but there has been no progress on that site since the summer. Thankfully the majority of Dublin City Council has voted to approve the Oscar Traynor Road site. We expect a planning application but it might only be for part of that overall development so we are a long way from the completion of that project. Pre-Part 8 planning approval is expected on the port tunnel site but we still await procurement and construction and it is only for part of that site. The Coutry Gardens site has been identified for cost rental homes but there is still no clarity on who the partner will be on that. Cranogue Islands on Balbutcher Lane has thankfully been identified for affordable purchase homes but we are a long way off the pre-Part 8 becoming a Part 8 and then being constructed. I mention the Church of the Annunciation site, identified for senior citizens. The church has been demolished and the site lies idle so we need action on that site. Belclare Drive has been identified for affordable housing. It is another complex site and may be further delayed. I could go on and on about all of these sites but if we do not keep an eye on each one of them, the ambition and legislation we have will not be translated into keys in doors and homes for people. The Minister of State and I agree that this is needed and we need to make sure that the next step, delivery by local authorities and AHBs, is carried out.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Deputy for his support for the work of the Government and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Increasing the supply of housing is a priority for this Government. Last September, the Government published Housing for All, which sets us on a path of delivering 300,000 new homes between now and the end of 2030, including 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes. The plan is backed by historic levels of investment with in excess of €20 billion through the Exchequer, the LDA and the Housing Finance Agency over the next five years. This will provide the sector with the stability and certainty it needs to increase supply to an average of 33,000 homes per annum.

Work undertaken in the Department during 2021 identified estimated housing supply targets of 14,000 in the Dublin region for the period 2021 to 2027, with almost half, 6,800, in the Dublin City Council area. Data published by the Department today show that 1,861 new homes

were commenced in January 2022. In the past 12 months, February 2021 to January 2022, commencement notices for 31,201 new homes were received. With the exception of 2020, when significant restrictions on home building existed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of residential homes for which commencement notices were received has increased every year since 2015, the earliest year for which comparable data is available. That is a 42% increase on the number of homes for which construction commenced in 2020. Indications are that the proportion of commencements in Dublin in 2021 is on target in accordance with the national planning framework.

Under Housing for All there will be significant investment to deliver both social and affordable housing in the Dublin region. The delivery of new social homes will be an important element of this increased delivery. Housing for All includes a target to deliver an average of 9,500 new build social homes per annum over the next five years, with annual targets increasing from 9,000 in 2022 to 10,200 in 2026. In this period, 17,750 new-build social homes will be delivered in the four local Dublin local authority areas, and over 20,000 new social homes will be built, including homes delivered through long-term leasing.

To increase housing delivery and more affordable housing, we introduced the Affordable Housing Act 2021, the first ever stand-alone affordable housing legislation. This Act established a basis for four new affordable housing measures to deliver on the programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes. Housing for All provides funding for the delivery of 54,000 affordable homes nationally to 2030, including 36,000 affordable purchase and 18,000 cost rental homes. The Department is in the process of reviewing the housing development action plans from the 31 local authority areas in order to finalise regional annual affordable housing targets in the period to 2026 and this process will be completed shortly.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Minister of State outlining some of the many things contained in Housing for All, the Affordable Housing Act 2021, the Land Development Agency Act 2021 and the many other measures that he mentioned. We need to go further and start to make sure that every local authority knows the breadth and depth of this housing plan, that every local authority knows how much is in here and that every councillor has an understanding that there are tools in this housing plan that will allow them to progress the projects which they might have been frustrated at being unable to develop. I welcome the two days we have spent with our housing directors and I know each of the Ministers will be speaking to the councillors in their parties. I also welcome the Taoiseach's comments that local authorities and councillors have to treat this issue, in its implementation, as an emergency. We have to make sure we get to a position where we start building homes and that will involve sacrifices and challenges for all of us. The biggest challenge that is faced is by the executives in the AHBs and, particularly, in the local authorities.

More than 250 additional staff have been provided across the country but there has not been any additional staff provided to Dublin yet. That is because, as the assistant secretary general at the Department informed our committee, they are waiting for the housing needs and demands assessment to be completed and they will be in a better position at that point to identify the numbers that are required. We need additional staff in Dublin and everybody accepts that. The local authorities need to tell us how many staff they need and they need to ensure that is approved by the Department. We have to get those staff in place and get to work on all of the sites I mentioned. Thousands of homes could be delivered in my constituency alone. That is what progress and Housing for All will look like. It will not be a list of policy instruments, but a list

of sites where homes are being developed and a list of families who are able to call those places home. It will be places that we will be able to call communities. I am not criticising Government policy. I am not even criticising progress at this point, but I am saying we need to make sure that ambition is one of the core points of the local authorities in how they deliver this plan.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for his remarks. When the housing need and demand assessment, HNDA, is submitted by local authorities, it will be looked at forensically, because it will be the guide rails in terms of where demand will be and construction will take place over the coming years.

The Deputy has, quite rightly, pointed to what citizens need to see. They need to see developments going on around them, with the prospect of and hope to have keys to their new home in their hand in order that they can have a secure tenancy for their family. The Government is working night and day and is focused on that and ensuring that people can see the 31,000 commencements that are now ongoing throughout the country. That means the skillsets of labourers, bricklayers and diggers are on site delivering those houses.

A key priority for Government is ensuring the increased supply of social and affordable homes throughout Dublin. This year, we will deliver more than 2,000 new-build social homes throughout the Dublin local authorities. Affordable housing delivery is already happening and the first affordable purchase homes will be made available shortly in Fingal County Council and South Dublin County Council. We have already delivered cost rental homes at 40% below market rates in Fingal in Dublin.

Importantly, affordable housing measures and schemes are designed to assist purchasers in meeting the costs of newly-constructed homes and increasing the overall housing supply. By significantly increasing supply we will help temper inflationary pressures on the wider housing market to benefit all home purchasers. We are working as hard as we can, in line with the sites Deputy McAuliffe pointed out, to ensure they are being realised for all our citizens.

Public Transport

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Minister of State for taking the debate at this hour of a Thursday evening. This is an issue where choosing the forum in which to raise it is difficult, because it involves a number of State and semi-State bodies. It is hard to ascertain directly through parliamentary questions what role the Minister can have. That is where I have combined two or three efforts into one for this evening.

The first is with regard to the timetabling of the Dublin Bus schedule in south County Dublin, namely, the 44 bus from Enniskerry to the city centre and the 47 bus from Stepside. These two buses serve a number of schools and are a vital form of transport for school children at both national and secondary level to access their schools. However, due to small changes to the timetabling, the bus either goes too early or too late to get the kids to school on time. It is a very simple issue that all of us deal with in our constituencies every day of the week.

I have engaged with Dublin Bus and its response is that the buses are relatively full as is simply does not cut the mustard. It does not realise that Dublin Bus responsibility is as a public-service provider, as well as a company that has to ensure profits are made or losses are minimised. Therefore, I ask for an intervention to allow small tweaks. We are talking a difference

of five to ten minutes to departure time of the second bus in order to allow kids to get to school via bus, get them on public transport, keep them out of the cars and not to force their parents, guardians or grandparents to take the car on the road when there is no need. It is a simple fix.

The second area I will raise is with regard to the Luas. The Luas is a wonderful facility that serves the entirety of my constituency. However, now that we have seen a return to 100% capacity, the vast majority of people returning to work and the vast majority of people having already returned to second and third level education, we see the old problems return in terms of the increase in demand. People are, increasingly, left on the platform or going on a Luas that is beyond crowded. This will only get worse.

The repeated announcements of the Minister for Transport and the previous Minister of new and expanded carriages is only enough to meet the current or, indeed, previous demand. The growing demand being added to by the large-scale construction and provision of housing throughout the south Dublin area, along the Ballyogan Road, along the Glenamuck Road, in Cherrywood and beyond, puts huge pressure on the Luas. What we see is people reluctant to take the risk of having to be left on the platform, having missed one or two carriages. It is a longer wait time, depending on where one gets on. Instead, they revert to the car and therefore, despite the 20% decrease in fares, we are not seeing them maximised.

The third area is very pressing. It looks ahead to the St. Patrick's Day festival to which we all look forward and the four-day weekend. It is the double bank holiday that was much promised. It will be the first real opportunity for many people to get out, socialise and I hope mark the end of the serious aspects of restrictions this pandemic has laid upon us. However, that comes again with pressure on public transport services, not just in south Dublin but throughout the entire city and region.

We already see late night transport squeezed to the maximum. There are not enough taxis on the road. Many drivers, for whatever reason, left the profession. Equally, the Nitelink bus service has only returned. I call for an extension of the Nitelink bus service and, crucially, for the Luas to take up Christmas timetabling with special late-night Luas services running until 3.30 a.m., such as we see in the weekends leading up to Christmas Day and over the new year period.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Deputy Richmond for giving me the opportunity to discuss this issue on behalf of the Minister. From the outset, I note that the Department of Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding with regard to public transport. However, it is not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The National Transport Authority has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services nationally and for the allocation of associated funding to the relevant transport operators.

