



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 10 Márta 2022

Thursday, 10 March 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Defence Forces

1. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence if, following the publication of the report from the Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces, he will outline a timeframe for the implementation for the recommendations contained in the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13746/22]

Deputy John Brady: Following the publication of the long-awaited report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, what is the timeline for its implementation? Key elements of it need to be implemented immediately, given the pressures relating to pay talks. I again ask the Minister to outline the implementation of the report. What will be the make-up of the implementation body, which will be instrumental in rolling out and implementing key elements?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Commission on the Defence Forces was established on foot of a commitment in the programme for Government and the Government decision in December 2020, which also agreed its terms of reference and membership. The report was published on 9 February this year. The commission undertook a significant body of work encompassing its wide-ranging terms of reference. The report contains 69 main recommendations and, together with sub-recommendations, there are just over 130 overall. The commission's terms of reference included the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing for the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service.

The report proposes significant changes for the Defence Forces, including its culture, high-level command and control structures, and the level of defence provision in Ireland. Clearly, these matters will require careful consideration and, in some critical aspects, interdepartmental discussion and agreement. This includes the level of resourcing that may be allocated to defence, legislative implications and the governance framework, which will require an underpinning in respect of changes and Government approval on foot of the commission's report.

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It will also seek the views of the Department and the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces' representative associations will be consulted on all matters that fall within the scope of representation relating to the implementation of any approved plan. I will also engage with key stakeholders and the Oireachtas; I welcome the Dáil statements on the report that took place on 16 February. I firmly believe that this is an opportunity to have a mature debate around the type of defence capabilities we require and I am very much open to such a discussion. Current events are highlighting the importance of such a debate.

The intent is that following relevant consultation, and before the summer recess, I will revert to the Government with a proposed response to the commission's recommendations and a high-level action plan. This high-level plan will set out proposed timelines and oversight arrangements for its implementation. It would be inappropriate for me to give an outcome of the deliberations at this stage but, as I have said to the Deputy previously, I hope to be able to do that in June, if I can.

Deputy John Brady: I also welcome the publication of the report. There are key recommendations in it that will go a long way towards addressing the major challenges of pay and retention in the Defence Forces, for which staffing levels are thousands below where the establishment figure should be. One of the key recommendations, which the Minister has been asked about a number of times now, including by me, is to implement associate affiliation to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, of representative organisations. The pressure is on because pay talks will commence in May. I am acutely aware that the Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, has had to resort to the courts to try to force the Minister to implement this key proposal. PDFORRA has been very clear that if the Minister was to show some goodwill in ceding to its very legitimate request it would withdraw that court case. The Minister needs to show goodwill in the first instance and agree to allow PDFORRA and the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, to affiliate with ICTU.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As I said, I hope to bring forward an action plan and implementation plan that I can bring to Government before the summer recess. I hope to be able to do that in June. Certainly, people who have studied the detail of this report will understand that quite a lot of consultation is required before we can do that. It is important to give it that time but we do not want to waste any time either. I assure the Deputy we are not doing that. I have started discussions with the representative bodies and others to put that implementation plan together.

The Deputy is correct that some of the recommendations, in particular that relating to associate membership of ICTU, should the representative bodies want that, is timely because a new round of public sector pay talks will start before the summer. I am conscious of that but it would certainly be helpful in those efforts, and I could speak in a much more open way with the representative bodies, if a court case was not happening in parallel to these discussions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask everyone to keep to the times. We all run over, but please stick to the times.

Deputy John Brady: I again ask the Minister to show some goodwill. That court case was initiated because of his failure, and that of the Government, to deal with the key issues in the Defence Forces. They are prepared to withdraw their court case, but the Minister needs to demonstrate goodwill in the first instance because if they withdraw that case, they cannot resubmit it. The Minister needs to be very clear to them that this is a key recommendation and is key to addressing the major challenges and shortcomings in the Defence Forces. In the first instance,

he needs to act by stating he is very much open to this, he is very conscious of the time pressures, given the pay talks in May, and it is something he is willing to do. On that basis, it will show the Defence Forces he is prepared to act on this key recommendation. Again, it is critical. Certainly, we cannot wait until June. The Minister is acutely aware of that. It needs to be made clear to the Defence Forces now to prepare for the pay talks beginning in May.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have spoken to PDFORRA about this issue; I assume the Deputy knows that. There is no issue with goodwill. This is about trying to work our way through one of many issues we have to work through arising from the recommendations of the commission. I have said I have an open mind about PDFORRA's relationship with ICTU in the context of pay talks and that is my position. I have also said it is very difficult for me to talk to PDFORRA about the detail of that while a court case is ongoing. That is self-evident. There is no stand-off here and no manoeuvring is going on. I want to have an open discussion with the representative bodies on this issue so that we can resolve it to everybody's satisfaction and we can move forward. The court case just makes that more difficult because I am much more limited in what I can say. PDFORRA understand that and I hope we will see some progress in this space soon.

Departmental Expenditure

2. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence his views on Ireland's defence spending into the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13465/22]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The armaments industry's merchants of death have seen their stock prices rise dramatically in recent weeks as the brutal invasion of Ukraine has an impact and the arms race that began in its aftermath has accelerated. The Government, unfortunately, seems to be planning to join that arms race. Presumably, it will get a boost from the meeting in Versailles today. What is the Government's position?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will respond to the question that was put in writing. On an annual basis, the overall defence Vote group allocation is determined within the overarching budgetary framework and the approval of Dáil Éireann, having regard to the level of resources available to defence policy requirements. Thus, for 2022, the total gross allocation provided to the defence Vote group, as set out in budget 2022, was €1.107 billion, comprising €836 million for Vote 36, which is defence, and €271 million for Vote 35, which is pensions. Capital funding allocations are also framed by the multi-annual national development plan. The White Paper on Defence, updated in 2019, highlighted the importance of capability development and the necessity for continued renewal, upgrade and acquisition of military equipment and infrastructure. To this end, the national development plan, NDP, has allocated multi-annual funding of €566 million to Defence out to 2025, with an allocation of €141 million per annum provided for 2022 and 2023 and €142 million per annum for 2024 and 2025.

Many of the military equipment projects are complex, multi-annual and have long lead-in times, so the funding certainty now provided by the NDP is welcome, as it will enable the Department and the Defence Forces to plan, prioritise and deliver on scheduled projects over the coming years.

I know what the Deputy wants me to get to rather than giving a long, drawn-out, factual answer, namely, whether we are likely to increase spending on defence on the basis of what is happening in Ukraine right now and the serious questions of security issues on the continent of

Europe and, of course in parallel with that, the report that we got from the commission. I think we are likely to increase defence expenditure on the back of the commission report, primarily. Some of that will be military equipment such as ammunition and weaponry but it will also be upgrading standards within our barracks and improving training facilities, armour and so on.

Deputy Paul Murphy: To be clear, we are in favour of spending to ensure that Defence Forces personnel are not living in conditions of poverty. Only €20 million of the €500 million and €2 billion extra recommended in the report relates to that. We are in favour of doing that but we are not in favour of trying to win an arms race that cannot be won. It certainly cannot be won by Ireland. We are not in favour of increasing spending by €2 billion a year for buying an intercept capability, the acquisition of a squadron of jet combat aircraft, naval ships, etc., or even the additional €500 million a year. One simple reason for that is 2,000 homes could be built every year instead. If the Government makes the choice to give the money to these big military industries, primarily in the USA presumably, then it is making a choice to prioritise that over homes, healthcare, education or whatever else.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not know if the Deputy has had a chance to read the report but the recommendation is that we would increase our level of ambition around defence and defence resourcing. Specifically it asks us to improve troop protection for more demanding roles overseas. Does the Deputy disagree with that? It asks us to enhance situational awareness with primary radar capacity; significantly strengthen military intelligence and cyberdefence capabilities; to increase naval presence by essentially double crewing so that we can have ships at sea more often to do the work that it has been asked to do; or to enhance mobile and lift capacity in terms of long-range lift capacity should we have to get our people or troops out of parts of the world quickly because they are in danger. Does the Deputy disagree with any of that?

This is the practical reality of capacity improvements that the commission is asking us to consider and spend money on so that our troops are better equipped, better armed, better protected and have better training facilities and are increased in number so that they can do the job that we ask them to do.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes, I have read the report and I disagree with it. I disagree with close to 50 mentions of NATO, all talking about the need for interoperability and so on. That makes me suspicious. I disagree with buying a squadron of jet aircraft or buying warships.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is not recommended.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It absolutely is recommended in paragraph 6.11. It is recommended; the Government likes to shy away from it. I also see it in a certain context, which is that a war on neutrality is being launched by the Government and by right-wing media commentators. Military spending will be ramped up and as a logical consequence of that, it is going to be used for something. Instead, we are saying that we need to copper-fasten and protect neutrality. We will bring forward a Bill to insert neutrality into our Constitution. I will be interested in the Government's response to that. We think that is a much better way of going than engaging in this arms race that simply cannot be won and the only winner of which is the big military industrial complex.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The report does not recommend that the Government moves to purchase a squadron of fighter aircraft. There are three options for the Government: level of ambition one, which is to stay as we are; level of ambition two, which is to add the kind of

capacity that I just put on the record; and level of ambition three, which is to increase military capacity more significantly in line with what most countries, in fact virtually all countries of the EU, have been doing for many years. The recommendation in the report is for us to move to level of ambition two, which is what I itemised a few minutes ago. Let us not get into conspiracy theories about so-called right wing media commentators. I am not quite sure who the Deputy is talking about when he starts using that kind of ideological language. Ireland is rightly having a discussion right now, both publicly and within Government, on how we respond to changing security circumstances across the Continent of Europe, given the brutality and aggression that we are seeing coming from Russia at the moment.

Defence Forces

3. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the overseas peacekeeping missions the Defence Forces are currently deployed in; if there are plans to expand these missions; if concerns have been expressed to him in regard to the capacity of the Defence Forces to fulfil their overseas role; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13747/22]

Deputy John Brady: As there is increasing focus on military neutrality, my question is on our position and involvement on peacekeeping missions and our establishment numbers, mandate and responsibilities to these missions. I believe in active neutrality, which means taking active participation in these missions. What impact are the serious challenges around pay and retention having on our capability to honour our commitments to these missions?

Minister for Defence Deputy Simon Coveney: I am glad that this question was asked so that I can put some of the data on the record. As of 1 March, Ireland is contributing 569 personnel to nine different missions throughout the world. The main overseas missions in which Defence Forces personnel are currently deployed are the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, with 344 personnel and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF, in Syria with 132 personnel.

In addition, three personnel are deployed to the MONUSCO stabilisation mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; 14 are in MINUSMA, the UN mission in Mali; five are with the EU-led operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina; 20 are deployed to the EU-led training mission, EUTM Mali; 13 are in the NATO-led mission KFOR in Kosovo; 12 are with UNTSO, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation in Israel and Syria; and three personnel are in the EU naval mission, Operation Irini. Ireland also contributes observers and staff to various UN and OSCE missions and personnel to staff appointments at UN, EU, NATO-PfP and OSCE headquarters.

With regard to any future deployments of Defence Forces personnel overseas, Ireland receives requests from time to time regarding participation in various missions and these are considered on a case-by-case basis. The changing nature of demands and potential future mission profiles need to be considered in the context of assets and capabilities that can be made available by the Defence Forces for overseas deployment, given existing operational demands at home and overseas.

I am aware that concerns have been raised, particularly with regard to overseas commitments. In this connection, I can advise that the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces jointly review the overseas deployment of Defence Forces personnel on an ongoing basis.

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Following a review of overseas deployments in 2021, a decision was taken to withdraw two Defence Forces personnel from the MINURSO mission on completion of their tour of duty in July 2021. This decision was taken in order for the Defence Forces to undertake a process of consolidation with regard to their overseas commitments.

Deputy John Brady: We have a very proud tradition of peacekeeping missions around the world, as the Minister noted. Many members of the Defence Forces have volunteered to participate efficiently and effectively in these missions. However, it has become increasingly challenging. Last year, RACO identified key challenges on members of the Defence Forces to volunteer for these missions. They have highlighted this with the Minister and nationally. This has led to a serious problem where many members of the Defence Forces, because of the shortage of specialist members, such as officers, are now being mandatorily selected for these missions. I ask the Minister to outline the number of Defence Forces members who have been mandatorily selected for these missions, given the challenges they have, like coming back from missions etc.

Deputy Simon Coveney: What is happening with the review process, which is a civil-military process where we are looking at our presence overseas, is we are anticipating that later this decade we would like to be able to have the capacity to make contributions, primarily to UN missions, that are potentially more complex, particularly ones on the continent of Africa that may involve chapter 7 missions. In order to do that, there is of course a lead-in time with equipment, training and so on. It is no secret that because our numbers are not where they should be in the Defence Forces we must, in order to do that, prioritise where we focus those resources and look at our existing peacekeeping footprint around the world. That process is under way. One of the areas under consideration at the moment is Mali. We have two missions there. One is a training mission to which we have just given a renewed mandate for another 12 months. The other is a UN peacekeeping mission. Both are becoming more complicated because France has decided to pull out of Mali. Perhaps I will get a chance to come back on that.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister. I appreciate that but I asked him specifically about the issue of mandatory selection. I asked him recently via a parliamentary question for the number of personnel of all ranks who have been mandatorily selected, those who have appealed the decision and the number of cases that have been upheld. I find it astonishing that information is not looked at or held within the Department in order that it might analyse the key challenges within the Defence Forces. I find that absolutely astonishing. It is true we are 1,000 members below the establishment figure but it is challenging for members of the Defence Forces and their families when they are selected again just after coming off a tour. Due to those challenges some decide to appeal it but we do not keep that information. It is not analysed to see how much of a challenge it actually is. That is a massive failure.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That information is a topic of discussion. When I was in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, the last time, we had a number of conversations on mandatory selection, that is, where people are asked to serve overseas when they have not volunteered to do so. That is because there are pinch points with skill sets and specialists that are needed for overseas missions. That is not an ideal situation and is why, from a recruitment and retention perspective, we must increase the numbers in the Defence Forces overall but also increase specialties in certain areas. There may be a role for the Reserve Defence Force in this space as well, as within it we have significant skill sets that can perhaps plug some of the holes for overseas missions if we have a skill set shortage in a certain area. We would like not to have to ask people to serve overseas on a mandatory basis but in the short term that is necessary for

maintaining the operability of some of those missions.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has concluded its consideration of the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2018 and has made amendments thereto.

Estimates for Public Services 2022: Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the year ending on 31 December 2022: Votes 35 and 36 - Army Pensions and Defence, respectively.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Defence Forces

6. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the plans that are in place to address the former married quarters housing stock in the Curragh, many of which are lying empty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13232/22]

21. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to bring the derelict homes at the Curragh Camp in County Kildare back into use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13286/22]

Deputy John Brady: I ask the Minister about the many boarded-up houses in the Curragh Camp that were formally used as married quarters. What is the plan for the use of those houses? What is the plan to bring them back into use? Have any conversations taken place about changing the policy or indeed, have any taken place with Kildare County Council with a view to making the houses available to deal with the housing crisis we are experiencing?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 6 and 21 together.

The Deputy will be aware the provision of housing for members of the public is a matter primarily for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and my Department assists in any way it can in support of such applications for housing assistance, when requested to do so. Additionally, I point out my Department continues currently to occupy premises in a sympathetic manner on a case-by-case basis.

It has been a long-standing policy to discontinue the provision of married quarters to serving Defence Forces personnel. It is not intended to reverse this long-standing policy which was introduced in the early 1990s and was implemented on a gradual basis in recognition of the

sensitivities involved for those personnel and their families.

With regard to former married quarters in the active military installation at the Curragh Camp, the future use of such buildings' facilities is primarily a matter for the Defence Forces to consider in the context of their operational and training requirements. To be clear, it is not intended to reverse the policy on the provision of married quarters. This is particularly relevant in the context of the Curragh Camp which is now a training centre and not a self-contained military community, as was the case in the past. Where appropriate and required it is open to the military authorities to consider their conversion to single living accommodation for serving personnel in the Defence Forces Training Centre. To this end, the Deputy will be aware that I recently announced the biggest allocation for the Defence Forces built infrastructure of €45 million for 2022, of which €35 million is specifically targeted at the progression of major capital projects. A further €10 million is being provided to the Defence Forces on a fully delegated basis for the purposes of maintenance of the current building stock.

I assure the Deputy my Department will continue to resolve matters relating to those overholding in properties in a sensitive manner, particularly those properties that may be occupied by vulnerable persons.

Deputy John Brady: It is absolutely scandalous that in the midst of a housing crisis, any house should be left boarded up and lying vacant. This is especially true when we are dealing with, I believe, between 50 and 60 houses in the Curragh. Many of them have now been lying vacant for 30 years. That is a scandal in its own right. To hear there are absolutely no plans to look at bringing these back into use, either within the Department to be used for members of the Defence Forces or indeed by the local authority, is another scandal.

I have spoken to many members of the Defence Forces. I have spoken to the representative bodies. They said because of the challenges within the Defence Forces, there are many young members who could use that accommodation. That could be when they are coming up for training in the camp. Many officers stationed there for up to a year could utilise that accommodation for their families as well. To hear there is no plan is a massive failure. It is shameful that anyone driving through the Curragh sees between 50 and 60 houses lying vacant in the midst of a housing crisis.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I was asking the same question around the dereliction at the Curragh Camp in County Kildare. I am very disappointed to hear there are no plans. The Minister says it is the policy of the Minister with responsibility for housing but previously the Department of Defence said it had engaged with Kildare County Council about a number of houses in the Orchard Park estate on the Curragh and was prepared to work with the council on some remaining properties. I am asking whether it is in fact prepared to do so. We have a housing crisis in this country and must look at every opportunity available. I am dealing with people on the Curragh Camp and soldiers need homes too. We have 6,600 people on the housing list in County Kildare at present. When one visits the camp, it is disgraceful to see how badly run down it has become. It was once a vibrant town with many people and a great community. This issue needs to be sorted.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Curragh Camp is a military training facility and the decision was made many years ago by a previous Government that having married quarters with families on a military training facility was not appropriate. That is not to say that there are not individuals, some of whom are in vulnerable circumstances, still accommodated there. We are trying

to deal with that situation and are speaking to Kildare County Council about their needs. That conversation is still open.