That being said, the Government is firmly committed to enhancing and expanding our public transport service provision across the country as a means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector. Under the climate action plan, we have set ambitious targets for an additional 500,000 daily public transport and active-travel journeys to reduce internal combustion engine kilometres by 10% and add 1,500 EV buses to the public transport fleet, as well as expanding electrified rail services, all by 2030. A key objective is to provide all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options.

To support this, in budget 2022, the Department of Transport secured approximately €538 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, and Local Link services. In addition, €25 million was provided to introduce a young adult card which will enable any person aged between 19 and 23 years old to avail of an average fare discount of 50% across all public transport services. This initiative will promote modal shift among this age cohort and contribute towards a reduced reliance on private transport. This exciting initiative will, of course, benefit many young people living in south Dublin.

Further, as part of a suite of new measures being introduced by Government to help combat the rising cost of living experienced throughout the country, a 20% average fare reduction on PSO services until the end of 2022 is also due to be introduced in early May.

I reassure the Deputy that I fully realise the importance of expanding public transport options in all locations throughout the country and the national development plan provide €35 billion for transport over the coming decade, the largest investment in transport in the history of the State. This provides the necessary support to translate our ambitions for public transport into reality.

Work is ongoing on the DART+ coastal south improvements programme which will provide increased rail capacity on the south-eastern line. In addition, there is also the planned development of a new DART station at Woodbrook, between Bray and Shankill, on the existing DART line. Consideration is also being given to new park and ride zones in the area.

In terms of bus services, a major programme of bus network enhancements is being introduced over the Dublin metro area and it is planned to introduce major new orbital services in south Dublin, including four new routes, the S2, S4, S6 and S8, to serve Ballsbridge, Rathmines, Heuston, UCD, Crumlin hospital, Liffey Valley, Dundrum and Tallaght.

5 o'clock

This year, it is planned to introduce major new orbital services in south Dublin, including four new routes, namely, the S2, S4, S6 and S8, serving Ballsbridge, Rathmines, Heuston Station, University College Dublin, UCD, Crumlin hospital, Liffey Valley, Dundrum and Tallaght orbital.

Additionally, in 2023 and 2024, four new bus spines will be introduced in the area under BusConnects. These spines will connect Malahide Road to Crumlin, Ballymun to Foxrock, Swords Road to Terenure and Blanchardstown to UCD. Collectively, these measures will not only further improve connectivity but in conjunction with the planned expansion in cycling infrastructure, will provide viable alternatives to the private car for those living in the region. I will bring the Deputy's views back to the Minister about the St. Patrick's Day festival, late-night transport, the fact that taxis are very difficult to get and also the extension of Nightlink services to the Christmas timetable.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Minister of State sincerely for that comprehensive response. I appreciate the many efforts and initiatives being taken by this Government with regard to public transport provision across the State but particularly in the Dublin region.

Having engaged, or attempted to engage, with the Minister for Transport via parliamentary questions, letters and other means, I fully appreciate the responsibilities of the Department and Government are related to policy and funding as opposed to operations, which is with the Na-

tional Transport Authority, NTA.

The policy, however, must fundamentally be about serving the public and anticipating difficulties. The funding, therefore, must be intelligent to meet the basic commitments of public transport provision this Government has made. The Minister of State is not off the hook. This simply cannot be delegated to the NTA because these are three quite straightforward issues.

This is not the first time I have raised them in this Chamber or in the Oireachtas overall. Indeed, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I have had this discussion. Not only is he a former representative for the constituency but he is the current Teachta Dála for the wider Dublin area. He fundamentally understands these issues and that the policy of Government must be to see around the corner and spot the very obvious difficulties. I fundamentally welcome the Minister of State's update on the large-scale plans the Government has but we are looking for short-term solutions to short-term problems. They are very simple short-term solutions such as a tweaking of the bus service and the laying on of a night-time service, be it Luas, Dublin Bus or, indeed, in deference to my colleague, Deputy Alan Farrell, the DART.

We need to see those services provided. We need to see them in the next three weeks. Otherwise what are we going to see on St. Patrick's Day? One of the finest things this State did was the deregulation of the taxi industry. We need to look at large-scale, progressive policies that can address the issues at source.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Deputy Richmond, who came up with some interesting views regarding serving the public and anticipating difficulties. He also mentioned the NTA and that we need to deliver short-term solutions to short-term problems. We sometimes need outside-the-box thinking and I appreciate that.

I want to advise the Deputy that the introduction of the Transport for Ireland, TFI, 90-minute fare last year, as envisaged by the BusConnects programme, has hugely benefited public transport users in south Dublin. The TFI 90-minute boundary for rail services encompasses all zone 1 to 4 journeys taken from Dublin city centre. Accordingly, it extends to cover south Dublin.

Residents can avail of this promotional fare of €2.30 when using a Leap card, allowing them the option to transfer between Dublin Bus, Luas, most DART and commuter rail and all Go-Ahead Ireland services in Dublin as long as they touch on their last journey within 90 minutes of the first. The Deputy will agree that this allows for greater enhanced integration of public transport services. That does not address the Deputy's issue of trying to ensure there are extra services, however, which as he rightly said, serve the public and address the anticipated difficulties.

The roll-out of the new orbital bus routes and spines under BusConnects, as well as extensive planned works on the DART+ coastal and DART+ south-west projects, in conjunction with the continued work on key infrastructure projects including cycling facilities, will greatly enhance the current offering of public transport and active travel services in the south Dublin region.

As I said, in tandem with this, the introduction of the young adult cards and a 20% average fare discount means that 2022 looks to be an exciting year for public transport provision across the country as we slowly return to pre-pandemic travel patterns. I hope that clarifies a few issues. I will bring the Deputy's concerns to the Minister. I thank him for raising these very interesting and informative issues.

Sustainable Development Goals

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: This is a welcome chance to discuss an important and substantial piece of work that issues every year from Social Justice Ireland, which tracks our attainment in terms of the sustainable progress index or sustainable development goals over of the year. I raised this issue this time last year and submitted a similar Topical Issue.

It is an important milestone and a good opportunity to take stock of where we are with regard to the sustainable development goals. It is nearly seven years ago now that Ireland played a significant and historical role in the process to agree and adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development plan and sustainable development goals alongside the co-chair, which at the time was Kenya. The adoption of agenda 2030 was one of the pivotal moments of 2015, with countries from all over the world coming together and committing to do more for fair, equitable and environmentally sustainable development. We have had some positive progress in terms of the workings of the Parliament here. We have it written into standing orders of each committee now that they should consider progress on the sustainable development goals within their area although I am not sure how many committees are undertaking that work.

I will direct the Minister of State to page 36 of the Measuring Success: Sustainable Progress Index 2022 report, which gives a nice visual dashboard that in one snapshot gives an overview of how we are doing in terms of sustainable development goals. I am heartened that the arrows are tending in the correct direction. There are no areas in which we are making backwards travel. Many areas are still earmarked for concern, however. The ones that are red-listed include climate action, responsible consumption and production and partnership for the goals. I draw particular attention to goal 7, which deals with affordable and clean energy. It states that “Ireland’s CO2 emissions from energy fuels combustion/electricity output ... are one of the highest in the sample.”

The heat strategy that was issued earlier this week identifies that we have a difficulty in terms of heating our homes in a sustainable way. We certainly have an issue around the affordability of heating our homes at the moment. The score for the proportion of people who are unable to keep their home adequately warm places Ireland in the middle of the rankings. I am sure that with our ambitious retrofit scheme, which again was announced last week, we will be hoping to make significant substantial improvement in that area in the 12 months ahead and beyond.

In the area of responsible consumption and production, again, we rank poorly based on this sustainable development goal. Our “recycling rate of municipal waste is very low and the indicators of circular material use ... is one of the lowest in our sample.” Again, I would be hoping for significant progress on this as we introduce our circular economy. The work in front of us will be significant in tackling not only input costs but the resultant emissions.

On climate action, a key indicator used by EUROSTAT is greenhouse gas emissions. While we are making some progress in this area, we are not making it any way far or fast enough. Emissions may have fallen but we are still well above the EU average. The last of the sustainable development goals to which I will point is goal 14, which is life below water. I spoke previously in this House on an Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report that highlighted the intense problems we have in some of our waterways. We have very few pristine rivers left. We have a particular problem where I am from in the south east in terms of the level of nitrogen that is finding its way into the waterways.

24 February 2022

I ask the Minister of State for an update of the progress of where we are in terms of the implementation plan and co-ordination of the interdepartmental working group and how that work is ongoing within the Department.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and welcome the opportunity to discuss Ireland's progress towards its sustainable development goals. A renewed focus is currently being given to progress Ireland's commitments to agenda 2030 for sustainable development.