Thirty-eight married quarter houses are occupied in the Curragh - 11 are occupied by military and 27 are occupied by overholders. We want to work with them on finding appropriate housing solutions for everyone.

I agree that we need to change the dereliction of the Curragh, and we are changing it. We are investing heavily in the Curragh, but change will not happen overnight. I can outline in some detail the significant amount that we are planning on spending in the Curragh this year and again next year.

Deputy John Brady: The Minister stated that 38 houses were occupied, but his plan is to get everyone out of them and make them derelict as well. He has not answered the question as to how many houses are lying in a state of dereliction. Although we are focusing on the Curragh, I am conscious of the fact that married quarters are being closed down across the State, which means that hundreds of units that were formerly used for housing may be lying vacant now. That there is no plan whatsoever to bring them back into usage is shameful.

Will the Minister outline the total number of current and former residential units in the Curragh? It is all well and good blaming a previous Government for the decision that was taken, but the Minister is in charge now and it is incumbent on him to act and put in place a policy to bring these units back into usage, be it for members of the Defence Forces or for the wider community.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I visited the Curragh Camp three weeks ago and saw the dereliction at first hand. I am sure the Minister has visited it several times. He will be aware of the filling in of the hollow at Donnelly's Hollow there. It seems to contain the remains of demolished buildings, although there has been a cover-up subsequently. I have asked several parliamentary questions on this matter but am not waiting for a reply any time soon.

The Curragh's community has suffered greatly and is now losing a school as well. We have soldiers sleeping in cars because they cannot afford to find anywhere else to live. I ask that this situation be dealt with, please.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If the Deputy has evidence of soldiers sleeping in cars, I would like to hear it. I have heard that accusation before and it has never been followed up with me in terms of details.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I certainly will. That will be no problem.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If she has those details, I would like to speak to the individuals concerned and we will try to work with them.

I have visited the Curragh and will continue to do so regularly, but the Deputies may wish to note that the following major capital projects are planned in the coming years at a combined cost of €32.7 million: the cadet school, which is scheduled to commence this year; engineering stores, scheduled to commence this year; communications and information services, CIS, workshops, scheduled to commence next year; the Army ranger wing headquarters, scheduled to commence in 2023; the military college auditorium suite; a new bonded warehouse; military freefall, MFF, facilities; and a medical school upgrade. We have a substantial plan of works for

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the Curragh and have in recent years been investing in upgrading buildings there. As the Deputies know, it is a large complex. The overall Curragh military facility is approximately 5,000 acres. We are incrementally going to upgrade the Curragh, deal with dereliction and ensure that it is an appropriate military training facility with a significant military community operating to modern standards.

The Curragh is the headquarters and, in many ways, the flagship of the Army. I am conscious of that. There are too many derelict buildings in the Curragh and we are setting about addressing that, but I do not believe that the way to do so, which seems to be suggested by the Members opposite, is to put more and more housing into the middle of a military training facility. That would not make sense. Previous Governments have agreed with this policy position, unless Sinn Féin proposes to change it.

Asylum Seekers

7. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Defence if the Irish Defence Forces will be involved in supporting refugees arriving from Ukraine in terms of settlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13364/22]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I wish to ask about the role of the Defence Forces in responding to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. We have major financial and humanitarian programmes of support, but as we expect more and more people to come to Ireland, I would like the Minister to outline the anticipated role of the Defence Forces in the major logistical programmes of support.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland is continuing to provide strong political and practical support for Ukraine as we continue to assert Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Government has stated that Ireland will play its part in assisting people from Ukraine and has lifted visa requirements to allow people from there who want to seek safety in Ireland to do so as easily as possible.

The European Union has agreed a package of €500 million in military assistance for Ukraine. While Ireland has constructively abstained on the lethal equipment element of that package, we are paying our full share - approximately €10 million - and our funding will go to non-lethal supports. The Taoiseach recently confirmed that the Government would provide a further €10 million in humanitarian aid, adding to the €10 million announced a few days earlier.

The Government acknowledged the scale and scope of the potential implications for the State of the war in Ukraine and agreed that a co-ordinated, whole-of-government response would be essential to minimise those impacts. Discussions have taken place on the humanitarian response required to welcome people from Ukraine fleeing the war and seeking protection in Ireland. Significant planning and preparatory work is taking place across the Government to provide accommodation and other essential supports to those who have arrived here already as well as to the large number of further people expected to arrive. These include preparations on healthcare, education, social welfare and so on. The Government agreed that temporary crisis measures may need to be taken in order to deliver a response to this humanitarian emergency at the scale involved and within the short timeframe in which we have to operate.

As part of these discussions, there has been engagement with my Department and the De-

fence Forces on land use and temporary shelter options. Logistical support that could be provided by the Defence Forces is also being explored. The Defence Forces, as always, stand ready to provide whatever assistance is necessary and possible within their capacity and capability. This is an evolving situation but the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence are very much involved in a cross-departmental response that is being assessed on a weekly basis.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister. Throughout my constituency, I am hearing stories of children from Ukraine joining various schools. It is great to hear that this has happened for them so quickly. As I dropped my son off this morning, a young boy was joining junior infants and high-fiving the kids around him. He had settled in nearly immediately. I hope that persists because there will be a very traumatic change for people arriving here and every element of logistical support that can be provided to them to minimise that trauma - the trauma of moving countries, of what they have left behind, of who they have left behind - and make the transition easier and smoother for the children and their families is positive and welcome.

It is good to hear about the cross-departmental work. The best way to think about this is to do so from the perspective of the people arriving - what do they need, how quickly can it be given, what is the package of documents that they need, where do they need to go and how easy can all of that be made? As the Minister mentioned, the Defence Forces have the opportunity to contribute to that logistically.

Deputy Simon Coveney: This is a war-time situation and we need to get into that mindset to make the kind of contribution that Ireland wants to make to these efforts. So far, considerably more than 2 million people have come across the border from Ukraine into the EU, primarily into Poland, but also into Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, all of which border Ukraine. Of course, Moldova is under major pressure as well. That number is likely to continue increasing. If this war continues, we could see somewhere between 4 million and 6 million refugees coming out of Ukraine into the European Union. Ireland wants to, and will, ensure we are part of those efforts in terms of accommodating Europeans who are fleeing war. That potentially means tens of thousands of people coming to Ireland at a time when we have many pressures of our own in terms of housing need and so on. I believe we are up for that. We are already putting in place solutions that can ensure that people are safe and welcome here.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I, too, believe we are up for that. When one looks back, we have already successfully put in place and operated many major logistical operations. I refer to the vaccination programme and how quickly that had to be mobilised and rolled out from a standing start. We have the capacity to do these different things. We have a little head start in terms of the relatively small numbers of people here now, but that is going to increase over time. The cross-departmental work is going to be crucial to that. Every effort that can be made to activate land use, accommodation and temporary shelters is a big part of that. I welcome the Minister's comments and I thank him for his work.

Deputy Simon Coveney: For me, it was very reassuring to see the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, at Dublin Airport yesterday meeting refugees as they arrived into Ireland. Instead of being asked to fill out forms and show their visas and passports, they were being given toys, mobile phone chargers and SIM cards. This is the message that Ireland wants to send, namely, that we are acting, preparing and resourcing in solidarity with a country that is being torn apart by brutality and an illegal war, which is undoubtedly responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, in my view, and

which will be proven to be the case in time with evidence-gathering and so on. While this war continues and the refugee flows continue, Ireland needs to play its part and we will.

Defence Forces

8. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the Commission on the Defence Forces report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13191/22]

11. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence when he will announce the appointment of the independent chair of the Commission on the Defence Forces implementation body. [13475/22]

39. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence the timeline for the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces by the Government; the recommendations that will be implemented; and the level of capability of the Defence Forces the Government will adopt based on the report. [13159/22]

41. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details of the stages that lie ahead in terms of actioning the Commission on the Defence Forces report. [13310/22]

53. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence the person he intends to appoint to the implementation body for the Commission on the Defence Forces report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13233/22]

59. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Defence the next steps regarding the Commission on the Defence Forces report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13330/22]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: What is the status of the excellent and very timely report of the Commission on the Defence Forces? This is a very important issue now given the invasion of Ukraine, the concerns worldwide about militarism and the lack of capacity in our own country to defend our shores.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 11, 39, 41, 53 and 59 together.

The Commission on the Defence Forces was established on foot of a commitment in the programme for Government and a Government decision in December 2020, which also agreed its terms of reference and membership. The report was published on 9 February last. The commission undertook a significant body of work encompassing its wide-ranging terms of reference. The report contains 69 main recommendations and, together with subrecommendations, there are 130 recommendations in total. The commission's terms of reference included the consideration of appropriate capabilities, structures and staffing for the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service.

The report proposes significant changes for the Defence Forces, including to the Defence Forces' culture, high-level command and control structures, and for the level of defence provision in Ireland. These are matters that will require careful consideration and, in some critical aspects, interdepartmental discussion and agreement. This includes the level of resourcing that may be allocated to defence, legislative implications and the governance framework that will be required to underpin any changes the Government approves on foot of the commission's report.

I will also be seeking the views of my Department and the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces representative associations will be consulted on all matters that fall within the scope of representation, relating to the implementation of any approved plan. I will also engage with key stakeholders and the Oireachtas. I welcome the Dáil statements on the report that took place on 16 February. I firmly believe this is an opportunity to have a mature debate around the type of defence capabilities we require, and I am very much open to such a discussion. Current events are highlighting the importance of such a debate in terms of broader security questions. The intent is that, following relevant consultation and before the summer recess, it is hoped in June, I will revert to Government with a proposed response to the commission's recommendations and a high-level action plan. This high-level plan will set out proposed timelines and oversight arrangements for its implementation. For obvious reasons, I cannot go into what will be in that report.

We now have a really good and detailed commission report on the Defence Forces and their future, which is evidenced-based, looks at international benchmarks in an appropriate way, shows up, in my view, a significant underinvestment for decades in the Defence Forces, and capacity constraints and capacity gaps that need to be filled and responded to. For the first time in a very long time, we have a clear set of recommendations that I believe make sense and now need to be turned into a Government action plan for resourcing, change and reform across the Defence Forces. We need to invest in and build a Defence Forces that are fit for purpose now and into the future.

If ever we needed a reminder and a context as to why that is necessary, we see it now in terms of the war in Ukraine, where the security architecture of the Continent of Europe is being turned on its head. We have seen countries like Germany change foreign policy and defence policy overnight. We are seeing countries like Sweden and Finland seriously considering NATO membership for the first time with the support of the majority of their populations. Like other countries, Ireland needs to consider its place in the European Union, how we deal with defence issues, how we assess what is neutrality and military non-alignment today in the context of EU security, Irish security and the well-being of Irish people, and how we do that in the context of new and developing threats such as, for example, cyberthreats, which ten years ago were a non-issue but now probably are the most significant threat we face. In the middle of the pandemic we had a cyberattack on our health system that put lives at risk and cost the State well over €100 million to resolve and which is still not fully resolved. We face a combination of new types of threats, a changing geopolitical situation and far less stability on the Continent of Europe in terms of basic security but, in my view, there is a resolve and a new determination within the European Union to address and protect the kind of quality of life we expect and have built over the past five decades or so together within the European Union, which quite frankly is literally under attack right now with bombs, bullets and bloodshed.

With all of that in mind, we need to have a mature and evidence-based discussion on how Ireland moves forward in this space. The combination of that new context as well as probably the most significant report on defence in my lifetime, which I have now in front of me with a set of very clear recommendations, can, I hope, allow us to make informed policy choices and resourcing choices before the summer recess in terms of how we progress the defence agenda. I hope we will be able to achieve cross-party support for that. This is about designing a Defence Forces and a defence policy for the next 20 or 30 years. It is not just about the lifetime of one Government or one political party's view. That is the way I will be approaching it.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The Minister outlined clearly the priorities, namely, the security

of our State, our capacity to defend ourselves against external threat and, particularly important right now, the security of Europe. I welcome the Minister's commitment to come back to the House before the summer recess with a level of ambition which we will all, it is hoped, agree and support fully and will, I presume, include a commitment to increasing our defence spend significantly.

We cannot allow Russian warships to enter Irish-controlled waters, as they did recently, as we look on in astonishment rather than act in a military capacity to deter them should they attempt to do further or other acts. We cannot be the weak spot in Europe. We cannot be the place where the vector of attack will come to attack the rest of Europe. I fully support a proper and appropriate debate. A citizens' assembly would make a lot of sense to discuss the implications.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I commend the members of the Commission on the Defence Forces for producing such a thorough report. It is a credible and realistic report. It is credible because it highlights the significant lack of funding that has been put into our Defence Forces and how this needs to be rectified. The report is also realistic because it recognises Ireland never wants to be, and never will be, a heavily militarised state. I believe this represents the views of the majority of the people.

The report sets out a timeline of 2025 as a reasonable target date for the delivery of the transformation. Page 146 of the report sets out some steps that need to be taken relatively urgently by the Government. Although I would recommend and agree that the Department and the Defence Forces be consulted for their views, it is important we do not get engaged in too lengthy a debate. I ask the Minister to proceed with the appointment of an implementation oversight group, the appointment of an independent chair, the establishment of an implementation management office, and the appointment of external change management support.

Deputy John Brady: There is a lot of focus here on neutrality and what neutrality means to people. This comes on the back of the horrendous actions in Ukraine. This report is also being used to further that political conversation. The underinvestment in our Defence Forces by successive governments, including this Government, has eroded what Ireland is supposed to be, which is militarily neutral. I would call out not just the Russians for using our waters but also the British, and the Americans for using Shannon Airport. If Ireland is neutral, then neutral means neutral against all countries and their militaries. We need to have that conversation but neutrality needs to be invested in. Neutrality comes at a cost. This is why the commission report is so important. Critical to that is the implementation of the report. Will the Minister clarify who will be appointed as the independent chair and will he also clarify the make-up of the implementation body?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I commend the Minister and the commission on its work on the independent commission's report on the Defence Forces, and the commitment of the Government to ensure the Defence Forces are fit for purpose in the immediate term and seeking to develop a long-term vision beyond 2030.

There have been calls for quick movement on the recommendations within the report, and I am aware the Minister is keen to do so, where possible, while understanding there are significant recommendations that must be discussed and considered fully and their possible implications examined. Will the Minister provide some detail on how he intends to move forward with the report? Will he also look at how the recommendations that will impact significantly on current governance structures will be overcome?

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are a lot of questions there and I will try to get through them as quickly as I can. Deputy O'Dowd asked about the security of the State, the security of Europe, and Ireland's commitment to it. These are all very important questions

Neutrality does not mean we stay out of these debates. Deputy Brady has just said that neutrality means against all countries and against their militaries, equating the UK, the US, and Russia as if they were all in the same space. That is not neutrality to me, just to be clear.

Deputy John Brady: They are using our airspace.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Neutrality and military non-alignment to me mean that Ireland decides when and where we intervene, who we partner with, and what side we take on debates and in conflicts and so on. We decide and we are not tied into those positions by alliances we have signed up to. That is what non-alignment and military neutrality is for me. On the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we are not neutral. We have made it very clear we are taking sides here, from a humanitarian point of view and from a military support point of view, to allow Ukrainians to defend themselves, as best we can. Ireland is making a modest contribution towards those efforts. It is important to put some of those issues on the record.

I will come back to the other points.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's comments. I must say to Deputy Brady over there that you raised funds in New York. I do not know if you raised them in Moscow. The reality is I would very much welcome American-----

Deputy John Brady: I never raised funds anywhere.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I did not interrupt Deputy Brady.

Deputy John Brady: I never raised funds anywhere. The Deputy needs to withdraw that comment.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Your party does. Your party raised a lot of money from the United States-----

Deputy John Brady: The Deputy has made an accusation.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: -----and I am quite sure that some of the companies in the defence business contribute to your accounts as well.

Deputy John Brady: The Deputy is accusing the military industry of funding my account.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Not your accounts. Your party; your Sinn Féin account.

Deputy John Brady: The Deputy said my account.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: We cannot be neutral-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is running on and we are not given extra time.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I want to make it very clear-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is okay but Deputy O'Dowd has made a specific point in relation to Deputy Brady. Deputy O'Dowd might withdraw that, please.

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Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Obviously I am not talking about his personal account. I am talking about his political party fundraising.

Deputy John Brady: That is just false as well. The Deputy is talking rubbish.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I just want to make the point that we cannot be neutral about the threats to our State. We cannot say "No" to our defence and to be part of the defence of Europe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on. Perhaps Members could use the time for the questions. It is up to them but the time is running.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I ask the Minister to take on board what is contained in page 146 of the report that refers to the fact that, "During the course of its work, the Commission encountered significant scepticism from military personnel, representative associations and concerned members of the public about the likelihood of the recommendations of this report being fully implemented." The Minister is the only person who can answer that scepticism and convince the members of the commission and the public this is going to be different. There have been reports that have simply gathered dust on shelves. There is a complete recognition now, and not just as a result of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia but also in terms of an objective assessment of Ireland's military capacity, that we need to do more. We need to strengthen our Defence Forces and we need to do it in a variety of ways, as recommended by the commission.

On the point of neutrality, I do not believe we should necessarily integrate both topics into the one debate, but neutrality does not mean as a country that we are neutered. We have strong political opinions in this country and it is important our Government expresses them. The Minister has expressed it. We need to condemn continually the illegal, unlawful and brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Hear, hear.

Deputy John Brady: I asked a question. Can I come back on that?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Dara Calleary): Yes.

Deputy John Brady: I ask the question on the implementation of this report because it needs to be a pivot point in the funding of our Defence Forces to stop the haemorrhaging of members from them. Implementation will be key, which needs a very strong implementation body. The independence of the chair to be appointed to that body will also be key, and critical to that body are the representative organisations such as PDFORRA, RACO and the Reserve Defence Force representative body, so that their voices are heard and are able to be articulated on that implementation body. Will the Minister give a commitment that those bodies will be represented on the implementation body once it is established?

Deputy Alan Dillon: On a day that an expert-led discussion on cybersecurity is happening in Dublin around new attack vectors and around geopolitical tension, I draw the Minister's attention to how we should be significantly strengthening the military intelligence and cyber defence capabilities of our Defence Forces. The commission believes cyberspace is a dynamic and rapidly evolving area and will be a key military domain in the period to 2030 and beyond. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on the joint cyber defence command managing cyber defence, defence IT services, encountering of hybrid aggression, and emergent technology.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister for his response. In recent de-

cedes we have been very much at peace with our geopolitical system and we have not yet felt any threat whatsoever. We are on notice now that everything is different and will be different for the decades to come. We must respond differently and this commission's report is a timely intervention in that.

10 o'clock

Deputy O'Callaghan said this is ultimately up to the Minister, but there is a broad swathe of political opinion and political support developing for the sorts of changes that are needed, while recognising the resource implications involved. What I am hearing from my constituency and the people I represent is a very strong desire that Ireland be capable of protecting itself, its people, its cybersecurity and its territory. We will consider whatever happens after that, but as a baseline we need to be sure we are able to protect ourselves. We are on notice now, in a way we never were before, that our previous assumptions about how we might be protected in the event of some aggression are finished.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I hope the Acting Chair will give me a little extra time given the number of Deputies in this grouping. The scepticism around whether this report will be implemented in full is fair. Even though there is a significant body of work on this and most people I have spoken to accept it is necessary to implement these recommendations now, there is understandable scepticism because this would mean a complete change in the setting of the resource base for defence, that is, where we start from. Effectively, the report is recommending we move to an increased level of ambition but it is still relatively modest. The report looked at seven or eight peer group countries that are similar to Ireland in population, wealth, defence concerns and so on, and it is proposing we move from where we are at the moment, which is spending about a third of what they spend on defence, to spending about half of what they spend. That was even before Ukraine. It recommends we have a longer and more considered discussion as to whether to move beyond that to the third level of ambition, which some people are advocating for now given the new security concerns coming from the east.

No part of the report is suggesting Ireland become a militarised country by international standards. The recommendation is we move to half of the resourcing norm across Europe, have basic military capacity and plug gaps that are itemised quite clearly. That includes, as Deputy Dillon noted, looking seriously at significantly strengthening the military intelligence and cybersecurity capacities of the Defence Forces, such as through the creation of a joint cyber defence command. That is a very strong recommendation we need to deliver on in quite a comprehensive way and as a priority.

On the process for how we will move on this, my Department, in consultation with the Defence Forces and other stakeholders, needs a number of months to get its head around how to implement change on this scale. It is not just about financial resourcing. It is also about a very fundamental restructuring of the Army, completely changing how the Naval Service operates in terms of double-crewing, which effectively means adding significant numbers to the Naval Service, and looking at a series of changes in the fundamental capacity of the Air Corps. All of that takes time to plan for. My colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Taoiseach's office have to be involved in those discussions as well because this is a Government decision about the country fundamentally changing the way we approach defence from a resourcing point of view. It is a question of how we plan for that over a decade, not just over a year. I hope to be able to bring that forward in June for consideration. I look forward to bringing the matter back to this House and not only getting Government support but support from

other parties in this House as well.

Departmental Expenditure

9. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details in tabular form of Ireland's procurement of military equipment from Israel between 2019 and 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13468/22]

Acting Chairman (Deputy Dara Calleary): Deputy Paul Murphy is taking this question in place of Deputy Gino Kenny.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I ask the Minister for the up-to-date figures on the arms trade between Ireland and Israel, which is shameful. It goes from Ireland to Israel in the form of dual-use goods and it goes from Israel to Ireland in the form of weapons that have been battle-tested on Palestinian civilians.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The principle of competitive tendering for Government contracts is used by the Department of Defence for the acquisition of defensive equipment for the Defence Forces. This is an EU law requirement in accordance with the defence and security directive. Central to those procedures is the requirement to allow fair competition between suppliers through the submission of tenders following advertising of the tender competition on the eTenders site and on the Official Journal of the European Union, where appropriate. Such tender competitions are open to any company or country, subject to the terms of all UN, OSCE and EU arms embargoes or restrictions. There are no such restrictions or embargoes in place on Israel or Israeli companies at the moment.

I am advised the Department of Defence has purchased defensive equipment from Israeli companies as set out in value terms in the following table. The expenditure primarily relates to ground surveillance radars, engineering equipment, fire control systems and the upgrade of the unmanned aerial vehicles operated by the Defence Forces. During this period no equipment has been purchased directly from the State of Israel. However, in 2021, engineering, or non-lethal, equipment was purchased from Israeli Military Industries, which is understood to be wholly owned by the State of Israel.

The expenditure on equipment that came from Israeli companies is as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2019	€646,070
2020	€486,700
2021	€667,194
2022	NIL

In expenditure terms, these are relatively small amounts of money for non-lethal equipment, mainly in the protective and information space from an engineering perspective, such as fire control systems, surveillance radar systems and so on.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is €1.7 million or so in the past three years to Israeli armaments companies.

Deputy Simon Coveney: They are not armaments companies.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are Israeli companies that are providing military equipment to the Irish State.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is not arms though, to be clear.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have a couple of questions. The Minister says there is no arms embargo. Does he agree there should be an arms embargo on a state that has been defined as an apartheid one by Amnesty International? It has been defined by it as operating a racist and cruel system of apartheid within the State of Israel, within the occupied Palestinian territories in Gaza, and against the millions of Palestinians exiled in the Palestinian diaspora. Just a minute ago, the Minister made the point that Ireland is a neutral state, which means we get to choose whose side we are on and are not bound by any alliances and so on. In that case, let us have an arms embargo on Israel and let us say clearly we are on the side of the Palestinian people who are being oppressed by the Israeli state.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As the Deputy knows, Ireland does not decide on arms embargoes. The trade policy of the European Union is decided collectively. It is proposed by the Commission and debated by member states. We had a very good debate on the Amnesty International report in this House last week. There was also a debate on it in the Seanad. It highlights many very important issues that Ireland continues to bring to light and focus on. Ireland is the most vocal country in the European Union with regard to the treatment of Palestinians by Israel, focusing on the expansion of settlements, settler violence, forced evictions, illegal activity and so on. We are constant and consistent in our criticism of such illegal activity. We do not decide unilaterally on arms embargoes. The Deputy knows that, or at least he should.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a clear question. Is the Minister in favour of an arms embargo on Israel? That is what Amnesty International recommends. Is the Minister in favour of it or not? He made a clear statement earlier that the Government is on the side of Ukraine against Russia. That is okay. I am also for the defeat of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and for its repulsion by the Ukrainian people. Will the Minister make a similar statement about Palestine and say the Irish Government is on the side of the Palestinian people against the Israeli state? I ask the Minister to make a similar statement. He is saying there is nothing stopping us and that is not what neutrality is about and so on. Let us make such a statement and as part of that let us say that it is horrendous to have an arms trade with a racist and apartheid state that is guilty of killing 9,000 Palestinian civilians in the past two decades, including 1,000 children. Let us speak out against that and take the side of the oppressed as opposed to the oppressor. Is the Minister in favour of an arms embargo? Will he clearly say that the Irish State is on the side of the Palestinians against Israeli oppression?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Ireland has not made any proposal to place an arms embargo on Israel. What we are doing and will continue to do is speak to both the Israeli and Palestinian sides to try to advance a peace process that is desperately needed. We have continued to do that and we have called out illegality when it has taken place. I have been clear, and at times, quite forceful, in my criticism of the Israeli Government's policy towards Palestinians and I have invested a lot of time, on behalf of this House and the Irish people, into ensuring that Ireland is a relevant contributor to that debate. This is about trying to find a way forward for a peace process that can allow for a two-state solution that can ensure the Palestinians can realise their right to a state of their own. That is our focus and it will continue to be our focus.

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Defence Forces

10. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Defence the use that the Defence Forces are currently making of the Glen of Imaal. [13295/22]

Deputy John Lahart: Part of the Glen of Imaal is in my constituency and I ask the Minister for an update on how the Defence Forces use it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Glen of Imaal is the primary field firing and tactical training asset for the Defence Forces. These lands are the main training and largest live firing range areas at their disposal. This training areas has been in continuous use for over a century and remains so to this day. The facility consists of lands in the Glen of Imaal, including the air firing range and the Coolmoney Camp. The training area is in constant use for troop exercises such as overseas readiness, casualty evacuation and air firing involving both the Army and the Air Corps. I am advised by the military authorities that in the coming weeks the planned occupancy rate will range from 70% to 100%, with a slight dip in usage during the summer and then returning to 100% usage from September onwards. To reiterate and for the avoidance of any doubt, the Glen of Imaal is the primary field and firing and tactical training area and is the only range capable of accommodating many Defence Forces weapons systems. It is not intended to change its status as the primary training land bank for the Defence Forces but I can go into more detail on that if the Deputy wants.

Deputy John Lahart: I have no further questions. If the Minister wants to elaborate on it he can take my time.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It might be helpful to give the House a sense of the scale there. The entire training lands contain some 6,700 acres and it is the biggest land holding in the defence portfolio. The Glen of Imaal is the primary training land bank in the country. We have other significant land banks and training centres but nothing as big as the Glen of Imaal. There may have been some suggestions that we could use part of that land bank and facility for housing accommodation.

Deputy John Lahart: It is very remote.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is probably not appropriate, it is remote and the dormitory-style facilities at the camp are not appropriate for families as they have collective shower facilities and so on. That is not an option but it is an important part of our defence land bank infrastructure.

Deputy John Lahart: Just in case the Department's officials were trying to figure out what motivated the question, it really was as innocent as it stated and I wanted an update on its use. The answer is comprehensive and useful from an information point of view.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Dara Calleary): We will go back to Question No. 5.

Defence Forces

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Defence the time frame for consideration of the development of an Irish radar surveillance capability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13539/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Acting Chairman for facilitating me. The timeframe for the consideration of the development of the radar surveillance capability that we are lacking became evident when we had the threat of manoeuvres by the Russian military. There has been much conversation on the criminal invasion of Ukraine by the Russians and the particular circumstances we are in. I mention the capacity that we will require into the future. We know there is a fear of hybrid cyberattacks and whatever else that we will be facing in the future.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I know people link the radar capacity with Russian naval military manoeuvres but we knew all about those manoeuvres. The Russians informed us and looked for permission. They informed the Irish Aviation Authority, which is what happens when a military wants to engage in manoeuvres in international waters that we are responsible for. That is not to say there is not an issue with primary radar; there is.

The equipment development plan for the Defence Forces was published in June 2020 and was completed following extensive military work. It provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects which will be progressed over five years. This plan builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper on equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade. It was developed to ensure that our Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment which are necessary to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas. I am advised by the military authorities that the Defence Forces operate many different types of radar systems. Existing capabilities available to the Army include radar systems such as the Giraffe Mk4 short-range air defence system and the Foxtrack X-Band ground surveillance radar. The Air Corps uses surface search radar on the CASA 235 maritime patrol aircraft and all aircraft are fitted with a transponder and an automatic identification system for identification and tracking. The Naval Service uses maritime surface search radar and the recognised maritime picture systems for surveillance and tracking.

There is a range of further detail on equipment that I could outline to the Deputy but his core question is on the primary radar capacity for monitoring and understanding what is in Irish or Irish-controlled airspace off our west coast. This has been a question that continues to be asked. The report of the Commission on the Defence Forces recommends that we should deal with that by providing increased resources and that we should put that capacity in place. I do not disagree with that and this issue was also raised during the White Paper process. However, it was subject to the availability of resources because if one is going to spend money on that one has to reduce one's spend in other areas. I hope we will be able to progress with increasing that capacity but it involves more resources.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire and I welcome the answer. There will be general agreement on the necessity involved in this. When I spoke of the Russian manoeuvres I did so from the point of view that it highlighted the issue in the public domain; I get that they told us about them beforehand. Following that we had the Irish Aviation Authority before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications and there is the scenario whereby it is given certain information by its equivalent in Britain, which is informed by the British military and the Royal Air Force. There is a capacity failing in that and that goes to the wider question of what neutrality means and the fact that we need to have capacity in order to be neutral.

I will digress slightly to the wider question of the threat we are under, which has been mentioned earlier, that is, cyber and hybrid attack. I know the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, gave out particular guidance to companies because it felt there is a higher threat. What

is the situation with the Defence Forces and what is the action plan for the near future?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The issue of primary radar has been under discussion since 2015. When I was last in this portfolio and when Deputy Kehoe was Minister for Defence we were both involved in that discussion. Plans have been put in place but it is primarily a resourcing issue. We have a lot of capacity gaps such as long-range strategic lift capacity and the need to invest more in cyber protection and primary radar. There are a range of other capacity resource issues. That is what the commission was put in place to address. We have recommendations now so it is up to the Government and me to respond to that.

On the primary role of the Defence Forces on cybersecurity, the NCSC is primarily the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and not the Department of Defence. Our primary responsibility is to make sure that our defensive and military systems are protected from cyberattack and we review that regularly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will allow the Minister to expand on that. The only question I have is on the wider issue of cyber-meets-hybrid and the new world in which we are living and the new threat we are facing. I accept that he cannot go into absolute detail on it, but will he give whatever information he can about the preparations being carried out? Deputies Brady and O'Rourke and I went to a conference about hybrid and cyber attacks, which I was delighted to attend. It was at the time of the invasion and the head of the NCSC decided not to go because he obviously had far more important issues to deal with that day. Will the Minister provide information about where the Defence Forces are on cyber-meets-hybrid?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Government has been doing a lot in this space in recent years and a number of Departments are contributing to that. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, under the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is the primary Department involved, but the Defence Forces contribute to that. We have Defence Forces personnel at the NCSC. On a European level, there is also an awful lot of sharing of information. There is a centre of excellence in Tallinn, Estonia, for cybersecurity. We have seconded a person from the Defence Forces to that facility in terms of gaining knowledge. For a number of years, the Defence Forces and the State more generally have been increasing the resourcing of our cybersecurity defence capacity, and we continue to do that. The Defence Forces has a dual role here. We have to make sure that our systems are protected within the defence networks and, of course, we have to contribute to tackling the broader challenges the country faces. There is a lot of focus on that within the Government at present.

Question No. 11 answered with Question No. 8.

Defence Forces

12. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Defence his views on and response to the finding of the Commission on the Defence Forces that it is clear, in relation to the Defence Forces, that there are recurring themes and specific HR-related issues that are a source of considerable frustration and, in some cases, exasperation; and that among the issues raised are those concerning aspects of career progression, career planning, the lack of a modern organisational perspective on worklife balance, the criteria surrounding pensions and extensions of contractual service, and the lack of flexibility within the current establishment. [13220/22]

Deputy John Lahart: Some of the findings and recurring themes in the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces relate to human resources issues that are a source of considerable frustration in terms of career planning and progression, as well as the lack of a modern organisational perspective on work-life balance. Will the Minister accept that this is corrosive to the morale of the Defence Forces, as is the lack of investment? What steps are being taken in the context of the commission? What can he tell the House about how these issues will be addressed in a positive way?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The report of the Commission on the Defence Forces contains many detailed recommendations. As I outlined earlier, a process is under way to consider these recommendations in consultation with Government colleagues. However, I take this opportunity to assure the Deputy that the Permanent Defence Force continues to offer excellent career opportunities for both serving personnel and new entrants. Of course, we have seen examples of what should not be happening, but there are many good things happening as well.

The military authorities have advised that leadership and career training is provided to ensure that Defence Forces personnel are prepared for exercising command authority across the full range of military functions, both at home and overseas in international operations, and that the organisation has the necessary pool of leaders and commanders at all levels. I understand there were a total of 376 promotions in the Permanent Defence Force across all ranks in 2021, and there have been a further 64 promotions, again across all ranks, in the Permanent Defence Force to date in 2022, that is up to the middle of February.

The Defence Forces recognises the value of the individual to the organisation and has already undertaken a number of measures to enhance the work-life balance of service personnel. A number of family-friendly overseas appointments for personnel have been introduced where the normal six-month tour of duty can be shared with another member of the Defence Forces resulting in a three-month deployment. The Defence Forces have also placed a renewed focus on members whose spouse or partner is also in the organisation, with a view to ascertaining how they can be assisted when their spouse or partner is deployed away from home.

In addition, a range of harmony measures are being explored and implemented, including hot-desking for certain enlisted and commissioned personnel who have been posted away from their home addresses. In certain non-command appointments, such personnel can work several days a month in a military location closer to home. I will come back on the issues that are not yet resolved, but it is important to say there are positive changes.

Deputy John Lahart: I want to give the Minister the opportunity to demonstrate that. I was fortunate enough in a previous career to see at first hand some of the work our Defence Forces do, much of which goes unsung. The piece I witnessed was in their UN capacity, redrawing and actually plotting out the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea. One of the issues I have found is that the public has no comprehension of the range of duties and functions the Defence Forces carry out. I have never encountered a finer body of men and women.