Substantial progress has been achieved in recent months in respect of reviewing Ireland's implementation of agenda 2030. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has overall responsibility for promoting the sustainable development goals and overseeing their coherent implementation across government. The Department is currently developing Ireland's second SDG national implementation plan, in which key priorities and actions have been identified to further successful SDG implementation across the Government and to promote awareness of the goals. It is intended that the draft plan will be made available shortly and that it will form the basis of discussion at the next SDG national stakeholder forum. It is important to emphasise that given the broad scope and cross-cutting nature the SDGs, the Government recognises that strong and effective governance arrangements are essential to ensure high level engagement with the 2030 agenda. For this reason, the established SDG governance arrangements of a senior officials group, which is chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach and which is supported by the interdepartmental working group chaired by the Department, will remain an integral part of the next plan. To ensure that Ireland's reporting on SDG progress is both comprehensive and relevant to its national circumstances and level of development, the identification and management of national data is carried out by the Central Statistics Office in consultation with the SDG interdepartmental working group.

The Central Statistics Office, working in conjunction with Ordnance Survey Ireland, has developed an online GeoHive data hub to provide spatially relevant information on our progress towards targets under the SDGs. As part of this initiative, the CSO has published of individual SDG goal reports. Goals 1-11 are available online and the remaining SDG goal reports will be published in the coming months.

Social Justice Ireland has produced an index of its own design, which ranks Ireland's performance under all 17 SDGs. I welcome the publication of the 2022 report which has measured Ireland's economic, social and environmental performance in relation to the SDGs. The 2022 report ranks Ireland tenth out of 14 comparable countries. It is ranked ninth on the economy, eighth place in the social category and ninth on the environment. Ireland is in the top five for three of the SDGs, which are goal four, quality education, goal 11, sustainable cities and communities and goal 14, life below water. A good score on goal 16, peace and justice, indicates that Ireland is a relatively safe place to live, with reasonably good, transparent, effective and accountable institutions.

In areas that have identified where work is needed to address some important sustainability issues, significant progress has been achieved in relation to goal 7, affordable and clean energy, goal 12, responsible consumption and production and goal 13, climate action.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I realise that this is outside of the remit of his own Ministerial work. I acknowledge that the report is not scathing. It does not necessarily paint a picture of a country that is doing badly. It is showing

progress across most of the indicators and the report does acknowledge that there are areas, for example in education, where Ireland does extremely well. We should work to maintain that level of progress.

I would say that the word “shortly” is doing much heavy lifting in terms of the timeline on this. The second national implementation plan has been promised for a while. I would like to see it and I would like a concrete timeline on it. I would also like a concrete timeline on when it will be brought to the national stakeholder forum. I acknowledge what the Minister of State is saying about a broad and cross-cutting nature. I think that is one of the strengths of it. I spoke about policy coherence earlier, when we were talking about the town centres first programme. That is one of the strengths of taking an SDG-led approach to these issues.

I want to acknowledge, as I did earlier, the work of Chambers Ireland in producing a toolkit for businesses. What it does in a really meaningful way, which I think sometimes we fail to do on larger policies, is it takes a first principles approach. It does not just take the 17 SDGs, but it looks at the 169 sub-targets that are below those SDGs. It seeks to implement them in a common sense and practical way. I sometimes worry when I see Government documentation that includes SDG material that we engage in a retroactive badging. For instance, after we produce the policy document we ask beside which goals can we put the nice picture in the document. I would prefer to see us change our approach, to go back to first principles, to look at the goals, to look at the sub-goals and to design our policies accordingly to achieve that level of cross-cutting policy coherence. This would help our Departments work better to deliver for the people.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy again for raising this issue. Ireland’s second SDG programme is currently being finalised. It is intended that the draft plan will be made available - I know the Deputy might not like to hear this word - shortly. However, we will try to get a timeline as quickly as possible to form the basis of discussion at the next SDG national stakeholder forum. This will allow for a final round of input from stakeholders prior to finalisation and publication.

It is important to note that the report uses official published data from international sources such as the OECD, the WHO, the United Nations etc. as well as from non-governmental organisations such as Gallup and Transparency International. The composition of the index of the Social Justice Ireland’s own choosing is significant, because the choice of which indicators to include and exclude from an index will invariably impact on a given country’s ranking within that index. The report claims that data selection for this report is first informed by the UN indicators set in 2020 and that it is aligned to this indicator set as closely as possible. However, the report also acknowledges, as changes have been made in the indicator set, the rankings in this report are not directly comparable to the earlier versions of the index. As new information becomes available, the number of indicators evolves. Where possible, each SDG is covered by a minimum of four indicators. However, the report acknowledges that data coverage across the goals is unequal.

Ireland’s good performance, good health and wellbeing does not take into account the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 on the SDGs cannot be fully captured in this year’s index. The full scale of the pandemic will likely only be evident in later editions. Again, I thank the Deputy. I hope we will have a timeline as quickly as possible.

Energy Policy

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State for taking this topical issue so late in the evening. I would have much preferred that the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, took this on the basis that I spoke to him previously in relation to it this week. I have sent information on to him. He was also involved in launching this scheme once upon a time in 2007. At that time at Carlinn Hall, the idea was that it was billed as the State's largest sustainable energy development. The homes went on the market as the houses of tomorrow. Obviously, we had the Celtic tiger crash, but later a developer bought it and he developed the majority of the 234 houses, which were then sold on. The heating system is a communal heating system. It was initially to be fed by biomass, but this did not work out and it was replaced with gas. I will say this in a straightforward way: it is an utterly inefficient system. It is basically losing 50% of the units of gas. It is operated by Frontline Energy. Frontline Energy does not make any money on the gas. It makes money on a standing order. Therefore, the problem is going to get worse, because of the disgraceful invasion by the Russians of Ukraine. Beyond that, however, we are now in a scenario where people are being charged on the basis of an inefficient system, combined with the huge price of gas.

The Irish Times has done a far better job than I will about this. It spoke about Tomás and his family who are paying a bill of €575. Its equivalent the year before was €258. John and his wife are paying a €375 bill and its equivalent the year before was €180. I spoke to Anne Marie who earlier in the year got a bill of €70. It is now up to €353.38.

A number of steps need to be taken. This is straightforward. The current system is utterly inefficient and this needs to be examined from a point of building regulation. Energia charges Frontline Energy on the basis of a commercial unit rate. Communication has happened with the CRU but it has indicated it has no responsibility in respect of these types of heating systems. This is not going to work. The only thing that will work, most likely, is legislative change and there needs to be a capping. We need to accept these are residential units. Families in Dundalk are being screwed and we need a long-term solution.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We now face significant gas price increases. Much has been rumoured in recent hours and while we hope it will not come to pass it looks as though it will if some of the people I have been talking to are anything to go by. Deputy Ó Murchú outlined the specific circumstances in regard to this case but I wish to make a broader point regarding the national heat study, which was published during the week. Carlinn Hall is a poor example of the opportunity that exists for district heating, but the report makes clear the need to move to these types of system to harness the waste energy and heat from industry and the great potential in that regard.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputies for raising this timely issue, given what has been happening today. District heating offers the potential to make use of renewable and waste energy to heat homes and businesses as part of a range of measures to reduce carbon emissions. In Ireland, district heating currently accounts for a small share of the heating sector, estimated to be less than 1%. The Government is committed, however, to ensuring that advantage can be taken of this technology to decarbonise the built environment. The Climate Action Plan 2021 contains actions that provide a solid basis for the appropriate expansion of district heating, including the establishment of a steering group to oversee the roll-out of district heating and to ensure a robust governance framework will be put in place. These actions will also ensure

consumer protection, in accordance with the legislation.

The legislative basis for the regulation of district heating is contained in the 2012 energy efficiency directive, which was transposed by SI 426/2014 and SI 646/2016. The directive contains a requirement in respect of the metering and billing of thermal energy, including district heating. It was amended through the 2018 revision and requirements for metering and billing of thermal energy were strengthened by way of that revision. The European Commission has proposed a further revision to the energy efficiency directive, which, once finalised, is expected to strengthen further consumer protection and empowerment. In addition to provisions contained within the energy efficiency directive, the 2018 renewable energy directive contains provisions for making information available to consumers in respect of energy performance and the share of renewable energy in their district heating and cooling systems.

The district heating steering group, established in line with an action set out in the climate action plan, brings together expertise from a wide range of organisations to assist with the development of district heating and to make evidence-based recommendations to the Government regarding targets for district heating. The steering group will draw on the findings of specialised working groups focused on key areas pertaining to the roll-out of district heating, including regulatory regime, planning guidance and financial options.