The commission suggested there were issues of frustration around career progression, pensions and extension of contractual service. The Minister might speak about the extension of contractual service and the lack of flexibility within the establishment. I will not come back in a second time so he may use all the time for this. Many of us know, as public representatives, that when people retire from the Defence Forces, the roles they take up in the private sector or other services are vital. Clearly, they still have much to give.

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Deputy Simon Coveney: The commission report did not pull any punches in regard to HR management in the Defence Forces. Even though some of the examples that I outlined are very welcome and necessary, in regard to trying to change the culture and approach towards staffing in the Defence Forces, a more fundamental change is needed in terms of culture, particularly towards women and other minorities, in the Defence Forces. Only 7% of our Defence Forces personnel are women. That is not where we need to be. The commission report stated that a target should be set of 35%, or more than one third, of our Defence Forces as women, as well as setting a whole series of recommendations for us in how to achieve that.

Cases of bullying and sexual harassment in the Defence Forces have been exposed very publicly. We need to have zero tolerance of such behaviour, which is totally unacceptable. There is an independent piece of work under way, led by a High Court judge, which will put practical recommendations to me in terms of how we respond to that. Change is happening, which is welcome, but there are problems that need to be addressed in terms of a fundamental cultural change in the Defence Forces. That is also a big part of the commission report. Let us not forget that three chapters of the commission report deal with people and HR. Therefore, it is a significant part of the report and we need to deliver on it.

Questions Nos. 13 and 14 replied to with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

15. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary question No. 122 of 27 January 2022, the status of the independent review to examine the effectiveness of the policies, systems and procedures currently in place for dealing with bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault in the Defence Forces; the progress reports received to date by him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13308/22]

23. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the work that has been carried out to address gender-based issues and concerns within the Defence Forces. [13478/22]

24. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Defence the engagements he has had in the past month with regard to the proposed establishment of a commission or statutory inquiry into allegations of sexual harassment within the Defence Forces. [12557/22]

47. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Defence if he will establish a statutory inquiry into allegations of sexual harassment in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12556/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: May I have a minute and I will forsake any further contribution as I suspect we will not have time for it? I have the advantage of having read the written reply. My question is about the status of the independent review to examine the effectiveness of the policies and procedures for dealing with bullying etc. in the Defence Forces. The review was announced on 25 January, when the three-person membership was also set out. The terms of reference state that a work plan is to be produced within 30 days of the appointment of the group. Has that plan been produced? How many times has the group met? Has there been a monthly report? The Minister's reply states that he received an initial report confirming that

work within the agreed terms of reference is under way. That is too vague given the seriousness of this and the fact that the Women of Honour are not participating. We need to restore trust. A work plan was to be produced within a month. Has it been produced? Have there been any monthly reports to date or anything else specifically under the terms of reference?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I propose to take Questions Nos. 15, 23, 24 and 47 together.

My understanding is that the work plan has been completed. I am very careful to ensure that this report remains distant from the Minister so that it is seen genuinely as an independent report, which it needs to be. Even though this process and the people who are leading it have much support in terms of existing Defence Forces personnel and also some former Defence Forces personnel, it is regrettable that the Women of Honour group has not supported this approach. I hope it will interact with the judge and her team because this is a very genuine and serious effort to produce recommendations that can fundamentally change culture within the Defence Forces. I am available at any time to talk about that with any group, including the Women of Honour group if it wants to do so. This report is progressing, however. We have asked, as part of the terms of reference, that they would provide an interim report to me within six months and finalise their work within 12 months. I certainly hope that we will be on schedule for those commitments.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Disadvantaged Status

62. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the roll-out of the expansion of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS; and if she will meet with Opposition Deputies to provide an update on this expansion. [13480/22]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The announcement regarding DEIS arrived yesterday. It is a very important programme that has cross-party support. It has huge potential to make major differences to many children's lives. I very much welcome the schools that were added to that, including several in my own constituency. Of course, like any process such as this, there will always be schools that missed out and are disappointed. St. Maries of The Isle primary school in my constituency made a strong case for an upgrade to DEIS band 1. I understand schools will be able to appeal this decision. When will these appeals open? How can schools apply?

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I was very pleased yesterday to be able to announce a major expansion of the DEIS programme. For the first time, we are now seeing a considerable expansion of the programme, which will mean that a significant number of schools will benefit from the €32 million investment. In fact, it will mean that 310 schools will be provided for in the DEIS programme, which will mean that 25% of our schools are part of the programme, facilitating almost 250,000 or one in four students.

Currently, 884 schools and more than 180,000 students benefit from the DEIS programme. As I said, the additions are significant in terms of moving that forward. Supports will be provided to these schools, including a DEIS grant and additional schoolbook grant funding, access

to the home school community liaison scheme, access to the school completion programme and priority access to continuous professional development for teachers.

Schools have been identified for inclusion in the programme, and this is important, through the refined DEIS identification model, which is an objective, statistics-based model. This model uses information from the Department of Education enrolment databases and the Pobal HP deprivation index. Schools were not required to apply for inclusion in the DEIS programme and the model has been applied fairly and equally to all schools.

The extension of the DEIS programme to additional schools follows intensive work by the DEIS technical group, which involved valuable input from stakeholders. The refined DEIS identification model builds on the objectivity and fairness of the 2017 version, but now captures a greater breadth of disadvantage and accounts for severity of disadvantage through the application of a weighted process.

It also takes consideration of the significant educational disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma learners and students residing in direct provision or emergency homeless accommodation. Using this approach, we can extend the additional targeted supports of the DEIS programme to those schools serving high concentrations of students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I understand that the Minister needs to put these things on the record, but I hope that in her next contribution, she might be able to tell us more about the appeals process. As I have said, there will be schools that are disappointed.

The other issue is that the appeals process needs to be a bit more dynamic, perhaps, than the existing process. We are dealing with five-year-old information. When there is an appeal, schools should have the opportunity to put forward things that might have changed in that period or that the criteria might not have taken into account. I raised this at the meeting yesterday. If there are now additional social housing turnkeys in an area, or there has been an increase in the provision of housing assistance payment, HAP, in the area, such things would change the circumstance.

The other issue I will raise with the Minister is co-operation with the Department of Social Protection. We need to get to a stage where every DEIS school has hot meals. We are a distance away from that. Obviously, the hot meals programme has expanded but we are a distance away from it. Will the Minister work towards that as an objective?

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to finish on the appeals process. I acknowledge that many schools were very pleased yesterday. The Deputy was gracious enough to include a reference to the schools in his constituency. I also appreciate there were schools that did not make the DEIS status yesterday.

I want to be very clear that the model employed, that is, the Pobal HP deprivation index, is very clear and transparent in respect of categorising what we are talking about or referring to in terms of compounded disadvantage, which highlights those schools where the greatest level of disadvantage is being experienced. Those were the schools that were successful yesterday. Notwithstanding that, there will almost certainly be an appeals process. The Department is committed to ensuring that all schools are treated equally and fairly in the manner in which they have been assessed for inclusion in the programme. If a school considers that it should have been identified for inclusion in the programme under the refined model, an appeals process has

been developed to allow it to seek a review. That will be forthcoming in the next few weeks.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I hope the Minister can tell us more about that as the process goes on.

The Minister also raised the issue of stakeholders. There needs to be a sea change in how the Minister and her Department show co-operation and partnership across the Dáil. We first contacted the Minister on 26 April 2021, which is almost a year ago now, because we wanted to work with her on the new DEIS model.

We have written to the Minister, or an official in her Department, 11 times since then. I raised this again with the Minister in the Dáil on 23 September, 13 October, 20 October, 25 January and 1 February and asked for a meeting, but throughout all that time the meeting was not forthcoming.

There has been such a level of non-co-operation, to be frank, that I had to resort to a freedom of information request to get basic information on how the DEIS allocation was progressing. The meeting yesterday, while it was welcome, was happening while the decision was ultimately made. I asked the Minister how many schools were included in DEIS band 1. The Minister said the process will evolve and that she will keep us posted. The Minister had the list. It is not good enough. She talks about stakeholders and co-operation but the stakeholders on this side of the House had no role in it. What is done is done but I want to see a serious improvement in how we co-operate across the floor.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to conclude.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I want to be very clear at the outset that the consultation actually predated me. There has been and, even in my own term, there continues to be engagement with the partners in education and the stakeholders of education.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Not these ones.

Deputy Norma Foley: I am not finished yet. I gave an absolute commitment to the Deputy that he would be fully briefed in advance of me making any public announcement in relation to DEIS. That was facilitated yesterday. It was facilitated by experts and by officials from my own Department. Indeed, I was there also.

On the availability of information, every step of the way the information has been made available through parliamentary questions, etc. about the model and the work that was ongoing at that time. In fairness, we have benefited greatly from the stakeholder engagements with the managerial bodies and the teaching unions, etc. in the entire process. In fairness, in terms of all the other operations in the Department of Education, the Deputy has been involved. I did give the commitment that he would be fully briefed and informed of what was happening prior to any public announcement-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I did not want to be just briefed. I wanted to play a part. I wanted to help.

Deputy Norma Foley: -----and that the model would be perfectly and expertly explained to him. All of that did happen in advance of any public announcement.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is not good enough.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, can we let the Minister respond uninterrupted?

School Textbooks

63. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the status of the pilot free book scheme as announced in budget 2022; and when the scheme will be rolled out to all students. [13508/22]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister will know that I have been raising the issue of a free schoolbooks scheme for many years now. I want to see one in this State that mirrors the one that is available in Northern Ireland, where no parent pays for a schoolbook. The Minister has initiated a pilot scheme. At what point can we expect to see a free schoolbook scheme in every school in the country at primary and secondary level?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post-primary schools within the free education system in order to provide assistance for books, including book rental schemes. Under this scheme, my Department provided funding of €17.2 million in 2021 to all of these schools. Schools that are participating in the Department's DEIS programme receive an enhanced rate of book grant. Schoolbook rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of schoolbooks for parents and guardians. In order to support the establishment of book rental schemes, the Department provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to all primary schools. From the information available to the Department, approximately 96% of all primary schools and 69% of all post-primary schools currently operate a book rental scheme. It is a matter for the board of management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book rent funding in the school. Schools are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those students most in need.

Additional funding of €1 million was provided for in budget 2020 to provide free books in DEIS primary schools on a pilot basis. This funding was allocated to 102 DEIS primary schools for a pilot programme for the 2020-21 school year. This funding continued for the 2021-22 school year. The aim of this pilot is to provide free schoolbooks for students in the schools involved and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of schoolbooks for parents. It will continue to run for the 2021-22 school year. Its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made regarding its possible extension or continuation. It is my intention to complete this process as soon as possible.

Under circular 46/2013, DEIS primary schools receive a book grant of €21 per pupil, which is important to note as well. We have seen that the present pilot has been successful. Indeed, it is important to us that we would take the opportunity to evaluate its strengths, and consider where we might be able to improve, prior to taking any further action.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I can tell the Minister where the strengths are. She just has to look across the Border. Anybody from the North who comes to live in the South will tell her that it is ridiculous that they have to go scrambling around looking for a book list and trying to get schoolbooks for the new school year. They just do not think it is their role. All of these conversations at school community level about buying books and book rental schemes are replacing conversations about education or child development. There is an opportunity for the

Minister. A sense of vision should creep into the Department of Education. It should say that it will work towards a situation where there are free schoolbooks for every child in the State. This would cost €20 million at primary level and €20 million at secondary level as well. The sort of administrative burden that has been placed on schools because of book rental programmes, whereby they have to chase down the book money and put an onus on parents to go and get the books, would all be eliminated by such an investment. Every school in the country and every child in the country would have schoolbooks as a right for free.

Deputy Norma Foley: Again, I want to say very clearly that many of the points the Deputy makes are being acknowledged by the Department. There is a strong vision within the Department. Hence, we have a very significant roll-out of the pilot scheme. It is only right and proper that before we would advance, we would have a significant pilot in place and we would have an opportunity to evaluate it so we can see where we are at.

Equally, in terms of the breadth of vision in the Department, I am very pleased to say that there was a €20 million allocation in the budget this year to provide for free books or resources for reading within our schools. This is significant. It is the first time we have done such an initiative. It underpins the value of reading and access to the power of language and words in whatever type of book might appeal to a child, whether it is poetry, artistic or whatever the case might be. There is a strong commitment to the provision of supports for children's textbooks or reading books in the school environment. This is being supported financially by the Department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I will make a prediction for the Minister. In years to come, people will think it is ridiculous that we had this debate about children having free schoolbooks because it is such a basic provision. It is provided in so many European countries for free. You only have to go across the Border to witness it. I will ask the Minister a blunt question. When will the pilot be done and when will the expansion begin? It is clear to anybody who is listening to this debate that of course a pilot scheme whereby children get free schoolbooks will be successful. It will replace many conversations about books, acquiring books, book money and book rental schemes with conversations about child development and education. As I have said, all those other discussions should be happening. I have a simple question. When will the pilot end and when will the expansion begin?

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the pilot runs for this school year. At that point, we will take a look at how the pilot has worked. In conjunction with that, we will roll out €20 million into our schools to make additional books and reading supports available in our schools. There is a significant book rental scheme. I know the Deputy has not taken the value of that on board. I think it is a significant resource for our schools. There is a book rental scheme also. It is operating-----

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I know about it because the Labour Party introduced it.

Deputy Norma Foley: No, I just want to conclude. We know that more than 96% of our primary schools are availing of the book rental scheme. That is a significant provision in our schools. It is actually being supported by the Department of Education from a financial point of view as well. I want to be clear that there is no single measure being offered within the schools. There is a multiplicity of measures and supports being provided. There is a wide breadth of vi-

sion in terms of how to support our families and our children going forward. The Department is providing for them. The current pilot will conclude, and we will take a look at how it has worked.

Special Educational Needs

64. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to ensure the equitable distribution of special needs assistants, SNAs, across the school system with particular regard to new and developing schools; and the status of the roll-out of the front-loaded allocation model. [13481/22]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Regardless of the announcement every year of additional SNAs in each budget, there just never seems to be enough. This is particularly concentrated in particular types of school. There is also the combination of the roll-out of the front-loading model and indeed the freeze on SNA allocation. What this means in particular is that fast-developing schools or new schools are finding it very hard. While 1,000 SNAs are announced every year, and I always welcome that, thousands of children across the State who need an SNA cannot access one. What can be done to ensure that every child who needs SNA support can access it?

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the new graduates of the SNA programme in UCD. This programme of training was advised by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, in 2018. Some 3,500 students will take that course over the next three years.

To get back to the Deputy's specific question on SNAs in general, we have increased the number of SNAs by 81% since 2011. We can all agree that that is a significant increase on what was originally there. That is not to deny that schools will occasionally need additionality. There is the process of exceptional review where a school requires an additional SNA.

The front-loading allocation model does not relate to special classes or schools, given they are outside of that. An SNA is allocated to a special class or school depending on the type of disability. In respect of mainstream classes, the front-loading allocation was frozen during Covid. We felt it would have been too great a burden on schools if we were to try to change that. The SNA allocations for existing and mainstream classes, including in new and developing schools, were maintained as of 30 April and were rolled over into the 2021-22 school year, and SNAs who are in position can remain so for the school year. Applications from developing and new schools were prioritised. The 1,165 SNAs who were allocated in budget 2022 will be allocated as a priority to developing and new schools. I accept the Deputy's point in that context. Nevertheless, a diagnosis is no longer needed to access an SNA in mainstream schools.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State, too, has probably had these conversations with schools. Indeed, I recently saw her engage with the school in County Louth outside Leinster House. In schools that do not have enough SNAs, the SNAs are run from pillar to post, the children feel let down and their parents are frustrated that the children are not getting the supports they need. It harms the children's development and their ability to thrive in school and to reach their full potential.

We have an issue with recruitment and retention. Every year, an allocation of 1,000 is an-

nounced but we never get there. In budget 2022, an allocation of 1,000 SNAs was announced, yet on budget day, 175 SNAs from the previous year's allocation still had not been allocated to schools. That is part of the problem. Some of it relates to their terms and conditions and how attractive the job is. People go into other jobs, they do not sign up to be an SNA and that is having an impact, even though the funding is available, on how many SNAs get into schools. Therefore, the children end up losing out. That is a big part of the problem and the Department needs to confront it.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Work is under way in respect of the new allocations for schools and they will issue as soon as possible. There will be consultation with stakeholders in advance. It is primarily the job of the NCSE to assess each school and its allocation. It is up to each school to allocate its SNAs as it sees fit. For mainstream classes, as I said, no diagnosis is required. The criteria for the front-loading allocation are clear. There is a baseline number of enrolments and account is taken of the number of children with complex needs, the gender of the children, whether it is a delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, school, and the educational attainment of the children. As Minister of State with responsibility for special education, I want every school to be adequately resourced with SNAs. The Deputy will be aware I have spoken previously about the school inclusion model and how that will benefit our children into the future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Perhaps it is the NCSE that applies the criteria, but the buck stops with the Minister of State in terms of policy and the terms and conditions and pay of SNAs. They have a significant impact on whether we can get SNAs through the system, that is, whether we can recruit and keep them. She mentioned that in the case of new and developing schools, the allocation has been frozen, but that is precisely the problem. There is a degree of additionality but nothing near what is required. There are schools that are growing year on year which, at the start of Covid, may have had only two year groups and that have expanded well beyond that. The additionality they have been able to get is nowhere near enough. New schools that are growing fast are at the sharp end of this. They do not have anywhere near enough, in most instances. The Minister of State mentioned the course in UCD and there have always been issues with its accreditation. We need to start showing SNAs more respect if we want to keep them in the system in order that we will have the SNAs we need to support children.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I assure the Deputy that the Minister and I take the role of SNA very seriously. SNAs are valued greatly for the assistance they give to children with additional needs who, quite simply, would not be in a position to function in any real way in classes without them. The SNA's role to increase the independent living skills of children with additional needs is to be commended and admired. In regard to the course in UCD, as I have always said, we want to examine and evaluate the outcomes. The first step is to get training, which is what the National Council for Special Education recommended, and we can then consider accreditation and other matters in the future. We had to get the training done in the first instance. There will be conversations we can have in that context in the future. The front-loading allocation is a more objective and fairer way of allocating teaching care supports to schools, and it will help developing and new schools as well.

Legislative Programme

65. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the Education (Health, Relationships and Sex Education) Bill 2021; and if she will expedite the work on the Bill. [13664/22]

Deputy Gary Gannon: What is the status of the Education (Health, Relationships and Sex Education) Bill 2021 and will the Minister make a statement on the matter to update us on the work that has been ongoing since it was brought to the House five months ago? If possible, will she expedite the Bill?

Deputy Norma Foley: Access to sexual and health education is an important right for students, and it is equally important that this education meets the needs of students in their day-to-day lives and reflect best practice. The Department continues to work closely with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, to give effect to the commitment in the programme for Government to develop inclusive and age-appropriate relationship and sexual education, RSE, and social, political and health education, SPHE, curriculums at primary and post-primary levels, including through an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships and making appropriate legislative changes, if necessary. The NCCA draws on the report on the review of relationships and sexuality education in primary and post-primary schools, which was published in December 2019.

As the Deputy will be aware from the Second Stage debate on the Private Members' Bill he tabled, arising from recommendations in that report, the NCCA has been following a twin-track approach in this work. First, the NCCA has a focus on developing support materials for teachers for publication online as part of an online guidance toolkit. The toolkit supports teachers in their engagement with the current SPHE-RSE curriculum in a confident and holistic manner, and in a comprehensive way that meets the needs of young people today. Separate toolkits, which are being used by schools, are available for the primary, junior cycle and senior cycle curriculum areas.

In tandem with this work on the online toolkits, the NCCA is progressing the broader redevelopment and update of the SPHE curriculum, with an initial focus on the junior cycle. The Department is also examining means to support teachers through the provision of enhanced continuing professional development, CPD. A review of the current junior cycle SPHE course has been approved by the NCCA and forms the basis for the work of the subject development groups in formulating an updated junior cycle SPHE specification. A draft revised junior cycle specification is due to be agreed by the NCCA in advance of the summer, with a public consultation to follow. The final revised specification is due to be completed by the end of 2022 and rolled out in schools from September 2023. Preparatory work will commence in 2022 in respect of senior cycle specifications as the next area of focus.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I would like an update on the Bill, which was delayed by nine months. We are more than halfway through that period, at five months. Is it the Minister's intention to bring the Bill back on Second Stage, as was agreed to when the Bill received cross-party support in November? Will it be brought back before or after the summer?

I might highlight some of the issues that were raised during the debate on the Bill. This week, we marked International Women's Day. The Minister for Justice is working on a Government strategy to tackle male and gender-based violence. It will have four pillars, namely,

prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. It is difficult to separate prevention from education. Has the Minister's Department engaged with the Department of Justice, therefore, on what could be included in any revised RSE models at primary level and in the junior and senior cycles to combat male violence against women?

Deputy Norma Foley: As I outlined earlier and as was outlined during the debate on the Bill, it is important that the NCCA, which has undertaken a significant body of work on specifications for the junior cycle this year, moving ahead with the senior cycle subsequently, be given time to complete the development work in this significant area.

11 o'clock

That is why, on Second Stage of the Bill, as the Deputy will be aware, Government tabled a timed amendment that the motion be read in nine months. The Department will continue to work closely with the NCCA to assist in completion of this work as a matter of priority.

I made clear at the time I am absolutely committed to this being delivered as a matter of priority. It is important, as I have articulated, that students have the information available. It is the right of every student to have the information available to him or her.

It is also important that we are conscious of models of best practice. Indeed, in terms of the work of the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, the Deputy will be aware that a cross-departmental approach is being taken and the Department of Education very much will be involved in all of that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Has the Department of Education been involved to this point? What are the timelines for the involvement of the Department with the Minister, Deputy McEntee's cross-departmental approach to combating men's violence against women? Can the Minister, Deputy Foley, update us on that particular work? Specifically, what role has the Department of Education had to this point? Will this feature in the work of the NCCA? Can we see a progress report?

Deputy Norma Foley: The NCCA has taken the broadest view of models of best practice in terms of the information that should be available to the students. I reiterate there is absolute clarity and commitment on the part of the Department. Indeed, there is recognition on all sides of the importance of the correct and factual information being not only made available to but readily accessed by the students. In tandem with that, it is important that the school staff are supported in the delivery of it. When we talk about various approaches, we are talking about not only the curriculum but also adequate and significant supports being available for the delivery of the curriculum. Underlying and underpinning everything that is in the curriculum, at the heart of it will be meeting the needs and the challenges that children and young people face today and that they would have the information.

In terms of working with other Department, I reiterate there is an absolute commitment on our part to work on a cross-departmental level. Whether with the Minister for Justice or the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, we will take that collaborative and co-operative approach.

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Special Educational Needs

66. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education the opening date for autism classes in schools (details supplied) in Dublin 12; the reason for the delay in opening the classes; and if they will be open for September 2022. [13665/22]

Deputy Joan Collins: My question is to ask the Minister the opening date for autism classes in schools in Dublin 12, the reason for the delay in opening the classes and if they will be open for September 2022. This is a follow-up question to the question I asked on the previous occasion regarding the capacity of schools in the Dublin 12 area when the Minister of State felt there was capacity in the area. I met with the campaign for Dublin 12 autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units. They asked me to resubmit this question to give more information to the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Education Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Deputy, who has raised this issue with me previously.

When we are talking about special classes in general, we have to look at it in the context of the journey that we have been on. That is not to say that we still have a great deal of work to do but we have increased the number of special classes by 386% since 2011 and that is quite significant.

At the end of December, we will have 2,437 classes opened. Three hundred of those are new classes this year. We are creating approximately 1,700 special class places.

We are making progress but, as the Deputy will be well aware, there are pinch points in certain areas, particularly in cities such as Dublin and Cork.

The majority of schools in Dublin 12 have opened special classes, including four new classes in the current school year. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is continuing to engage with other schools. At present, in Dublin 12, there are 21 special classes. Fifteen are primary, including two early intervention classes, and then there are six post-primary. Out of four of these, three are primary and one is post-primary. They are all newly established as well this year: Loreto Senior National School, Loreto Junior School, St. Damian's National School on Clogher Road and City College.

There are also schools, as the Deputy will be aware because she has raised it with me in the past, that have ongoing building projects or proposed building projects in train. There will be a new ASD class in Holy Spirit, Greenhills in 2022-23. The building work has commenced. Scoil Úna Naofa is employing a consultant to oversee building works with a view to starting up a new class there. The NCSE is liaising with Drimnagh Castle school. They do not have the space at present but we are looking to see whether schemes are available there. There is the additional accommodation scheme and there are other works that can be done to try to facilitate special classes in these particular schools.

Deputy Joan Collins: The autism community and myself are well aware of the good work that has gone on to date. There has been an increase in classes. We welcome that but, as the Minister of State said, there are still pinch points.

Holy Spirit Junior Primary School has been out to tender for an autism class for the past number of years, yet there is still no movement on it. I welcome that the Minister of State

is saying that will open in 2022-23. Will she provide verification that Scoil Úna Naofa is on course to open an autism class in September 2022? They have just sorted out the asbestos problem. We want to move on that.

I will come back on Drimnagh Castle in my next contribution because there are issues around that that we should be aware of. Hopefully, we will be able to move to getting a class there as well.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: To reassure the Deputy, there is intensive ongoing engagement with all of these schools by the local special educational needs organisers, SENOs, in the Dublin 12 area and I am consistently briefed on what is happening when I ask.

Scoil Úna Naofa is employing consultants, as I said, to oversee building works and we hope that it will happen as soon as possible. The aim is to open for September. I will never stand here in the Dáil and give an absolute guarantee or make a promise about anything but I know that the best endeavours are being made. It takes a great deal of work from the schools to do it.

Many of these classes were opened under the section 37 process, as the Deputy will be aware, which has been a success. We can also mention the special school, Our Lady of Good Hope in Crumlin, which has opened. That is providing 48 places. It has 36 at present but it will be in a position to take in 48 pupils at some point.

There are many ongoing discussions with patron bodies and local stakeholders around making sure that we have full capacity in the area.

Deputy Joan Collins: I welcome those few points the Minister of State made about Scoil Úna Naofa.

With regard to Drimnagh Castle, an NCSE report a number of years ago stated:

The school had reported that it does not have the physical space to accommodate any new classes, and therefore has advised the NCSE that it is not in a position to establish ASD Special Classes. School management report that there are currently 14 SET Teachers using 6 rooms. The Patron advises this school has available land on which the school could expand.

That is certainly an area, and the Minister of State mentioned that the NCSE is looking into that. The NCSE stated recently that there is no capacity and, therefore, that has changed.

The land referred to was bought by the Romanian Orthodox Church but the land that the school sits on belongs to the Edmund Rice Schools Trust. They are the trustees and the archbishop is the patron. I am sure that, after opening Our Lady of Hope in 2021, they would want to continue being inclusive in regard to opening a class in Drimnagh.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I met the archbishop in Our Lady of Good Hope and we had a conversation around special schools and special classes. They are very active and really want to try and provide that inclusivity where they can. We can all accept that sometimes there are legitimate reasons where schools do not have the capacity and, in those circumstances, we can either try to provide that building work where they can facilitate special classes or we must accept the fact that they cannot and try to find additional capacity elsewhere. That is the job of the NCSE and its SENOs.

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There are many conversations going on in the Dublin 12 area because we are always aware of the fact that there is an increased demographic. We must make sure that we have a proper forecasting model in place and that we use the geographical information system from the building and planning unit to liaise with the NCSE to ensure no child who requires one is without a placement, in particular, in the Dublin area.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

School Transport

67. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the school transport system, including consultation; when the final report can be expected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13494/22]

Deputy Dara Calleary: My question is on the progress of the review of school transport, when the Minister will receive it and what will be the likely actions. I also draw the Minister's attention to a report in this morning's *Irish Examiner* on the potential sustainability of the school transport network because of the current fuel price hikes, which are not catered for in the contracts, in particular for private operators.

Deputy Norma Foley: As the Deputy will be aware, the school transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the current school year, more than 121,400 students, including more than 15,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of more than €289 million in 2021.

I know what a hugely important service school transport is for families and children. As the Deputy referenced, my Department commenced a review of the school transport scheme in February 2021. The review is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme, its broader effectiveness and sustainability, and to ensure it serves students and their families adequately. The review encompasses the school transport scheme for children with special educational needs and the primary and post-primary school transport schemes in terms of how each element of the scheme currently operates to include eligibility criteria, trends, costs and cost drivers, and overall effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the schemes. The review will also examine the potential for integration of different strands of the scheme and a more co-ordinated approach with other Departments that also use transport services. The review will consider issues such as climate action, supporting rural development and promoting, where possible, initiatives that encourage walking and cycling to school.

In June 2021, the steering group presented me with an initial interim report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next-nearest school. Following consideration of the report, I approved alleviation measures that allowed for the provision of transport for post-primary students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and had applied and paid on time. Wider considerations relating to the operation of the scheme are now taking place in the second phase of the review. As part of this phase, the Department has conducted an extensive stakeholder engagement process. The Department is analysing the views of relevant stakeholders, includ-

ing parents, guardians, students and other Departments, so that they may be considered as part of the assessment and in informing policy on the future operation of the scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Regarding the changes the Minister made to the scheme last year, which have been beneficial for many, does she plan on making any further changes ahead of the next school year, arising from the report currently before her?

I am interested to hear about her interaction with students. I welcome the work she did with students on the leaving certificate. Will she actively engage with students on school transport, as they would bring a lot of ideas to the table?

Regarding transport for students with additional needs, will she engage with their parents, providers and the broader school community on how best we can do that? Has she had any consultation in recent days within the Department on the cost of fuel and its potential impact on private providers and on the main provider, Bus Éireann? My interaction with the school transport office has been excellent. I thank, in particular, the officials in the school transport office in Ballina.

Deputy Norma Foley: With regard to engagement, following the announcement of the commencement of the stakeholder consultation process in January 2022, a very proactive approach was taken by the Department. There was direct contact with stakeholders, including school management bodies, parent representative organisations, special education interest groups, EU member states, and school principals, to seek their views on the school transport scheme. Parents and guardians and post-primary students were also invited to complete online surveys.

More than 8,200 surveys have been received from parents and guardians and more than 2,400 surveys have been received from students, which is significant engagement by students in the process. To date, five submissions have been received from other Departments and organisations, six from school management bodies, 73 from school principals, and submissions have also been received from special education interest groups and broader interests. Ongoing engagement continues between officials in my Department and others. We hope to expedite the completion of the review on school transport as quickly as possible.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome the engagement on the fuel issue. That is very urgent. Has the Local Link organisation made a submission to the review or has the Department engaged with it? Local Link is an asset that could be very much part of school transport as well as community transport. It could be possible to exchange and co-ordinate assets that are available to school transport for broader community transport when they are not being utilised for school purposes.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I echo what Deputy Calleary said. It is vitally important that there is good engagement, not just with Bus Éireann but with the private operators on whom we rely enormously. They are under big pressure in the same way as hauliers and others, and it is important that there is engagement and that they get the support and assistance they need.

There were improvements to the school transport scheme last year, but there are still outstanding knotty issues relating to routes in particular. It comes back to what Deputy Ó Ríordáin has been saying about the Department needing to show some vision. This is the big issue, along with solar panels on schools, that the Department can address in respect of climate change. We should be working towards a situation where every child does not have to travel to school in

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a car. Ideally, they would walk or cycle, but if that is not possible, they should get a publicly-funded bus service. That is the vision the Department must show in school transport in the short to medium term. Every child who wants a place on a school bus should get it.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be very clear, there is no ambiguity as regards the Department's ambition. We are very clear that it is our intention to advance the school transport system. We have listed a variety of criteria regarding eligibility and encouraging people to access school transport, but also to pursue a green agenda in terms of accessibility. We have moved a step forward even in the short term in accessing availability for students who are not necessarily attending their nearest school but their next-nearest school. We continue apace.

In terms of the engagement, I reiterate that it has been the widest and possibly the most significant public consultation that has taken place. A wide breadth of representatives - individuals and organisations - were invited to participate in the public consultation. I do not have the time to articulate the various groups that have engaged in the process. It is my intention to conclude the process in a timely manner.

Question No. 68 replied to with Written Answers.

State Examinations

69. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education her views on correspondence (details supplied) regarding the junior cycle examinations; if she will clarify the position regarding same; if she will provide the breakdown of marks to teachers or outline when the State Examinations Commission will be issuing guidance to teachers and students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13323/22]

Deputy Niamh Smyth: My question relates to the marking scheme set out by the State Examinations Commission, SEC, specifically the allocation of marks for geography and history, in order that teachers can advise their students. I would welcome if the Minister could make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Norma Foley: The first phase of junior cycle reform began in 2014 with the introduction of a new specification in junior cycle English, which was first examined in 2017. New specifications in junior cycle science and business studies were introduced in August 2016 and first examined in 2019. The new specifications for the modern foreign languages and Irish were introduced in August 2017 and were due for assessment for the first time in 2020. Junior cycle geography, history, home economics, music and mathematics were introduced in schools in 2018 and were due for assessment in 2021.

The State Examinations Commission published sample papers in autumn 2021 for the subjects in the fifth and final phase of junior cycle reform, which will be examined for the first time in 2022. These are religious education, classics, wood technology, engineering, graphics and applied technology. While all new specifications are now being taught in schools, due to the pandemic, the junior cycle examinations in both 2020 and 2021 were not held for school-based candidates. The majority of new specifications will, therefore, be examined, at scale, for the first time in 2022.

The SEC advises that, as has long been the case at junior cycle level, the level of detail on

examination papers relating to mark allocations may vary from subject to subject. In some cases, mark allocations are shown for questions, sections or the entire paper, and some papers provide guidance as to the length of time to be spent on particular questions. It is important to note that these are no-choice examination papers and candidates are required to answer all questions on the examination paper. In addition, the examination papers are in a completion booklet format, and the space provided for the candidate responses provides an indication to candidates of the length of the response required. The structure and format of the papers are of assistance to teachers in preparing candidates in their preparation for the examinations.

In line with long-standing practice, and in the interests of fairness, the SEC does not provide marking schemes for sample papers as the marking scheme cannot be finalised in the absence of a review of candidate work produced under live examination conditions. The SEC advises that it would not be appropriate to draw any inferences from any marking scheme for a sample paper regarding how any subsequent live paper might be marked. The SEC will publish the marking schemes at the time of issue of the provisional examination results. This can assist candidates who are considering whether they may wish to appeal these provisional results, and provides clarity to candidates and their teachers regarding how the work produced was evaluated.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I wholeheartedly congratulate the Minister on the terrific announcement yesterday that 310 schools have been brought under the delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, programme. That €32 million investment will make a major difference to many thousands of students throughout the country.

As somebody who not only taught history of art but corrected it for the SEC, I am acutely aware that the marking scheme is very important for teachers in giving accurate advice to students on time spent on questions. In my experience, that was available to us in history of art at pre-examination level and for corrections. It is very important for teachers to have that guidance to enable them to give correct information to their students about how much time they should spend on questions. I again ask the Minister to examine this, especially for history and geography. We should not be precluded from saying teachers should be given that guidance. As I said, we had it for history of art and I do not see why it should not be the same for geography and history.