Under the House of Tomorrow programme, the first phase of approximately 50 homes in the Carlinn Hall development were supported by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. The homes were built to a higher standard of efficiency than the then building regulations and were approximately 40% more efficient than was then required. This means that, when they were launched in 2007, they were approximately 40% more efficient than they would be if they had been built to the standards of that time. The district heating network was also supplied by a central boiler, which significantly reduced the carbon footprint of the homes, given the fuel was originally biomass. I understand, however, that the fuel source has, since installation, been changed to a gas boiler.

Gas prices are not capped in Ireland, whether at a commercial or residential level, and electricity and gas markets operate within a European regulatory regime, whereby electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. Nevertheless, I take on board, not least in the context of what has happened today, that prices will increase and the Deputies gave some sobering examples of the effects of the price increases on residents which I will convey to the Minister.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the Minister of State's response and will follow up with the Minister on the matter. We all accept the benefits of district heating systems when they use overflow heat, which would otherwise be waste, but that is not the case here. From an environmental point of view, they are a complete disaster in the sense that they must use 100 units to get 50 units of heat. That is not going to work.

As anyone who has made contact with the CRU will know, it maintains it does not have responsibility in this field, and that needs to be rectified. One way or another, these people are paying an extortionate price for gas and it needs to be capped. We need to ensure the CRU can take action. There is a wider issue in respect of building regulation and heat energy assessment modelling. We cannot end up with heating systems such as this again. Long term, we will need a solution for Carlinn Hall, which I assume will mean a different form of heating system and possibly a different energy supply.

24 February 2022

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On the opportunity arising from district heating, I return to the national heat study. We have seen the example of Codema and the data centre in Tallaght. In the past, there have been town gas and other communal systems. There is an opportunity in that regard but it has to be done right and embedded appropriately. My local authority is setting up an energy agency in co-operation with Kildare County Council and Wicklow County Council. There is opportunity but it will need to be co-ordinated.

There is potential for a significant increase in the price of gas. The Government has not acted in respect of carbon tax and has indicated it cannot act on VAT. It needs to go back to the drawing board to respond to the increase in the price of gas that is on the horizon.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Deputy Ó Murchú talked about the CRU needing the power to take action and I will convey those views to the Minister. He went on to state we need a solution for Carlinn Hall and I thank both him and Deputy O'Rourke for raising that issue. Deputy O'Rourke raised the issue of the Tallaght data centre and the provision of town gas. Unfortunately, gas prices will continue to increase and we hope the Government can bring in some measures that will reduce the serious impact that will have.

The position of successive Governments for almost 20 years has been that competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses in terms of suppliers, products and prices and support competition to drive down prices. The CRU ended its regulation of retail prices in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014. Given prices are no longer regulated, they are all set by suppliers as an entirely commercial and operational matter. Each company has a different approach to pricing decisions over time and in accordance with factors such as the company's overall strategic direction and the development of its cost base. However, as I said, all EU member states have been affected by recent high global energy prices to various degrees. Recent developments, as in what happened today, have underpinned the importance of moving away from our reliance on imported gas and instead accelerating developments of renewable energy generation across the country.

A central part of the solution lies with cost effective energy efficiency measures and accelerated deployment of renewable energy sources. It is of utmost importance to proceed swiftly with the treatment of the Fit for 55 package to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. A well-managed energy transition is not the cause, but part of the solution to keep prices affordable and predictable.

I thank both Deputies for raising this issue.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was probably remiss of me not to state we have already started chasing this up with Energia, which is the gas supplier.

Ukraine Invasion

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing flexibility to include a fifth Topical Issue on this important subject, especially after statements yesterday on security in Europe.

We woke up this morning to the news that a full-scale invasion had begun in Ukraine, that Ukraine had declared martial law and that explosions had been reported in multiple cities across

Ukraine. At the outset, I express my utmost solidarity with Ukrainian people, in Ukraine and also here in Ireland.

Earlier today, Deputy Alan Farrell and I, and so many other Members of these Houses, met with the Ukrainian-Irish community outside Dáil Éireann. Members of our shared community, terrified for their families in Ukraine, have stood outside today in the cold, the rain and the snow. I hope that they see our solidarity with them from everybody going out, but also from the cars passing in the street beeping and supporting them.

There are extensive subway systems across Ukraine and from what we are hearing, those unable to flee at this point are going underground seeking protection and making plans to protect themselves against bombing and ballistic missiles. As we speak, Russian forces have attacked and seized control of an airport and are attempting to take control of other strategic areas.

I welcome, in particular, an Irish-Ukrainian family from my constituency to Leinster House. They are sitting in the Gallery. I spoke with them this morning. They have family in Ukraine trying to flee - trying to head south west. They are part of that traffic jam that we have seen on the television trying to leave Kyiv - people literally fleeing for the well-being of their families. These are the people and families who need safe refuge in Ireland. They are very real, raw, heartbreaking human experiences that nobody ever wants to have to think about.

This is an indefensible aggression in Europe but by no means the first such aggression. It is, as the Taoiseach said, an immoral and outrageous breach of the most fundamental principles of international law. Could the Minister outline to the House the humanitarian response that we can expect from the Government to the concerns of families here today, in particular for those Ukrainians who have been prominent critics of Russia and Putin and the scale, if possible, of the economic and other retaliation that is appropriate to this aggression that we can anticipate by the EU?

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank Deputy Carroll MacNeill for having the foresight to put this item on the agenda and the Minister for making himself available.

Like my colleague, I woke this morning and turned on my radio and immediately felt my heart in the pit of my stomach with the horrific news that the Russian Federation had invaded the sovereign territory of Ukraine. Like any democrat or any parent, I immediately think of the women, the men and the children of that nation and the terror that they must feel as we speak.

It is an act of tyranny, an act of barbarism on the part of the Russian Federation. In particular, I am especially aggrieved with the lies that we have been told over the past number of days and weeks, even in this House in the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, where the Russian Federation ambassador presented himself for questions.

This is a murderous rampage from a despot that will undoubtedly kill tens, if not thousands, of innocent citizens of Ukraine going about their ordinary business.

I listened very carefully to the Ukrainian ambassador on radio this morning. I could hear the emotion. It was hard not to feel the emotion that she expressed on behalf of her people and her Government.

Like my colleague, I have grave concerns for the innocents in Ukraine right now. I am pleased to have heard what the Taoiseach said earlier in relation to visas. I would like the Min-

ister to explain that in more detail and the supports that are being offered on the ground to Irish citizens and their families who may not all be of Irish extraction.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue.

Ireland and all of our EU partners stand in solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people on this shocking day when Russia, unprovoked, has initiated missile strikes and a ground invasion on their country. Today's invasion by Russia of Ukraine's sovereign territory and its attack on its people is an outrageous and immoral breach of the most fundamental and basic international law.

Prior to the events overnight and today, the EU had already stepped up its support to Ukraine. At the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday, we decided to provide €1.2 billion of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine. The EU is one of the largest humanitarian donors to eastern Ukraine. Since 2014, the European Union and its member states have contributed over €1 billion in humanitarian and early recovery aid to support the needs of people in the areas directly affected by the conflict and those who have had to flee that conflict.

Ireland is among a number of EU member states that responded with an offer of medical supplies. Today, the Government is working on a further package from Ireland to support the people of Ukraine and the Taoiseach will be in a position to announce this later this evening.

In response to Russia's actions, a first package of new sanctions was formally adopted yesterday. The sanctions package is wide-ranging and contains a number of elements, including an EU travel ban and an asset freeze extended to all 351 members of the Russian State Duma who voted in favour of this violation of international law, and an asset freeze and a travel ban applying to 22 key decision-makers, business figures, military officers and persons involved in leading the disinformation war against Ukraine. An asset freeze will also apply to three private banks and an entity responsible for disinformation. The package also targets the ability of the Russian state and government to access EU capital and financial markets and services. This limits Russia's ability to finance further aggression in terms of policies and actions.

New measures also target economic relations between the EU and the two breakaway regions. This includes an import ban on goods from the non-governmental controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk, restrictions on trade and investment related to certain economic sectors, a prohibition on the supply of tourism services and an export ban for certain goods and technologies.

All EU sanctions regulations have direct effect and as such are legally binding on all natural and legal persons in Ireland and across the EU. Private companies have an obligation to ensure that they are in full compliance with these new measures.

Sanctions will not be cost-free for this country or other EU member states, but we are left with little choice by Russia's behaviour. In light of the very serious developments overnight, the EU will move forward with a second even more wide-ranging sanctions package this evening.

A special meeting of the European Council has been called for this evening and the Taoiseach is attending. Ireland and our partners in the European Union will adopt the most severe package of sanctions that Europe has ever considered.