Deputy Norma Foley: Consequent to the pandemic of the past two years, exams that should have taken place, including for students who were being examined for the first time, did not take place and are open for assessment now. It is in line with long-standing practice and in the interests of fairness that the SEC does not provide marking schemes for sample papers as a marking scheme cannot be finalised in the absence of a review of a candidate's work produced under live examination conditions. The commission advised that it would not be appropriate to draw any inference from any marking scheme on a sample paper as it may not reflect the live paper.

The commission will publish the marking schemes at the time of issue of the provisional examination results. This will assist candidates who are considering whether they may wish to appeal these provisional results. It is important to note that there are no-choice examination papers and candidates are required to answer all the questions on the examination paper. In addition, the examination papers are in completion booklet format and the space provided to the candidate is indicative of the amount the candidate is required to write to answer that question.

I acknowledge the points the Deputy made but the NCCA is making the point that a live

exam will determine the final marking.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The expectation was raised in 2021 and 2020 when the NCCA issued a number of junior certificate sample questions online. These clearly stated that each question is not weighted the same in the marking scheme. That raised the expectation and the hope that clarity could be given around that to give teachers an ample opportunity to give guidance to their students. It is a difficult time for teachers and students and, as the Minister said, we have come through a difficult time in education because of the pandemic. With the first State examinations since and some sort of normality approaching, there is an eagerness among teachers to give their students as much advice and guidance around those exams as they can.

I appreciate the Minister's clarity on the question. We will endeavour to give our teachers as much clarity as possible closer to the time.

Deputy Norma Foley: I again acknowledge the enormous body of work that has been undertaken by teachers and students. I am particularly conscious that for the first time in two years we will have junior cycle exams in this third year. We welcome that. I also appreciate the workload of teachers and their ambition for their students to maximise their abilities and achievements on the paper. I also want to be fair about it. This is not a choice examination paper. It is in booklet form. A certain number of lines are given that are indicative of the amount of time and space that needs to be given to an answer. Equally, the point made by the NCCA is that work produced under live examination conditions ultimately determines the marking scheme. That is appropriate as that has been a long-standing practice. Nonetheless, I wish all students, and staff who are supporting them at this time, the very best. Great work is being done in schools.

Question No. 70 replied to with Written Answers.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Is the Acting Chairperson taking Questions Nos. 71 and 72 together? They are on the same issue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): They are not grouped together. We will stick with Question No. 71.

Schools Building Projects

71. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education if funding for a school (details supplied) will be sufficient to provide a new building considering the level of inflation in the building sector. [13313/22]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I will raise the issue of the Kolbe centre in Portlaoise, County Laois which is in urgent need of a new building. The Minister might outline the funding progress on that.

Deputy Norma Foley: The major building project for Kolbe Special School in Portlaoise is included in the Department's construction programme, which is being delivered under the national development plan. The €4.4 billion funding envelope for the schools capital programme under Project Ireland 2040 provides a strong basis for the roll-out of projects, including in respect of Kolbe Special School.

The project is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2b detailed design, which includes the application for all statutory consents, including planning permission, disability access certification and fire safety certification, in addition to the preparation of tender documentation. Planning permission has recently been granted. Disability access certification has also been granted and the application for fire safety certification is with the local authority; its response is pending. The design team is currently working on completion of the tender documents and finalisation of the stage 2b report, which will then be submitted to the Department for review and approval. To expedite the project, the pre-qualification of contractors is being carried out in parallel with the completion and review of stage 2b, and the design team was authorised to commence the process just last week.

Upon receipt, review and approval of the stage 2b submission, completion of the pre-qualification of contractors, and once the design team are satisfied that their tender documents are in order and comply with all departmental and building regulation requirements, the project for Kolbe Special School can be progressed to tender and award of contract. A tender stage normally takes between six to eight months subject to no issues arising. I will articulate clearly that the Department is fully committed to getting this project delivered as quickly as possible and advanced as a priority.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for her reply. I cannot emphasise enough the need for a new building. At present, this special school, which deals with children with very complex needs and serious levels of disability, has only one permanent bricks-and-mortar classroom. Everything else is prefabricated and some of it is in a very poor condition. It is not totally weatherproof, it is not soundproof and some of the prefabs are just too small. It is very difficult to heat and, with the current situation regarding energy costs, that causes difficulties. I emphasise there is a major need for this school. The site is secured on Block Road. It is an excellent site and the school authorities have been working hard on that with the Department. I acknowledge the co-operation of the Minister's officials on that matter.

The school has an excellent and very committed staff and the parents are also very committed. It is very important that we try to move this project on. Planning permission was granted a couple of weeks ago by the county council. That is something I have raised a number of times with the council because of the urgency of the project. It is now important that we get it to the next stage, which the Minister will appreciate. Will she give an indication of the timelines and the funding involved?

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge the Deputy's commitment to the delivery of this project. I also acknowledge that it is a project where the importance of delivery has been drawn to my attention. The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, and myself are very committed to the provision of special education. Some 25% of our budget, in excess of €2 billion, is expended, rightly so, on special education. There is an enormous commitment from the Department to that.

From what I have outlined, the Deputy will see that significant progress in advancing this project has been made. He referenced planning permission, and fire safety certification is pending from the local authority, whose role we acknowledge. The design team is currently working on the tender documents. Equally, to expedite the project, pre-qualification for contractors, which is important, is being carried out in parallel with the completion and review of stage 2b. Again, as the Deputy acknowledged, the design team has been authorised to commence the process last week. The manner in which we are as much as possible taking a twin-track approach

underlines our commitment.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister will understand, coming from the education sector and given her job now, the different stages of planning, design and delivery of a school. There are a number of hurdles within the process and a number of stages that must be gone through. I ask that her officials give this priority. I acknowledge the Minister of State. She will be in the constituency, in Laois, on Friday and she will be very welcome. It is really important that we get it done and that the funding provided is sufficient to cater for any building inflation there may be because, unfortunately, costs are not going down. It is important that there is sufficient funding for it.

I ask the Minister could really work hard on this so that the children and the staff do not spend another winter in the accommodation that they are in, if that is possible. We need to try to move on with it. It is not suitable with the weather conditions to have people in those prefabs year-in, year-out. I thank the Minister for her reply. Hopefully, we can get this project moving very quickly.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. I reiterate the Department's absolute commitment to deliver this project as expeditiously as possible. It is being given priority. On receipt and review of the stage 2b submission, completion of the pre-qualification of contractors and once the design team is satisfied that the tender documents are in order and comply with departmental and building regulations, the project for Kolbe Special School can be progressed to tender and award of contract. We will do that as expeditiously as possible. I concede that the tender process can take between six and eight months but it is very important that everyone in the school community, families and the wider community can see the timeline of progress. That also gives confidence to the project. We have made significant progress and I want us to continue with the same level of urgency and priority.

Questions Nos. 72 and 73 replied to with Written Answers.

School Staff

74. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education when the staffing schedule for 2022-23 will be published. [13510/22]

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: When will the staffing schedule for 2022-23 will be published?

Minister for Education Deputy Norma Foley: The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September.

For the current school year, the staffing schedule operates on a general average of 25 pupils to every one teacher. That is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. More favourable ratios are implemented for DEIS urban band 1 schools.

Budget 2022 progressed the ongoing major investment in our primary education sector which impacts positively on the staffing in primary schools by providing a further one-point reduction for the 2022-23 school year so that primary schools will be allocated teaching posts on an average basis of one classroom teacher for every 24 pupils in September 2022. This brings

the staffing schedule to a further new historical low for primary schools.

Budget 2022 also provided the largest-ever increase in funding for the DEIS programme with an additional allocation of €18 million, equivalent to a full year allocation of €32 million, which will enable an expansion in 2022 of the programme to further schools. This will result in an increase of more than 20% in funding for the DEIS programme.

In addition, nearly 1,000 extra special education teachers will be provided to increase capacity for supporting children in special classes, special schools and mainstream settings. Schools with at least two special classes will be provided with an administrative principal, while release days for teaching principals will be maintained.

The staffing schedule for the 2022-23 school year is being finalised and will be published in the coming weeks. The Deputy will appreciate that with 4,000 schools, significant work is involved. I appreciate the need to expedite it. The Department is working on it and it will be published as expeditiously as possible. The timeframe is in the coming weeks.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I just want to know what “in the coming weeks” means. The Minister will appreciate that principals tell me that they need to plan for September. Even though it is off the front pages of the newspapers and outside the media circle of conversation, they are still dealing with Covid on a daily basis. I spoke to a teacher yesterday who said that approximately one third of the student body had been out because of Covid-related illness. If the Labour Party Parliamentary Party is anything to go by, seeing as we have lost half of our members to Covid this week, I am quite sure that staffs around the country are having a similar problem. Covid is something that the schools are still having to deal with. They need to be able to plan for September. Can I get something a little better than “in the coming weeks”? If I go back to a principal who has asked me to raise this and say “in the coming weeks”, they will want to know what that means.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the work that is ongoing in our schools. I visit schools regularly and meet principals, staff, students and school communities, boards of management and parents. I am very conscious of the ongoing work as we, hopefully, journey out of Covid. All the necessary additional supports to manage infection prevention and control in our schools have been maintained. Notwithstanding those resources and additionalities, they pale into insignificance when considering the sheer goodwill and workload provided in our schools every day from our school staff, school leaders and the students themselves.

The commitment is that the schedule will be available in the coming weeks. I cannot give the Deputy a definitive date. We are working as quickly as we can and giving priority to the staffing schedule but it takes time. The Deputy will appreciate that we are talking about 4,000 schools with 1 million pupils and 100,000 staff.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I appreciate all those factors and I appreciate the Minister’s comments about the commitment of teachers, SNAs and school principals. I have raised, as have other Deputies, the need to analyse and quantify the damage to young people, which was outside the Minister’s control, over the past two years in terms of social interaction, anxiety and loss of in-school learning. That point needs to be made in the context of planning for September. If we do go back to something approaching normality in September, then there must be recognition from the Department that a lot of really profound damage was done to young people over the past two years. I impress on the Minister that the schedule be published as soon as pos-

sible in order that school communities, teachers, SNAs and principals can plan for September.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I also wish to raise something related to our anticipation that a significant number of school children will join our system from Ukraine. Typically, English language support would be allocated in September. Schools will need that much sooner in these circumstances. Will the Minister examine this to see whether additional English language support can be provided? There are schools that want to take on additional language support teachers but the funding is not there. I encourage the Minister to provide this. It is one of the lessons we can learn from how schools supported children who came here from Syria. The Department did a lot of good work and many schools did heroic work but where it fell down in many cases was in English language support. This cannot wait until September. We need to address this now and provide funding for schools to find teachers and staff who can assist with language because that will be a big barrier.

Deputy Norma Foley: A cross-government, interdepartmental approach is being taken on this. We are clear that families, children and young people from Ukraine are welcome and we will do all that is necessary to support them. I met the Ukrainian ambassador yesterday, as the Deputy will be aware. I also spoke online with the Ukrainian minister for education. The details he shared were very upsetting and harrowing. Some 250 schools and education institutions have been bombed and he said that there would be more to come. Our schools will be open and welcoming. Last week I visited a school that already had a Ukrainian student in it. I spoke to principals over the weekend. One informed me of a family who arrived into his community on Friday and had children in the school on the Monday. Notwithstanding that, English as an additional language, EAL, is a significant support. We will absolutely put in place all the resources we need to. This is a time of emergency and challenge. Any humanitarian support this country can offer the Ukrainian people will be given.

Schools Building Projects

75. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education further to Question No. 146 of 23 November 2021, the analysis her Department has carried out into the future acquisition of any privately owned vacant school properties in Galway city and county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13315/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is very specifically about what analysis has been done on acquiring empty schools in Galway where properties are vacant. There are two major schools empty for some time. There is potential there. I ask that in the particular context of an Educate Together school that is in a temporary building. That arrangement is coming to an end this year. We had a meeting with the school representatives lately and I understand from yesterday there has been an announcement on that. It is a general question plus a specific purpose one.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. To plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a geographical information system, GIS, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places throughout the country will arise. With this information, the Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises to determine where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level. This information provides a degree of certainty in projecting demand in an area in future years.

Where an additional school place demand is identified, the need can be met by one or more of the following options, namely, utilising spare capacity in existing schools, expansion of existing schools or establishment of a new school. In that assessment of appropriate solutions, the Department considers a national inventory of school capacity that is completed by individual schools. When schools are providing their annual 30 September enrolment returns to the Department in respect of the primary online database for primary schools and post-primary online database for post-primary schools, they are now also requested to provide information in respect of overall demand for school places and available capacity within their schools. The compilation and analysis of this information at local, regional and national level through the Department's GIS is an important additional feature of the school planning process.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Department currently has a requirement to identify a permanent site to accommodate the 1,000-pupil capacity Galway Educate Together post-primary school that was established in 2019 to serve the Galway city and Oranmore school planning areas as a regional solution. The site identification exercise for this school requirement found there were no suitable available vacant school buildings that would meet the long-term accommodation needs of the new school. The Department did, as the Deputy has referenced, make progress on that.

The Department also has building projects at primary, post-primary and special schools across Galway city and county, including new school buildings for St. Joseph's College in Galway city, Scoil Chaitríona Junior and Senior Schools, Cuan na Gaillimhe Community National School, Rosedale Special School, Scoil Mhuire, Moycullen and St. Teresa's Special School, among others. There are also multiple large and small scale extension projects in train across the county.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Department is aware of vacant former school properties in Galway and of properties that may become vacant as a result of school building projects. These properties are in the ownership of third parties, but in all instances throughout the country, such properties are considered as part of the Department's assessment of potential solutions for school accommodation needs and the Department engages with the relevant property owners as appropriate. While no such properties were identified-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I am sorry, Minister. Deputy Connolly may respond.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have had the privilege of reading the answer. There was good news yesterday but my question relates to Galway city. We have two empty schools sitting there. The Minister mentioned St. Joseph's College and the plans for that. They have been going on for a long time. It is literally across a little river, or a little stream, from an empty secondary school, where I went myself. It is sitting there empty because the school amalgamated with the Mercy Secondary School, which sits empty. Both have gone to a new premises.

I have the greatest respect for the Department, its business and how it does its business, but in this matter I do not know how somebody did not look at Galway city and the empty school buildings there are and ask what we are going to do with them now. Could The Bish have used the Presentation and could it still use it? On the specific question we are talking about, is the Educate Together school now moving into what was the Mercy school in the centre of town? I

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understand from the announcement it is, but for just two years, and no progress has been made on a permanent site. I ask the Minister to clarify that.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy's commitment to the provision of appropriate capacity in the Galway area. I want to be very clear the Department is being proactive here. There was a positive announcement yesterday. In an ideal world we would be able to source permanent sites almost overnight. That is not the case. There are significant difficulties. Every site identified as having potential absolutely is evaluated by the Department. Particular time and consideration is given to evaluating every aspect of the site, including whether it is suitable not just for current needs but projected ones going forward, whether there is a planning issue or a road issue and so on. The Deputy herself knows there are a whole variety of considerations that must be taken into account. We are committed to advancing and have made progress. We will continue to deliberate as a matter of urgency on finding appropriate spare capacity going forward.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate a positive announcement was made yesterday about a temporary solution for two years. What is the permanent solution? The Educate Together school is moving into an empty school. I am emphasising to the Department that it has been empty and the school I went to myself is also empty. Two major buildings have been left empty in Galway while there is a plan to build a brand new school up on a university site and no examination of what to do with these two schools.

Again, my question is what specifically is in place for the Educate Together school. Is it two years? Is it a lease for two years or for five? What money is being paid and to what entity are we paying money, if there is money involved? Is one Department paying the religious organisation or entity in charge, CEIST - I am not sure of its exact name - and are we paying now to house the school? Maybe I am wrong. The bigger picture is getting a permanent site and whether that site is permanent-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I beg the Acting Chair's pardon. I did not realise I was over time.

Deputy Norma Foley: Again, I want to be clear when a property becomes available, the Department will engage with the property owner, as it is right and proper. When a site becomes available, the Department will engage and do a full evaluation of the site. It will evaluate the site's positives, negatives and its potential going forward. All of that is a time consideration. Specifically on the matter of properties being available, if the property is not in the Department's ownership, then obviously arrangements need to be made with the property owner. Our key priority is to ensure there is provision of appropriate space for our students, staff and school community. As I referenced earlier, it is not always easy to find an appropriate site, that is, one that will meet not just the current demands but also the future ones. Thus, in some instances we must make short-term arrangements to facilitate a longer or greater vision we have going forward. In this instance we are doing that but we ultimately have the longer objective and longer view of providing a permanent site.

Question No. 76 replied to with Written Answers.

Dáil Éireann
State Examinations

77. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if all concerns regarding the leaving certificate examinations have been addressed with reference to the disruption to the past two school years due to Covid-19; the plans that are in place to tackle remaining concerns with particular reference to children with special educational needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13454/22]

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: This question seeks to ascertain the position, after Covid and the issues that arose over the past two years, with the operation of the leaving certificate, how that might affect students, those with special needs in particular.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Deputy. As he knows, I myself have a son doing the leaving certificate. He is in the middle of his mocks at the moment. Deputy Durkan is right that the past two years have been especially difficult due to the pandemic. Obviously, the Minister announced adjustments around greater choice in the papers and fewer questions to answer while allowing the same amount of time to completing the examination as is permitted in normal years. Students are also having their oral exams and the music practicals over the first week of the Easter break.

On children with additional needs specifically, there are accommodations there. In 2019, 23,041 reasonable accommodations were granted to 19,765 students. That is about 16% of the cohort taking the leaving certificate in the first instance. It is essential we support them in every way we can.