The Deputy also inquired about Irish citizens based in Ukraine. In light of developments, the Department of Foreign Affairs advises all Irish citizens currently in Ukraine to shelter in a secure place. However, citizens should consider leaving Ukraine if they judge it safe to do so depending on their location and prevailing circumstances, of course. It is likely that routes out of Ukraine will be severely disrupted and the road network and border crossings may face closures at short notice. Our embassy is no longer operating in Kyiv and our staff and other staff are transferring to a safe place as we speak. Any Irish citizen requiring emergency consular assistance should contact a dedicated telephone line, 01 6131700, which has now been set up by the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Department will issue regular updates online and on our @dfatirl Twitter account as the situation develops. The Department of Foreign Affairs remains in direct and ongoing contact with Irish citizens in Ukraine who have registered with the embassy of Ireland in Kyiv, currently totalling around 70 people. The safety and security of Irish citizens and also their dependants in Ukraine are our absolute priority.

To the 4,000 Ukrainian people who call Ireland their home, our hearts are breaking with them as we stand with them today.

Ukrainian and Irish people have much in common: kindness, fairness and friendship run to the core of Ukraine. Like in Ireland, Ukrainian families are large and interconnected with a deep intergenerational bond. The Ukrainian diaspora across the world cares for and supports their family at home and I know how worried they are today. We had hoped to avoid this war. We had in fact pleaded with Russia to pull back from the brink through multiple diplomatic efforts. Those hopes and pleas were ignored and instead we see illegality, aggression and killing. I say to those in the Gallery this evening and to the other thousands of Ukrainians in Ireland that I am working with my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, to put a structure and system in place that will allow Ukrainian citizens in Ireland to bring their families from Ukraine to Ireland if they judge that is necessary for safety reasons. We will ensure that system works and is streamlined.

Likewise, for Irish citizens who are in Ukraine who want to bring their families home with them, who may not be Irish nationals, we will also ensure that we have a process in place that will allow them to do that quickly and without impediments such as difficult visa application processes or anything like that. The Minister for Justice and my Department are working out the practicalities of how we can ensure that system will work for those here and in Ukraine who may need to flee for their safety. I look forward to taking any further questions the Deputies may have.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I allowed a certain amount of latitude because of the seriousness of the situation.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister for outlining the steps. We will hear more from the Taoiseach later. For the benefit of the House, the key concern for those families is getting out. Now that martial law has been declared, that is going to be very difficult for the men. I think in particular of prominent anti-Russian and anti-Putin journalists, who have spoken out so bravely in recent months and years in defence of democracy and against imperialist aggression. Those people are identifiable and they are in Ukraine. It is incredibly difficult for their families to think about that. It is so important to identify it. There have been reports of cyberattacks on car insurance companies. They would know who anyone is, what their car looks like and what the registration number is. We have seen reports from across Europe. We know the work that is going on. The key thing is about getting out in the first instance. The

additional sanctions are welcome. I have run out of time. We know that so much has moved already and they need to be very effective.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I just want to mention my appreciation to Moldova, which when I last checked had taken more than 4,000 refugees on its border. That prompted this debate because we have a role to play. I am very heartened by what the Minister said. There are 4,000 Ukrainian citizens in Ireland. There is a prominent local businessman in Malahide whom I know very well, who I am very fond of because he is an absolute gentleman. It is important to me to know that there is an opportunity for families to be reunited in these circumstances. For that reason, I am very pleased to hear what the Minister outlined about his Department and the Department of Justice. I thank him for that.

As a neutral nation we cannot declare war, but we can declare financial warfare on the Russian Federation along with our European partners. That is entirely necessary for us to do. I very much look forward to what the Taoiseach has to announce this evening. We must make life as difficult as possible for businesses and for the Russian Federation Government in particular because of the absolute barbarism they unleashed upon the Ukrainian people this morning.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I can remember as an MEP travelling to Kyiv as an election observer during what was then called the Orange revolution. I remember the excitement the night before the election in Freedom Square in Kyiv and the sense of momentum and change at that time in Ukraine. Of course, there was some division too in the context of east and west, but it was a time of genuine hope for a new direction for a country that was looking west, with hopes and ambitions for the future. For those of us who have followed the ups and downs and challenges of Ukrainian politics since then, when we see what is happening there today, it really is shocking to see at the heart of Europe a level of aggression that takes us back many decades in Europe. That shows that the lessons of history on this Continent have not been learnt by some, as Russia attempts to undermine and change the political and state relationships and stability on the Continent of Europe by the actions it is taking today and the threats it is making to those outside of Ukraine also who may dare to interrupt its plans.

The role that Ireland will play will not be a neutral one. We are a neutral state. We are militarily non-aligned, but when we see the Continent that we have helped to build in terms of political stability over many decades being threatened in the way that is now happening, by Russia illegally invading its neighbour, we need to stand up and ensure that we are part of resisting that negative change on our Continent. As ever, we also need to take action on a human level and a humanitarian level in the context of supporting those who may have to leave or flee Ukraine or, through NGOs and others, support those who stay but who may need our help in the weeks and months ahead. Ireland will be very much part of a collective EU effort.

I have been in politics for 25 years and I am not sure I have ever seen anything that has united the EU in the way that this issue is currently uniting European countries that historically have very different relationships with Russia. The resolve I hear from some of my EU colleagues and from the European Commission and other institutions within the EU is one of steely determination to show that European democracy matters and that we will take the necessary actions even if they are painful ones for the EU in order to stand up to what we are seeing happening to our eastern neighbours.

I say to Ukrainians that we are going to be with you through this as much as we possibly can be. I say to our other EU colleagues, and our other partners in the United Kingdom, the United

States, Canada, Japan, Australia and the many other countries that will be part of this collective effort, that Ireland will not be found wanting in terms of being a part of those efforts to try to reverse what we are seeing coming from Russia today in the context of what is happening in Ukraine.

The Taoiseach will have an opportunity later this evening to outline some of the detail of what I have announced in terms of what sanctions look like, what our humanitarian support package looks like - our initial one at least - and also some of the detail perhaps in terms of how we can facilitate Ukrainians to come to Ireland should they need to for safety and shelter.

Estimates for Public Services 2022: Message from Select Committee

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for the public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2022: Vote 38.

Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

This is very important legislation and, if passed, it will make an immediate difference to lone parents and their families. The current situation for both income supports which lone parents can receive, the one-parent family payment and jobseeker’s transitional payment, sees lone parents having to prove they have sought maintenance in order to both qualify for and retain that income support. In many cases, for lone parents that can be their only source of weekly income.

In the case of the one-parent family payment, lone parents are helped in some way by the Department of Social Protection’s liable relatives unit, which seeks either a contribution from the non-custodial parent directly towards the Department of Social Protection essentially recouping part of the costs of paying out the one-parent family payment in the first instance, or it would begin to pay maintenance directly to the lone parent. However, the issue arises with the cliff edge when the youngest child turns seven. The lone parent typically then moves onto jobseeker’s transitional payment and is still required to seek maintenance in order to both qualify for jobseeker’s transitional payment and to retain it. At that point, the Department walks away but not before it writes to the non-custodial parent telling them they are no longer liable to make a contribution. This pushes the lone parent into court to seek maintenance.

The way this typically works is that the lone parent will wait for a while to eventually get a court date and will go to court potentially several times. Eventually, once his or her case is heard, a maintenance order can be granted but that does not mean maintenance is actually paid. The lone parent will then go away. The maintenance order is treated as household income and it is taken off other income supports coming into the household, regardless of whether it is paid. In cases where it is not paid, it is back to the lone parent, back to court again, and a bench warrant is typically issued which typically sits on a Garda desk for months or years on end. Even

where the maintenance order is granted, it is not always necessarily paid. Time and again, it is back to the lone parent, and the lone parent alone.

This legislation, if passed, would extend the powers of the Department's liable relatives unit to allow it to seek a contribution from the non-custodial parent beyond the duration of just the one-parent family payment. It would allow that unit to seek a contribution while the lone parent receives the jobseeker's transitional payment, and this is paid until the youngest child is 14. I am clear in bringing forward this legislation that this is not a silver bullet; it is not a solution to the entire issue, as complex as it is when it comes to lone parent supports and to maintenance in particular. What this legislation would do, if passed, is take the pressure off lone parents in essentially being forced to go to court in order to access their income support and retain it.

We have to remember when we discuss any issue in regard to child maintenance that it is not an easy thing for a lone parent to be asked to go to court in order to retain, in some cases, the only income support they will have. Courts are not an appropriate environment. They are not child-centred, I believe, and they are not the right avenue for seeking child maintenance. They have not worked up to now and they are not going to work because a court is not where this issue should be sorted out.

Census 2016, which is the latest census data we have, shows there are over 218,000 households headed by a lone parent in this State and they make up 25% of family units, as the CSO calls them. Once again, we saw further data published yesterday in the survey on income and living conditions and, once again, they showed that lone-parent families have the highest consistent rate of poverty of all household types, with 21.6% in consistent poverty compared with 0.4% for households that are headed by two parents. They are at a high risk of poverty and they also experience very high levels of deprivation. Again, this is a picture that is painted every time and every year the survey on income and living conditions is published. These levels of poverty and deprivation among lone-parent families are shameful in 2022. We know the payment of child maintenance can play a role in lifting children out of poverty, which has been proven by research time and again.