The reasonable accommodations at the certificate examinations scheme was reviewed in 2017 and will be subject to further review in the context of reform of the senior cycle. It is assessed and based on a level of need. In 2021, €3 million was given to schools under the assistive technology scheme because many students use word processors, laptops, tablets and various types of digital assistance when undertaking their coursework or doing their exams. There are no digital exam papers at the moment because that would create concerns around the integrity of the exams, as the papers would need to be accessed in advance of the exams. However, there are examination reading pens that convert text to speech and digital coursework booklets on a wide range of leaving certificate subjects are provided, for example in geography, history, home economics and religious education.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. Is she satisfied with the extent to which these matters have been addressed? How will matters proceed this year and is it in accord with the concerns expressed by teachers, parents of children with special needs and the students themselves?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Regarding the leaving certificate more generally for children without additional needs, the right balance has been struck in trying to cater for them as best we can, bearing in mind the difficulties that they have faced over the past two years. I am satisfied that we have made reasonable accommodations for children with additional needs. The scheme aims to remove access barriers to exams while retaining the fairness element for all students. The need to assess the same underlying skills and competencies will always be there. This is the basis on which decisions are made.

There are a number of technological assists to help students. The majority use word proces-

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sors. The scheme is being reviewed and consideration will be given to widening the use of assistive technologies to new areas, for example, text-to-speech software, reading pens and so on.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: If particular issues arise at exam centres anywhere in the country, is it possible to put in place some means of addressing them in time and on the go?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): Deputy Ó Laoghaire wishes to ask a brief question on this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There has been a lengthy debate on how the leaving certificate should be done. I do not want to rehash it, but it arose for a number of reasons, such as, the difficulty in covering the course and the anxieties and pressures students were experiencing because of two or more years of Covid and everything that went along with that. What plans are there for mental health supports for students between now and the exams? Will the Minister of State put in place a helpline, run by the Department, to ensure that information on mental health supports is available? There will also be many questions about papers and so on. It would be a useful resource for the Department to provide.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: If there is time, I will ask the Minister to respond to that question.

Regarding Deputy Durkan's question on assistance, 8,936 special exam centres have been set up at a cost of €5 million for children with additional needs. That assistance will be available through these centres and everything will be done to assist the children in doing the leaving certificate.

Deputy Norma Foley: I wish to be clear regarding the leaving certificate and junior cycle classes of 2022. Significant accommodations have already been made on the papers for leaving certificate students, and equally so in respect of junior cycle students. We are looking at classroom-based assessments being cut by 50% and the assessment task being removed so as to allow for greater contact time in the classroom and a strong well-being approach. I acknowledge that this approach is being taken by all schools in supporting their students - not just their exam students, who are important in this context, but the entire school community. This approach is being well supported throughout our schools.

Questions Nos. 78 to 81, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

Special Educational Needs

82. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the meeting between the National Council for Special Education and a school (details supplied), which is scheduled for 4 March 2022, to discuss urgent need of the school for additional SNA resources; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13194/22]

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: What was the outcome of the meeting between the principal of Tullydonnell National School, Ms Anne Marie Ford, and the Department of Education regarding the urgent need for additional SNAs? The Minister of State met the principal and me outside Leinster House, so I would be delighted if a good outcome were to be announced now.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I met Ms Ford and some members of the school staff outside

Leinster House with the Deputy, who has been a strong advocate for the school. At my request, the NCSE met the school on Friday to discuss the issues of concern. At the meeting, the SENO explained the basis for the allocation of SNA support. The SENO will engage further with parents in this regard.

SNAs have to be deployed by schools themselves in a manner that best meets their needs and care supports. As I told Ms Ford, an additional 1,165 SNAs have been allocated for distribution this year via budget 2022. We are targeting and prioritising new and expanding schools. Notwithstanding that, if there is a genuine need - Ms Ford is of the view that there is a genuine need in her school and has made that strong case to the NCSE - we will be examining front-loading allocations over the next few weeks and I hope there will be consideration given in that context. The allocations for next year are under consideration and a decision will be made shortly. We want to support those schools that have been hardest hit by the freeze, for example, developing schools.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: While I welcome the Minister of State's comments, I did not hear an absolute commitment to look after the needs of this particular school at this time. Rather, she is saying that the situation will continue to be reviewed. The parents, students, the local parish priest and the whole community are concerned about this. When will the Minister of State make a decision on it? Would there be any point in a further meeting if there are issues to be clarified between both parties?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: To stress, the decision is not mine. Rather, it is a decision for the NCSE. However, the NCSE is fully aware from the meeting last Friday of the genuine concerns of Tullydonnell National School in County Louth. A decision on allocations will be made over the next number of weeks. I will not give any guarantee in the Dáil, as I do not make promises or give guarantees, but suffice it to say that the NCSE is aware of the school's concerns. An additional 1,165 SNAs are coming on stream and, if required, I hope that the school will be satisfied.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I can give the Minister of State a guarantee that she will hear about this matter again, and so will I. She will continue to hear about it.

In fairness to the Government, it has allocated a significant number of additional assistants, but this is a school that has to be heard. The delivery must be transparent and is needed. I appreciate that the decision is not the Minister of State's, but we do not want to be protesting again shortly with an even larger crowd.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I certainly do not, but it is important to say that SNAs should be deployed by a school in a manner that best meets the care support requirements of the kids enrolled in that school. I have heard this school's concerns and the NCSE knows its concerns. I hope that there will be a satisfactory conclusion - I want that also. I thank the Deputy for advocating on behalf of the school so strongly.

Schools Building Projects

83. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools that are currently in temporary accommodation while awaiting permanent sites; the stage that each of those schools is at, that is, searching for a suitable site, a suitable site located,

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a suitable site located and acquired by her Department, the tender process under way or the build under way, by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13366/22]

12 o'clock

Deputy Norma Foley: I can assure the Deputy that it is the policy of my Department to ensure a high standard of permanent accommodation for all schools. However, in the context of a rapidly increasing school population over the past decade or more, it is sometimes necessary to put in place interim accommodation solutions to meet the needs of schools. Given the timeframes for the acquisition of suitable sites, design, statutory planning processes, tendering and construction, it is often necessary for newly-established schools to commence operation in such interim accommodation.

Since 2011, 117 new primary, post-primary and special schools have been established by the Department of Education. Of these, 51 are already operating in their permanent accommodation. The projects to deliver permanent accommodation for the remaining schools are at various stages of planning and construction. The Deputy has requested a breakdown of these by status and county in tabular form and I have arranged for my officials to provide the requested details directly to her office in due course.

In relation to the acquisition of permanent sites, the Deputy will appreciate that the site acquisition process is very complex and subject to completion of successful negotiation and conveyancing processes. Each acquisition is unique and dependent on multiple factors, many of which may be outside of the control of the Department of Education. The Deputy will also appreciate the importance of conducting a thorough appraisal of site options before proceeding with an acquisition in order to obtain best value for the Exchequer. While the site acquisition can necessarily take some time, I can assure the Deputy that the Department is working to progress all site acquisitions as quickly as possible. It is important to note that of the 117 new schools established since 2011, only six do not yet have their permanent site identification. Once the Department has certainty on the permanent site for a school the project for the new school building is progressed to the architectural planning process as quickly as possible.

Approximately 1,200 school building projects under the Department's large-scale and additional accommodation scheme are currently in progress across the various stages of planning, design, tender and construction, most of which are expected to be either under construction or completed in the period up to 2025. There are currently in excess of 250 school building projects at construction, with a continuous stream of other projects at or near the tendering stage. These are being progressed as quickly as possible.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Aréir, thug an Rialtas isteach laghdú, mar a dtugadh air, ar pheitreal agus ar dhíosal agus an cháin atá á ghearradh orthu sin ach ag dul trasna aon stáisiún peitрил ar maidin, ní thabharfadh aon duine faoi deara é, mar go bhfuil an praghas sa chuid is

mó de na stáisiúin inniu níos daoire ná mar a bhí sé ar maidin Dé Mháirt. Tá go leor acu go fóill ag iarraidh níos mó ná €2 an lítear ar pheitreal agus ar dhíosal. Ní dhearna an Rialtas aon rud ó thaobh an cháin atá á gearradh acu ó thaobh ola tithe. Gan dabht, d'fhéadfaí níos mó a dhéanamh ach chuir an Rialtas seo i gcoinne leasuithe Shinn Féin a d'fhágfadh go mbeadh na praghsanna seo níos ísle.

Last night, the Government introduced a so-called reduction in excise duty on petrol and diesel, but on passing any filling station this morning nobody would have noticed because prices in most filling stations this morning are higher than they were on Tuesday morning, with many still charging over €2 per litre. The reduction has been immediately eroded. That is the likely trajectory. Prices will continue to rise, which is something ordinary workers and families simply cannot afford because it comes on top of already skyrocketing costs of living.

People are panicking. They are struggling to make ends meet. The Government does not seem to understand that. It does not seem to understand the pressure that workers and families are under and that businesses and farmers and now being pushed to the pin of their collar. Half measures simply does not cut it. The Government could have done more. Instead, last night it opposed Sinn Féin's amendments that would have brought prices at the pump down further. The fact the Government did not do that is indicative that it is completely out of touch. There were no measures, none whatsoever, to reduce the cost of home heating oil, which has more than doubled since January of this year. That could have been reduced by as much as €100 on a 1,000 litre fill but there was no reduction. Worse than that, the Government plans to increase the cost of home heating oil by a further €20 on 1 May.

Supporting our amendments last night would have delivered for workers and families. Yesterday, the Taoiseach misled the House in saying there is no excise on home heating oil. That is simply not true. The Minister for Finance in a written response to a parliamentary question from Deputy Verona Murphy referring to kerosene, which is home heating oil, said: "This excise duty is called mineral oil tax." We know that mineral oil tax on home heating oil is levied at over €84 per thousand litres. Excise on home heating oil can and must be reduced, thereby reducing the cost of a fill by up to €100. Excise on diesel can and should be reduced by more than 15 cent and excise on petrol needs to be reduced further than the 20 cent agreed last night.

The Government's claim that it is doing all it can simply does not stand up. More needs to be done. Much more needs to be done. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has been advising people to slow down. Let me tell him what the public are telling me. They are telling me that that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Government need to hurry up, get their act together and bring these prices down further because people can take it no longer. Will the Government commit to reducing excise duty further on petrol and diesel? Will it commit to taking action to reduce the cost of home heating oil immediately? Will it call on petrol stations, which undoubtedly are engaging in price gouging, at this time of crisis? Strong words at a parliamentary party meeting are not enough; we need action and we need action now. We need leadership.

Visit of Canadian Ambassador to Ireland

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, we have a very distinguished visitor in the Visitors Gallery, H.E. Ms Nancy Smyth, the Canadian ambassador to Ireland. I am sure we all want to extend a very warm Céad Míle Fáilte to her. She is joined by her colleague from the embassy, Jackie Ellis,

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and by our colleague, Deputy Stanton, who is doing an outstanding job as Chairman of the Canada-Ireland Interparliamentary Friendship Group. I am hoping that via the ambassador's visit and the work of the friendship group that cultural, social, economic and political links will be strengthened in the period ahead.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed)

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

This energy price crisis has been with us now for the guts of a year. The Government has taken a series of responses. In October last, through the budget we increased the fuel allowance, the qualified child allowance, the working family payment and the living allowance, targeted to those most at risk of fuel poverty. Three weeks ago, we went further with the €500 million package in terms of the €200 credit which will help people with their bills. It will not cover the full increase, but it will help this month. We introduced a 20% reduction in public transport fares, which commenced yesterday and is only the first in a series of fare reductions. We also increased again the fuel allowance and are helping with school transport and other costs. Again, that will not cover the full cost of what is happening.

Since then, a war has started on our Continent. Our first thought is in regard to how we can help and address that on the humanitarian side. The underlying root-cause behind some of this is our reliance on imported fossil fuel. The fact that so much money is going from Europe to Russia every day is the fundamental problem that we have to address. We went further yesterday with a cut in excise duty on petrol and diesel. In doing that, we said that it would not cover the full cost and that this is a market which is incredibly volatile, beyond precedent. On Tuesday, the wholesale market for diesel in Ireland increased by 22 cent. Yesterday, it decreased by a similar amount. It is yoyoing. It is dramatic. We cannot be exactly certain where it is going to go or where this war will go. We will have to manage it. It will serve nobody if we panic or have a panicked response. We have to be methodical and to keep responding in the same way as we did to Covid by being flexible and quick.

The Government would love to go further, of course we would. The first thing we must do - the Canadian ambassador will know this - is stand for the rule of law. This conflict is ultimately between the rule of international law and democratic constitutional legal systems and those who take a different view of how the world should be run. The rule of law protects us. The rule of law gives us strength, European law especially, in this country. What we did we did within the European law. That was correct. The law may change. Today at the European Council the Taoiseach will be, I am sure, looking to see what more we can do, what further flexibilities and protections and help we can provide, but we will always do it within European law.

On home heating oil, we had a discussion on it three weeks ago. The Deputy and I have different views. The tax on home heating oil is largely carbon tax. That is the form of excise, levied at 8.5 cent per litre, as the Deputy said. Is Sinn Féin saying we should remove that and get rid of all the carbon tax revenue? As I said three weeks ago, the problem I have with that is that this would, in turn, remove the money we use to give the 100% grants to people's homes to help them cut their bills. That is the choice we must think about. The Sinn Féin policy has been that we should retain the carbon tax but not apply the further increases, but if we do not apply the increase, on the average full fill it might give people an average of 5 cent per day. Five cents per day is not going to protect people or cover the full costs. We must look at other means and

measures, and we will. This means efficiency measures as well as price reductions. Ultimately, more than anything else, we must switch from foreign fuels to using our own. I am sure this is something Sinn Féin would surely support. We must switch from oil to wind. In that way we could provide security for our people and cut their bills. That is the change we need to make.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We need to deal with the right here and the right now. Let me explain to the Minister. People are ordering fill up home heating oil now. In Dublin they are being charged €1,840. I have seen other costs of close to €2,000. In January it was €750 or about that. This is more than €1,000 more. These families have not budgeted for that. It is easy for the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues to say “Let us not panic.” They will be able to afford this extra cost. Many people out there cannot afford that. When the Minister talks about not wanting to reduce the tax on home heating oil, people are saying, “Do everything you can to help me, help my family, help my business and help the farmers at this time.” Do it inside the law. The Minister could have done this. He could have supported the amendments last night where we would have reduced the cost of home heating oil by €100. It is not enough but at least it is what we could do right here, right now.

The Minister’s Government should have been asking the European Union for the flexibility of that, right back in September when we were putting it to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe. Like the Minister, Deputy Ryan, he sat on his hands and let this crisis get out of control. We can reduce diesel and petrol prices further. The Minister needs to understand that people are panicking and they need support from the Government. They do not need to be told to slow down. People are telling the Minister to hurry up, get his act together and get these prices down further.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That advice to slow down got a lot of criticism yesterday but it was in answer to a straight question about what sort of efficiency measures we could do. It is just a fact. The people in rural Ireland are most exposed. Consider the drive down from Donegal, for example, which is a long distance. If you are on a motorway, which would not be on the Donegal route but elsewhere, going from 120 km/h down to 100 km/h could save about 20% plus. This is real and is the absolute law of physics. That measure and such efficiencies are important. Yes, we will look also at whatever other measures we can do.

I was speaking to the Taoiseach last night in advance of his going to Versailles today for a meeting of the European Council. He will be working with European colleagues to see if we can we go further and do more. There is a certain point, however, where we are actually exposed. That exposure is the reliance on fossil fuels. This is why efficiency also matters and making the switch matters.

People are very upset this morning because they were looking at the forecourts and they see that the price has not changed. The problem is the price was probably set several days ago, and it depends on different petrol stations as to when the excise was applied. The situation is highly volatile and subject to real change. We are absolutely attuned to the difficulties that Irish families are having. This is why we continue to make the measures such as those we have introduced.

Deputy David Cullinane: There was nothing done on home heating oil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government has decided to do nothing on home heating oil.

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Deputy Gary Gannon: I begin by expressing my revulsion, the revulsion of my party and I am sure the revulsion of all of us across the House, at the latest war crime committed by Russia in Ukraine, namely, the bombing of a maternity and children's hospital in Mariupol. A picture from that atrocity of a heavily pregnant and bloodied woman being stretchered away from the smouldering ruins of the hospital is on the front pages across the globe today. It should remain burned into all of our brains. This is Putin's Russia, an evil regime that thinks nothing of dropping missiles onto pregnant women, newborn babies and little children.

Yesterday's horror in Mariupol, where the dead are now being buried in mass graves, underscores that we need to do everything we can to help as many people as possible escape the barbarity of Putin. The Irish people have acted with extraordinary generosity in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by this war. Thousands of offers of accommodation have already been made. In schools throughout the country, Ukrainian children have already started to attend classes. I acknowledge that the State has acted quickly and with speed for what can often be lengthy bureaucratic processes, be they in residency rights, the issuing of personal public service, PPS, numbers and healthcare entitlements. However, the State will have to do more than merely extend the right to use services to Ukrainian refugees. It must adequately resource those services to cater for the increased demands and increasing need of those experiencing them.

We know, for example, the childcare system in Ireland is at breaking point with waiting lists of 12 months or more in some areas. We also know that for those parents lucky enough to find a childcare place, the costs are equivalent to a second mortgage. The healthcare services are also under unprecedented pressure. Almost 1 million people are currently on public hospital waiting lists waiting to be treated or assessed, nearly 100,000 of whom are children. Disability services are also in crisis. In December, the Ombudsman for Children heavily criticised the Government for its failure to provide assessments for thousands of children. Not only is the State failing to provide adequate services, it is even failing to assess what services children currently need. Meanwhile, we all know that in the midst of a catastrophic housing crisis, more than 9,000 people are now in emergency accommodation, including more than 2,500 children.