Of course, there is a wider issue. On two occasions in recent years, we have brought forward the child maintenance service system that we want to see established. It is in place in the North of Ireland and it works quite well. We need to see a statutory child maintenance service established in this State. This would take it out of the lone parent's hands and take it out of court, and it would allow the Department to step in. In this case, the child maintenance service would step in and calculate the maintenance required to be paid for a lone parent household and it would not only do that, but it would collect that maintenance and ensure it is actually paid in the first instance.

In 2019, Fine Gael abstained on a motion we brought forward calling for the establishment of a child maintenance service. At every single round of priority and oral questions, we raised the need for a child maintenance service to be established and we have repeatedly asked for that over three years at every single round of questions. Eventually, in January 2020, just before the general election was called, the Minister at the time, Senator Regina Doherty, announced that she would establish a child maintenance review group, which was and is welcome. We expect that now, albeit late, it is going to review this and come forward with a report at Easter, which is welcome.

I have read the amendment that is being put forward. It looked familiar and, indeed, it is

familiar because it is almost word for word the amendment that was brought forward the last time this Bill was taken forward by Fianna Fáil in this House in 2018. It is again kicking the can down the road. I appreciate the review group is in place and it has to do its job. That is fine but what we could do now, and what the Government could do now, is take the pressure off lone parents and stop forcing them into courtrooms in order to seek maintenance to allow them to keep that little income support they rely on. The reality is that lone-parent families have suffered and I would go so far as to say they have been neglected in Ireland for many years. They have suffered huge levels of poverty and they continue to do so, and the data yesterday prove that point which has been proven time and again.

We need to stop counting maintenance as household means. If child maintenance is paid, then it is a payment towards the rearing of the child and that is how it should be seen. It should not be seen by the Department of Social Protection as a source of income into the house that reduces other income. That should not happen. That could be stopped now, regardless of what the child maintenance review group will say at Easter. Again, regardless of what the child maintenance review group will say at Easter, we could right now take away that obligation on lone parents to seek maintenance. We should do that because we should not be pushing them into courtrooms in order to seek maintenance and to prove they have done that in order to get an income support from the Department of Social Protection. I am disappointed that the same amendment almost word for word from 2018 has been brought in again all these years later, when lone parents have waited and waited.

I ask that the Government reconsider its position on this Bill. It is a Fianna Fáil Bill from 2018, word for word. I presume that party has not changed its tune in regard to its position on lone-parent families, or I at least hope it has not. I ask that the Government reflect on its position, given the importance of supporting lone-parent families in our State and supporting their children who, day after day, are living in poverty in far too many cases. We have a way to support them. We can do that through the payment of child maintenance. I hope the review group will recommend in a few weeks' time the establishment, at long last, of a statutory child maintenance service that will ensure maintenance is calculated correctly and that it is paid, as it is well-deserved and should be paid. It should not have come to this. I ask that the Government review its position in regard to waiting on the child maintenance review group.

6 o'clock

There are steps the Government can take. It could tell lone parents immediately that it will not force them into court to seek maintenance to get income support. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann, while acknowledging the relevance of the Social Welfare (Payment Order) (Amendment) Bill 2021 in the context of the current conditions in the child maintenance system, resolves that the Bill be deemed to be read a second time this day six months to allow for consideration of the outcome of the Child Maintenance Review Group, as its terms of reference include an examination of the liable relative provisions which the Bill seeks to amend."

I thank Deputy Kerrane for her remarks. I acknowledge the great she has put into this Bill and the intentions behind it. I know she has a keen interest in child maintenance issues and has discussed these matters with the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, previously.

This amendment is not about opposing the Bill but, rather, acknowledging that the matters it covers are currently under review by the child maintenance review group, allowing time for group to conclude its work and allowing the Government time to consider the group's recommendations in their entirety rather than make piecemeal changes now.

Child maintenance is a hugely important issue for families where parents are not living together. We all know that people can experience difficulties under the current arrangements. That is why the Government set up a group to examine a number of aspects of the current system. The Bill aims to extend the liable relative provisions operated by the Department of Social Protection to the jobseeker's transitional payment. It is useful, therefore, to consider how those provisions operate currently.

One-parent family payment is means-tested for people who are parenting alone and whose youngest child is under seven years. Where a lone parent is in receipt of one-parent family payment, the liability to maintain the family provisions provide the Department of Social Protection with a legislative basis to carry out an assessment against the other parent and to issue a determination order for him or her to pay a contribution. A determination order is issued by post to the person notifying him or her of the contribution due. This also includes means assessment outlining basis of determination order. The liable relative can request reassessment on the production of additional information. This order can be appealed to the Social Welfare Appeals Office within 21 days.

Certain categories of liable relative are not pursued due to personal circumstances or because they have low incomes which would result in a nil liability following a means assessment. When the provisions were first introduced any moneys received as a result of this assessment were paid directly to the Department. However, as this function evolved it was decided that the liable relative could instead pay the agreed amount directly to the one-parent family payment recipient as maintenance.

Where the liable relative makes the payment directly to the recipient of the one-parent family payment, it will be assessed as income in the means test for the recipient's payment and the level of his or her payment may be adjusted as a result. However, it is important to note that there are disregards in the means test which apply in the treatment of maintenance payments. For most schemes, where a person has housing costs, the amount of those costs up to a level of €95.23 per week is disregarded in the means test. Thereafter, the balance of the maintenance payment is assessed at 50%. If there are no housing costs, 50% of the maintenance payments is assessed.

I know that the treatment of maintenance within the social welfare system is another issue of great interest to Deputy Kerrane and other Members. It is one of the other issues being examined by the child maintenance review group. Under the liable relative provisions, the Department is not arranging maintenance but ensuring, where possible, that where there is a one-parent family payment in place and the other parent makes a financial contribution towards the cost to the State of providing that support. The liable relative provisions do not extend to the jobseeker's transitional payment. This is also a means-tested payment for people parenting alone but in this case the person's youngest child must be aged between seven and 14 years.

The fact that the liable relative provisions do not extend to the jobseeker's transitional payment has led some to suggest that the obligation of the non-resident parent to pay child maintenance ceases when the child turns seven and the other parent moves from one-parent family payment to jobseeker's transitional payment. This is not the case and the Department of Social Protection advises people of that when arrangements under the provisions cease at that juncture.

Under existing family law legislation, parents, certain categories of guardian or those acting in the place of parents, who may be liable under the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015, are obliged to maintain their children. In cases where the family unit has broken down, these obligations continue to apply. Child maintenance arrangements can be agreed directly between the parties themselves or with the assistance of their solicitors, private mediators, supports such as the Family Mediation Service and the Legal Aid Board or, ultimately, through the Courts.

It is important to note that the liability to maintain family provisions contained in social welfare legislation are separate from, and do not negate or supersede, parents' obligations under family law. Deputies will recall that several significant reforms of the one-parent family payment were provided for in budget 2012. The major change was the reduction in the age threshold of a child in respect of whom a person can receive one-parent family payment. Originally, a person could receive one-parent family payment until his or her youngest child was 18 years, or 22 years if the child remained in full-time education. The reduction in the age threshold of the youngest child was implemented on a phased basis for all recipients during the period 2013 to 2015. Since the reforms have been fully implemented, a lone parent's entitlement to the one-parent family payment continues until his or her youngest child's seventh birthday, subject to the recipient continuing to satisfy the other eligibility requirements.

The jobseeker's transitional payment was introduced in 2015. This payment has almost identical eligibility rules as the one-parent family payment but the lone parent's youngest child must be aged over seven and under 14 to qualify for the payment.

Another difference between the two schemes is the subject of our debate this evening, that is, that the liable relative provisions do not apply to the jobseeker's transitional payment. There are no requirements for recipients of one-parent family payment or jobseeker's transitional payment to seek or engage in employment in order to qualify for the payments. Recipients are of course free to take up employment and there is an earnings disregard built into the means test for both schemes to facilitate that. The difference between the two schemes in this regard is that recipients of jobseeker's transitional payment are required to engage with the Department of Social Protection's Intreo service, whereas recipients of the one-parent family payment are not obliged to do so.

The Government established a child maintenance review group to examine certain issues in respect of child maintenance. The group is chaired by former Circuit Court Judge Catherine Murphy and includes legal, policy and academic professionals as well as officials from the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice. The establishment of this group is in line with the programme for Government which commits the Government to acting to reform our child maintenance system and address key issues such as calculations, facilitation and enforcement, guided by international best practice. The Government's actions in this regard are to be taken in light of the findings of the review. One of the terms of reference of the child maintenance review group is to examine the liable relative provisions operated by the Department of Social Protection. These are the very provisions which this Private Members' Bill

is seeking to alter. A public consultation process was undertaken in February and March last year. The submissions received are highly valued by the group and are informing its work. I am aware Deputy Kerrane made a submission that includes, amongst other things, a proposal to extend the liable relative provisions to jobseeker's transitional payment, as this Bill aims to do.

Submissions were received from a range of stakeholders, including other Members of the Oireachtas, NGOs and professional bodies. Although there were some common themes, not all raised the same issues and even where the same issues were raised it was sometimes from different perspectives. However, all were united in wanting to improve the current system. That is what we in Government want to do and what the Members of this House want to see happen.

It is the submissions from individual members of the public, many of whom wrote very openly about deeply personal issues, that really brought to life the difficulties people can experience within the current child maintenance system. Amongst the range of issues raised, people wrote about the difficulties they experienced in attending court, the hardship caused when expected payments do not materialise and the heartache caused by the intertwining of maintenance and access issues.

I understand the chair of the group has advised the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, that the report is expected to be submitted to her by Easter. I am conscious Deputy Kerrane and others are very keen to see the group's report but given the importance and complexity of the issues involved it is reasonable for the group to spend some additional time on its deliberations. It would be inappropriate to make changes to these provisions in advance of the group concluding its deliberations and reporting to the Minister. The Government considers that we should await the outcome of the review and consider its recommendations in their entirety before making any changes in this area. We cannot and should not pre-empt what those recommendations might be. That is why we have tabled this timed amendment, to allow time, as I have said, for the report to be completed and for the Government to consider its findings and recommendations.

Maintenance is a complex issue, even within the social welfare system. In addition to examining the liable relative provisions, the group is also tasked with examining the treatment of maintenance payments in the social welfare system and whether or not there is a case for a child maintenance agency in Ireland. As part of its work the group is also considering the international position. There are a variety of approaches in other jurisdictions. It is difficult to make comparisons because each country operates a system which operates within the parameters of its own social welfare and legal system and these vary greatly. Some jurisdictions, such as Northern Ireland, operate a child maintenance service. This is the model Deputy Kerrane and others would like to see replicated here. By contrast, in New Zealand, it is the Inland Revenue that is primarily involved in the determination, operation and enforcement of child support payments. Although we cannot expect it would simply be possible to replicate a system that operates in another country, it is useful to examine other systems and how they work.

The Government is committed to improving the entire family law system. That is of course much broader than child maintenance but any improvements in that system will nevertheless be of benefit to people who need to go to court over child maintenance issues. In September 2020 the Government set up the family justice oversight group. It has been tasked with driving progress on the development of a national family justice service. It also ran a public consultation process last year and its work is ongoing. The programme for Government contains a commitment to enact a Family Courts Bill to create a new dedicated family court within the existing court structure and provide for court procedures that support a less adversarial resolution

of disputes. The overall aim is to change the culture so the focus of the family justice system meets the complex needs of people who need help with family justice issues. I understand the drafting of that Bill is well advanced.

As I said at the outset, child maintenance is a hugely important and complex issue. The Government is aware of the difficulties people can experience and we are committed to reforming the system. However, it is important we allow the child maintenance review group time to continue its work and allow the Government to consider its recommendations before making any changes in this regard. I look forward to hearing the contributions to this debate and again acknowledge the work Deputy Kerrane has put into the Bill and the intentions behind it. I am aware she has a keen interest in child maintenance issues and thank her for her remarks this evening.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I begin by commending Deputy Kerrane on this legislation that clearly sets out to improve the situation for people who very often find themselves in dire poverty and in very serious situations. Lone parents are, as has previously been said, one of the groups in our society who often find it difficult to survive and manage on a very low income.

I was reading the Minister of State's speech and was quite alarmed when he referred to the changes that happened between 2013 and 2015 as "reforms". For those who experienced those changes they were not a reform that was positive but one that was very negative because it removed income from a huge number of people across the length and breadth of the country. I remember being contacted at the time by many lone parents who were devastated by the situation they found themselves in when their payments were taken away from them simply because their child had got a little older. In most cases their children had got a little more expensive to keep, yet the State found its way to doing this. If that is what the Minister of State considers reform then we hope the next review will be a damn sight better than the last time Government called it reform.

We have legislation that was, as Deputy Kerrane mentioned, brought forward by Fianna Fáil, I think about three or four years ago. It is ironic that in the particular marriage the parties have over on the Government side of the House this legislation is clearly a lone child with a lone parent that is not being embraced by all parties of Government. It is now being dealt with the same way it was when Fianna Fáil proposed the legislation. The Government is kicking it down the road and kicking it to touch. This set of people are in very dire circumstances. Everybody acknowledges that and the Minister of State acknowledged in his own speech that there is a dire need to change the situation in place at the moment because the system simply does not work for so many people. We are in a context of rising costs for everyone. Home heating oil, transport and all those costs are rising for everybody across society and are especially acute for people on the edge of the poverty line, which is particularly the case for lone parents. Despite this, the Government decides that rather than taking this Bill for the small improvement it would make, embracing it and running with it, it will instead kick it down the road for six months. We all know even if the Minister of State decided to accept it now it would be six months at least before it would be enacted and in place. We are talking about over a year or maybe much longer before we see a situation where the changes required in this Bill come into force.

The other point concerns the courts system and the huge trauma it is. I deal all the time with people who come to me and have had that experience from all walks of life. They have found the court experience very difficult. It is mainly women. These women may be in a situation where they have a child and there was possibly a break-up from what has often been an

abusive relationship. They find themselves having to go to court and having to go through all that again. They know full well the chances of getting maintenance from the person who has abandoned them with their child is very low, but that they must go to court to get the assistance of the State is an indictment of the State's position in regard to this. It needs to be reconsidered, and very quickly. I recently came across the case of a lone parent in my and the Minister of State's constituency. She is a young woman with a child who has a disability. She explained the situation to me. She talked to me about getting services for the child. She talked about the difficulty she had in that she was trying to manage on the lone parent payment and fighting all the time to get services in the school for her child and to get her child to appointments for this, that and the other. Everything she faced in her life was a struggle. It is a battle. The Minister of State comes across the very same type of people on a regular basis. We have legislation in front of us that can do something about that. It is not going to put a huge cost on the State. We are not talking about creating some difficulty here. Rather, we are discussing something that could relieve a little of the stress for a young woman in such circumstances who has to go to court to try to get some maintenance or has to try to get a lone parent payment from the State. It is a scandal that the Minister of State would suggest in the Chamber that the right thing to do would be to give this more time. People in these situations do not have the time to wait for them to be resolved and they do not resolve themselves. These people live in anguish and poverty as they try to survive and battle day in, day out. Those of us who are in a better position should at least have the common decency and humanity to do something about it. Here we have an opportunity to do so but the Government is refusing. That is difficult to take.

I suggest that the Minister of State speak to his colleagues in Fianna Fáil, who were the first ones to propose this legislation, and work out a solution and that the Government reconsider the matter, drop its amendment and allow the Bill to move forward. Getting it through the Houses will take a great deal of time. By the time it enters into force, the report, which is supposed to be published at Easter, will be on the table for consideration. If it is a sensible report constructed by sensible people, then it will reach the conclusion that every other sensible person has reached and say that we need to do something about this situation and deliver fully for people in these circumstances.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I commend my colleague Deputy Kerrane on introducing this important legislation. It is unfortunate that the Government has decided to kick the can down the road for six months. I understand that there is the child maintenance review group. While it is welcome that something is being done, these people need help right now. The Government has form, in that when practical measures are being proposed by the Opposition, they often fall on deaf ears.

From our clinics and speaking to our constituents, family members and neighbours, we all know how difficult many lone parents have it when going through the courts. Any practical and simple step like the one suggested by Deputy Kerrane in her Bill and as previously proposed by Fianna Fáil, and that would provide these people with assistance, should be taken as a matter of urgency. We have had many debates in the Chamber about the increase in the cost of living and we are all acutely aware of the pressures that people face. We are now discussing people who are at risk of poverty or, as in many cases, are already in poverty and we need to do everything we can to help them.

The Minister of State and others have mentioned how this approach is being taken in other places, including the North. My colleague, Deputy Kerrane, has been talking about it for many years. It is not new, but it can be done in a practical and easy way. For people who are in such

a difficult situation and have to go through the courts - that in itself is difficult, including in terms of the outcomes - this practical approach could work for them and make payments more accessible. Just this week, one such parent who attended my clinic said how difficult the entire process was. It can be difficult, as it is not something that people would be used to.

It is unfortunate that the Bill is not being accepted this moment and is being put back for six months. I suggest that the amendment be removed at the end of those six months. It is not the first time that this proposal has been before the Dáil. It should have been enacted as soon as it was proposed. It is a simple measure to make matters easier for people. We should all be here to propose as many practical and simple solutions as possible to make life easier for people. That is what they have elected us to do.

I commend my colleague Deputy Kerrane on introducing this Bill and, like Deputy Martin Kenny, I urge the Minister of State to reconsider his amendment.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Like my colleagues, I congratulate Deputy Kerrane on introducing this Bill and on her Trojan work in representing lone parents as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on social protection. Her Bill would be a step towards ending the victimisation of lone parents and stop them being forced to go to court, which is hard on people physically, mentally and financially. They have to take time off work, organise childcare and travel. All of this adds up, especially in contentious situations where there can be multiple court cases. Do lone parents who are trying to raise their kids need to be put under this pressure? I think not, and neither does Deputy Kerrane. This Bill would only be a small step in the greater scheme of things where social protection is concerned. For lone parents, though, it would be an important one.

This is not just about the money. It is also about having to go through a court system because of Government bureaucracy. We are forcing people into confrontations that they do not want and they realistically should not have to pursue. If the system works for the first seven years, it is nonsensical to change it for the next seven.

While we wait for a proper child maintenance collection agency, we need to take the burden off the lone parent. The way that Governments have treated unmarried mothers and other lone parents has been a great shame. We should have learned from it. Instead, thanks to failed Government policies and failures by Governments to care, one in every five lone parent families is in constant poverty.

A single mother contacted me last week about the cost of living. She works every hour God sends her and all the overtime she can get. She is not entitled to any State support whatsoever. She worked 17 days straight. When she looked at her bank account at the end of that, she had just €2 left after paying all of her bills. She gets no support from the State. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed people like her. When the current Tánaiste announced that he would be a leader for the people who got up early every morning, he was not talking about this lady. He might have been talking about the well-to-do, the cuckoo funds and big investors. He was not talking about how he would be a leader for ordinary people like bus drivers, secretaries, nurses, teachers and shop assistants who get up early in the morning. If he was, then he, the Government and the Minister of State would not be postponing this Bill.

Sinn Féin has a vision for an Ireland of equals. Deputy Kerrane's Bill shows that we are willing to achieve this. We are proposing a solution. All Deputies are elected to this Chamber to make a difference in people's lives. Sometimes, we can make big differences. Sometimes,

we feel that the Government makes no difference. This Bill would make a small difference for lone parents and their children. That is what it is about. We are here to deliver. We are legislators and this is legislation, but instead of taking the opportunity to help the most vulnerable, the Government is kicking the Bill down the road. That is shameful.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Deputies Kerrane, Martin Kenny, Mairéad Farrell and Gould for their contributions on this debate and for their interest in this important topic. We have had a useful debate. We all understand the importance of child maintenance and want to improve the system. The liable relative provisions that are operated by the Department of Social Protection are just one element of that system.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to reform of the child maintenance system. It was because of this commitment that the Government established the child maintenance review group. The group has been tasked with considering and making recommendations on the current treatment of child maintenance payments by the Department of Social Protection, the current provision with regard to liable relatives, managed by the Department of Social Protection, and the establishment of a child maintenance agency in Ireland. As I mentioned earlier, the work of the group is being informed by the submissions, inclusive of the one made by Deputy Kerrane's party, to the consultation process. The group is also examining the international position. I acknowledge that the group was due to report to the Minister last year. Deputy Kerrane and many others, including many Deputies on the Government benches, are keen to find out what the group will recommend. We are advised that the report is expected to be presented to the Minister by Easter. I hope it is progressed as quickly as possible.

The Bill aims to extend the liable relative provisions operated by the Department of Social Protection to the jobseeker's transitional payment, a set of provisions expressly covered by the group's terms of reference. It is reasonable for us to await the outcome of the group's work to see what recommendations it might make in regard to the liable relative provisions and its other terms of reference. We must allow the group to complete its work. In taking action now in regard to a set of provisions which the group was specifically tasked to examine, we would be undermining the group and its work. The Government will also need an opportunity to reflect on the group's recommendations before deciding how to move forward. There are inter-linkages between issues being examined by the group and so it is prudent to wait and consider the group's recommendations as a whole. This is preferable to making changes in this area without knowing what recommendations the group might make not just in regard to the liable relative provisions but the other matters under its remit.

A number of Deputies referred to this Bill having been introduced on previous occasions. In 2018 and 2019, there was no child maintenance review in place. That is a key difference between then and now. The liable relative provisions do not make maintenance arrangements for people and provisions are intended to arrange a contribution to the cost of the one-parent family payment. The efforts to seek maintenance provisions which Deputies mentioned are separate provisions and these are also being reviewed by the child maintenance review group.

The Government is acutely aware of the high rates of poverty experienced by lone parents. We have introduced a number of budget measures to assist those families. The rate for a qualified child has been increased to €40 per week for children under 12 and by €48 per week for children over 12. The income limit for the working family payment has been increased and will be further increased by €10 per week for all family sizes from April. Approximately half

of all recipients of this payment are lone parents. The earnings limit was removed from the one-parent family payment last year. This removed a cliff edge for lone parents as their earnings increased.

I again thank Deputy Kerrane for bringing the Bill before the House. I thank all Deputies for their contributions on this important issue. I look forward to future debates on this and related issues. I will bring Deputy Kerrane's views and concerns to the attention of the Minister. As rightly stated by the Deputy, we are all awaiting this report. I hope it will be presented to the Minister by Easter.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister of State. On the amendment and the proposal, this day six months will bring us to the end of August. At that time, the Dáil will be in recess and will not return until the end of September, and we will then be into the budgetary cycle.

This report was due at the end of last year. It is now, we are told, to be published by Easter. If it is published by Easter, which I expect it will be, there should be no excuse or reason to delay this until more or less the end of next year. The other issue is that will have implications for the budget. Should this review group report at Easter that we need a statutory child maintenance service, whatever form it may take and whatever country we make look to mirror, we will need to see steps for the establishment of that service taken in the next budget rather than having to wait another year. Lone parents and their families have waited long enough.

The Minister of State referred to the one-parent family payment and the jobseeker's transition payment and the differences in that regard. However, he did not say why the liable relative unit does not seek a contribution when the lone parent moves on to the jobseeker's transition payment, why maintenance is being treated as household income when it should be taken as income for the child and why it is proposed to continue to pressure lone parents into court in order to seek maintenance. I presume the Minister of State does not believe it is right that lone parents should have to go to court in the first instance to seek maintenance in order to receive a social welfare payment. That is extraordinary; it should not happen. We should not in the first instance need a child maintenance review group to tell us that that is very wrong.

The Minister of State referred to the so-called adjustment whereby a contribution is sought. As I said, this is basically the Department of Social Protection seeking to recoup its own costs as regards the one-parent family payment in that the level of the payment is reduced and not, as the Minister of State put it, adjusted.

The Minister of State also spoke about the disregard of €95 for housing costs. When rents in Dublin are €2,000 per month or €500 per week, again, that disregard is totally inadequate. Furthermore, the Minister of State mentioned the financial contribution that is made towards the State. The State should be seeking a contribution for maintenance for the benefit of the child or children and not to recoup its own costs.

The Minister of State recalled the significant reforms to the one-parent family payment. I recall that those significant reforms had a devastating impact on lone parent families. The Minister of State does not have to take our word for that. We saw it a number of years ago in an amendment through social welfare legislation on the basis of an Indecon report which showed that the significant reforms had a major impact on lone parent families and it put more of them into deprivation and poverty. That was the impact of the significant reforms, as the Minister of State referred to them. That was proven.

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The Minister of State went on to speak about the importance of allowing time for the child maintenance review group to do its work. As I said, the issue in terms of this legislation has been going on since 2018. There has indeed been plenty of time. The Minister of State also said that we need to wait to see if there is a case or not for a child maintenance agency in Ireland. How can we need a maintenance review group to tell us if it is right to send lone parents into courtrooms in order to seek maintenance to allow them to keep a weekly social welfare payment which, in some cases, is the only weekly payment they get? We know they are living in poverty and we know the deprivation they experience. We should not have needed a maintenance review group to tell us that and nor should we have needed a maintenance review group to tell us that child maintenance should not be treated as household means. That should not continue.

While the amendment in regard to the six months, which, clearly, the Government is not going to move on, is disappointing, I would ask that should the report be ready at Easter, as is expected, the Government would look at it immediately rather than in August or September, which is basically the end of the year. If it recommends that we need a statutory child maintenance agency then we need to move on that in the next budget and not kick the can down the road. I ask the Minister of State to bring to the Minister my request that between and now and receipt of the review group report pressure would be taken off lone parents in terms of them being forced into courtrooms to seek that maintenance. We could do that without waiting on the maintenance review group report because that is wrong and it should not happen. We should be able to do that regardless.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: Insofar as a vote has been called, it stands deferred until the voting time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.40 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 1 Márta 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.40 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 1 March 2022.