When the Ukrainian people come to Ireland seeking refuge and as we open our doors, we must ensure they are able to access the services they are not only entitled to but that they will need. What additional resources, and please be specific, will be provided to childcare services, to education to meet the trauma being experienced by these children as they go into our schools, to the health service, and to the housing services to ensure the entitlements can be delivered upon and the need will be met?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I fully agree with and support Deputy Gannon when he spoke about calling it out, and especially when yesterday we saw the maternity hospital being bombed. There are no words to express the shock and horror of the images we see on the front pages of a newspapers this morning. Our Government is, on behalf of the Irish people, standing up. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, has been active in New York this week. We have led the call for the establishment of an investigation by the International Criminal Court to look at such instances. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, and our ambassador at the United Nations General Assembly, where we have a critically important place on the UN Security Council and on the United Nations Human Rights Council, are standing up as a voice for those nations that have been attacked. We will continue to do that.

Deputy Gannon rightly puts the question on what we can do here at home. The issue of how we manage the influx of young children who will come in is critical. I will share one personal

experience. A number of years ago I was very fortunate to be brought by Human Appeal, an Irish Islamic charity, to a town called Reyhanlı on the Syria-Turkey border and the city of Antakya, or Antioch. I saw there at first hand how they managed with very similar circumstances. At that time there was the bombing and the destruction of Aleppo, and they were seeing very similar circumstances with people fleeing. I saw at first hand how they coped with and managed that. It provides us with a lesson. They engaged with the Syrians.

We need to engage with the Ukrainian minister for education, who I believe is talking to our Minister, and the Teaching Council is looking to see how we could employ some of the Ukrainian teachers who are coming here, how quickly we could establish classes that would give them flexibility in maintaining the Ukrainian curriculum, or how we could work with our Polish and other colleagues to ensure there is connection between how they are taught in the first number of weeks they may be there before they come to Ireland. It is a matter of involving the Ukrainian community and the Ukrainian ambassador, which I am confident we will be able to do, to make sure we can provide the best education and welcome for those children for whatever time they are here. That is our first duty.

Yes, we have a voice on the UN Security Council, and, yes, we have sent humanitarian support. Ireland does not send military offensive weapons. What we can be good at and what we should stand up for in the UN Security Council and in the classrooms we will have to set up is looking after those children in particular as a sign of where our support stands and how our moral outrage at what is happening turns to effect.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Many of the ideas the Minister has suggested are welcome. They are good ideas. In the first instance, as the Ukrainian people arrive here we need to recognise the trauma they have experienced. That needs to be met first. The idea of employing Ukrainian teachers has a lot of merit. The people coming over here are going to be looking at their cities under siege, maternity hospitals being struck with missiles and their husbands left with AK-47s in their hands. In addition to wanting to employ them, I want to ensure their emotional needs are met. How much will be put into counselling services? Will we have trauma-informed education services in order that these children can receive counselling when they arrive in our schools? Our systems are already stressed.

Many people are currently in Poland seeking sanctuary. Could we perhaps send buses to bring people who are in search of sanctuary and refuge here? What active measures are we going to take in that regard? For example, housing needs will be acute. There is a chronic lack of properties at the moment. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has said emergency planning powers may be used to build modular housing. When is that building likely to commence? Is there a plan or a roadmap? I appreciate that this could not happen on day one but now, three weeks into the siege, where are we in terms of an actual plan?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said, we are going to have to act with real speed. In some instances, that will require the likes of modular housing and applying different rules from what we would ordinarily apply in the planning system. My understanding from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and from Cabinet discussions is that we are looking at those sorts of emergency measures to allow us to build modular housing outside the normal planning process. On the more immediate issues, the Deputy is right. Assessments and health supports for arriving Ukrainian citizens, particularly those who have suffered incredibly traumatic experiences, are critical. There is now a welcoming committee in Dublin Airport, which deals with a series of public health services, the provision of social welfare numbers,

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the provision of food and water and the organisation of shelter. Two thirds of the people arriving are staying with friends and family, which is very welcome because that gives them some secure succour and support. We will have to go further. As the children move into schools, the services of the National Educational Psychological Service will need to be applied. We must match the services we have, particularly in support of lone parents, of whom we may see a large number coming with children, and match our social security system, which has that expertise, to this new community that is arriving.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I will focus my questions on the situation in Ukraine, starting with the refugee component. Everyone in the House is aware that almost 2,500 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in this jurisdiction in the last number of weeks. In fairness to the Irish public, their response has been extraordinary. They have opened up their hearts and homes to people fleeing war from the opposite side of the Continent. The main point of entry to this State for Ukrainian refugees is Dublin Airport but the main points of departure from the war zone are the two Polish airports of Rzeszów and Kraków. There is no Irish State presence at those two airports. Would it be worth deploying a small team of diplomats or administrators there to begin the processing in Poland? That would provide an early warning for our people in Dublin Airport so we could have an idea of the numbers coming through. It would be good from an evacuation point of view so it could proceed in good order. We should not be sitting passively in Dublin Airport waiting for refugees to arrive. We should be proactively getting information and passing it on.

Our embassies in Warsaw and Bucharest are under massive pressure at the moment. Has any consideration been given to redeploying some people in the Department of Foreign Affairs, either from Iveagh House or from other embassies, to those two embassies that are under significant pressure? Any thoughts the Minister might have on that would be much appreciated.

On the defence component, the Commission on the Defence Forces reported in January after 14 months of forensic analysis. We have been told since then that the Government will now require an additional four to five months to analyse the analysis. This brings another dimension to the phrase “the paralysis of analysis”. Other EU countries have made decisions on the resourcing of their military in hours or days, because they recognise the severity and gravity of the threat. Can that four- to five-month timescale be shortened to four to five weeks? We all understand that under normal circumstances you should measure twice and cut once, like any good tradesperson, but these are not normal times.

For the first 90 years of this State’s existence, we had a stand-alone, dedicated Minister for Defence but for the last ten years the job has been paired up with another portfolio. It is fortuitous that the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, is sitting next to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, at the moment. He is holding down two portfolios. We are now entering a period of considerable conflict in the Continent of Europe and we do not know where that trajectory is going to take us. Has any consideration been given to once again establishing a dedicated, stand-alone Minister for Defence at the Cabinet table? I appreciate that there is a constitutional ceiling of 15 senior Ministers but perhaps a “super junior” Minister could be considered. I do not think the public would have a difficulty with that for the duration of this crisis.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy that we have a proud record in difficult situations and conflict situations. Rather than adding to the conflict, we try to create peace in such conflict situations. There are examples of us sending diplomats and the likes of our Army Ranger Wing, which went to Kabul Airport last year and helped to get Irish citizens home, in conjunction with other countries. The Department of Foreign Affairs is working very closely

with the Polish Government, which is co-ordinating the response in this regard. We are ready, waiting and willing to provide whatever help we can in that tradition of peacekeeping. Our diplomats and military will be on hand and available at a moment's notice to provide whatever logistical support they can. However, it has to be co-ordinated and led by the Polish authorities because they are on the front line managing it. Subject to their request, the Department and the Minister will provide the necessary response. This is something the Government discussed at the Cabinet subcommittee the other day and we would be very open to it, but it has to be led by those on the front line.

The Minister for Defence and I have had lengthy discussions on the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. We have to deliver on it. We have to deliver additional resources to our Defence Forces. The report is well written and makes a strong case about our lack of resources in critical areas, such as maritime, air cover and support for the likes of the Army Rangers and other Irish soldiers on missions abroad. We need to provide additional resources and strengthen our military in its ability to carry out the critical work it does. However, we have to be careful. We will do it in June according to the timeline we have set. It is important we get this right. It is a highly complex issue. I am in regular contact with my colleagues in countries across the Union, particularly Green Party colleagues. It has been fascinating to discuss with my Finnish colleagues the situation in that country, or the dramatic changes in Germany with my German colleagues. As the Deputy noted, it completely turned around in a day. Denmark is facing a referendum on this matter in June. I am not so sure. Sometimes the lesson in these issues and these debates is not to rush it. There are certain things we need to rush, such as the humanitarian help and the provision of support in Polish airports as needed. We have to be quick there but with regard to the big strategic and long-term response, I think June is an appropriate time for us to assess and implement the recommendations of the commission's report.

With regard to the role of the Minister, I do not believe the creation of a separate Ministry would necessarily make a difference. There may well be a strength, and I think there is, in having the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence integrated under a single senior Minister. There is real merit to that in some ways as it provides status and seniority. I do not believe the creation of a separate Ministry would necessarily help with what we need to do on the commission report.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for outlining the Government's position. I am glad Deputy Gannon mentioned the appalling atrocity in Mariupol yesterday, namely, the bombing of the maternity and children's hospital. I was recently contacted by the HSE, which pointed out that there is some small spare capacity in our neonatal ICUs in Ireland. There is a national neonatal transport programme available whereby hospitals in Dublin link up with the Air Corps to transfer very critically ill children from abroad. Ireland has the capacity to add a particular niche value in the evacuation and movement of people and refugees out of Ukraine. Perhaps the Minister might discuss with his Cabinet colleague, the Minister for Health, whether that could be brought into play. It would certainly make a huge difference to very sick or critically ill children in Ukraine and their parents.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The situation in Mariupol is atrocious but the difficulty is that it is impossible for citizens to get out of the city. Despite supposed arrangements to provide safe access routes out, that has not happened so that is not possible. Our embassy officials in Bucharest were hugely influential in getting a certain number of babies out recently in difficult circumstances. I will go back to the Deputy's original question and I mention our engagement with the Polish, Romanian, Moldovan and other governments. We should be willing and

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able to provide support and assistance but it has to be done as part of a co-ordinated European Commission response. I understand that the European Commission is co-ordinating how such health supports would be provided and that is the best way for us to play our part.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have never seen such anger as is among the general public in our country at this time. The simple truth that families, businesses and ordinary people are telling me is that this Government is grinding the country to a halt and we must get it out. The Rural Independent Group raised the crisis with the cost of fuel in the Dáil well before the Ukrainian war and with a broad smile on their faces the Government heaped carbon tax on the innocent, good and hardworking people of Ireland. Even after yesterday's pathetic decrease, fuel is over €2 per litre and for every €2 of petrol bought this hungry Government's tax takes over €1. For every €2 of diesel bought, it greedily takes €0.98 of tax one way or another. Since this Government took office, carbon tax has jumped from €26 per tonne to €41.50 per tonne, something Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Greens, Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and the Social Democrats supported at the time. The next jump in carbon tax will take it up to €48.50 per tonne as the Government continues to destroy our economy.

The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and the Taoiseach keep talking about their dreams of renewables, knowing full well that they are mocking the public because the renewables we really need are at least ten to 20 years away. I and others agree with the need for these renewables but as they are not here now or anywhere near being here in the foreseeable future, we stay on course with reality while the Government continues to dream.

It was not long ago that I put a great proposal from a west Cork company of putting a floating liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal in Cork Harbour on the Government's table. This would have given us a continuous supply of energy until other measures come into place but the Government refused to work with the company, a decision which has cost this country dearly and a decision that will come back to bite the Government on the leg. It is because of these shocking decisions the Minister is making, with the aid of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, that the people of Ireland have been severely suffering in recent months.

The Government announced a 20% reduction in public transport fares in its first mini budget in recent weeks and I presume the Minister would have pushed for that. If we had public transport in rural Ireland this would be welcome. This 20% decrease will aid those travelling on the DART in Dublin, those travelling on the train in Dublin and those travelling on the Luas in Dublin. It also aids those who travel with Bus Éireann but most of the people in rural Ireland totally depend on private bus operators.

I mention one private operator, West Cork Connect. It runs the best service available in west Cork, from Skibbereen, Clonakilty, Bandon and Innishannon to Cork and back several times a day and from Bantry, Drimoleague, Dunmanway and Ballineen to Cork and back on the other side. West Cork Connect has invested hundreds of thousands of euro and the Minister and this Government are doing all they can to put it out of business as it is not eligible to pass this 20% decrease on to its customers. The same is true of GoBus and Aircoach. They also cannot get the 20% decrease so they must try to deal with crippling fuel costs and compete with a fully subsidised Bus Éireann, even where the private bus operators provide a service that this State cannot provide. The Government has done everything it can to destroy what they have built.

Transport comes under the Minister's brief. Will this 20% decrease be given to the private operators that mainly serve rural Ireland routes and that are encouraging our youth and elderly

to use these services, or was this farcical 20% decrease only intended for Dublin people in the main?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The switch to this renewable and local fuels future will have to be accelerated and I accept that. It is here and I just checked my phone to get the latest figures. As we speak we are using about 5,500 MW of power for lights, heating and our electricity systems. About 3,500 MW of that is coming from wind, particularly from the west, the north west and the south west, including in west Cork. We can use that and we can start planning to store, share and switch it. We can turn things on and off so that we use it in efficient ways as part of the solution and we will have to accelerate that. Our country will be rich and prosperous on the back of that; we will never be safe, secure or wealthy by giving our money to distant countries and regimes that we do not agree with. Let us work together to deliver that more quickly.

It is not just in electricity but we will also have to do it in transport. I agree with the Deputy and we have talked at length about the need for better rural bus services. The Connecting Ireland bus plan that we have is the most radical and probably the most important public transport project we have. I would love to work with the Deputy on how we would run a bus service from Lowertown out to Goleen and back to Schull, Skibbereen and every town and parish along the route.

I agree with the Deputy that private operators will also be critical; it will not just be Bus Éireann or public bus services. Those companies have done a remarkable job, particularly during the Covid period and we stood with them during that time. I met them at various stages and when they asked for support we agreed. At every turn when I went to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, to ask for more money because their fares and numbers were down he agreed because we needed to keep them running through those difficult times when the passengers were not there. They continue to provide that service and they are also part of our public transport service. We have continued with that support.

Even though the masks are off, schools are back and people have returned to work, we are continuing to provide Covid support to the private bus operators and we did so deliberately for a variety of reasons. For example, we recognised that we cannot provide the 20% reduction as easily, quickly or immediately for those private operators as we do for public transport companies. There is a simple reason for that. It is no lack of regard or respect for those companies or the work they do but we do not control, set, manage, monitor or operate their fare systems. What the customer pays the driver for those services is nothing to do with the public bus service. We have no control or management system to put the sort of change the Deputy would like to see in place. We will continue to work and look to give every support we can to them because they are a vital part of our transport network. Part of what we do in responding to Mr. Putin and saying we will not use his fossil fuels is to switch to public transport, including private operators.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister for his reply but it alarms me on so many fronts. His Department is anti-rural as it refuses to give this 20% to rural bus operators to pass on to their customers. I also have worries on other fronts. In addition to the plight of our fishermen and farmers and the state of our health sector, I have consistently raised the issue of the security of our national energy supplies in the Oireachtas in recent years. Tragically, all of the dangers I have raised and warned the Minister about have come to fruition. For example, we are paying through the nose for our oil, gas and power. Despite my best efforts the Government has refused to address my concerns.

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As an elected Member of the Dáil I must act on behalf of my constituents and in the best interests of the Irish nation. The Minister needs to act in the nation's interests, not in the Green Party's interests. I wish to point out that I have asked the Minister numerous times in recent years about the officially commissioned report on security of energy supply. Where is this report and why is it over a year late? We are in an unprecedented crisis and it seems that the Minister is not able to take decisions on the national gas supply due to party politics.

The Minister talks about Connecting Ireland; €350,000 is all that each company will get. In County Cork we will only be able to deliver two services that are there already, not new services. These operators need a 20% decrease. Will the Government give it to them or will it refuse it to rural Ireland and keep it for the capital? That is where the carbon tax of this country is going. It is going to people who stay in Dublin, in the capital but not to the people of rural Ireland.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: There is no need to shout.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am not talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, but to the Minister. I am well able to talk to him and I do not need any lecture from the Deputy.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: There is no need to shout.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am talking to the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can everyone calm down?

Deputy Michael Collins: Talk through the Chair.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Deputy can make his point without shouting.

Deputy Michael Collins: I can make my point without any interference from the Deputy. I did not interfere with her.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Collins and I were neighbours for many years in LH 2000 and I am sure he had the same experience as me. Does the Deputy remember the first day he walked through the gates of Leinster House and getting a tingle in his spine? We all share something in our constitutional and democratic Republic that when one is elected as a Deputy for a constituency one represents all of the people in it. The Deputy represents all of the people in Cork South-West and I represent all of the people of Dublin Bay South, regardless of who they voted for. If they voted for Deputies Andrews or Bacik I still represent them. When we are elected as Deputies we have that tradition that we represent all of the people. If I were to give advice, and I think everyone gets this anyway, when Deputies are elected and are in government, they are not just thinking about everyone in their constituency. They are thinking about every constituency across the country. We all act and serve in the national interest to do our best for all our people. That is the Republic we live in and what the Proclamation tells us.

The report on energy security needs to be concluded quickly. One of the complications is that we have a lot of interest in Cork, as an example, which is looking to see that there is the potential to convert the significant wind energy we have offshore to hydrogen in Cork Harbour, on Whiddy Island, or in Bantry Bay. It is complicated to understand if it is the right investment or what else we need. We will have to conclude that quickly, but we will do it in a way that gives security and looks after the best interests of our people.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What was already post-pandemic inflation has now risen even further as a result of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Key commodity prices are skyrocketing, such as for wheat and palm oil, on the global markets and this will impact on Irish households. Figures released by the Central Statistics Office on the increase in food prices in the past year show that bread has increased by 8%, and this is before the consequences of the war have impacted on the prices on the shelves. Price rises, as the Minister knows, do not affect everybody equally. They hit those on low and middle incomes hardest. It was reported that the Government received a briefing on the potential impact of global price rises on the economy and households. We also know that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine met with the farming sector without any concrete proposals. Will the Minister outline to the Dáil the potential impact of food price rises, which was shared with him? What is the Government's plan to secure our food supply? Finally, what measures will the Government introduce to support households struggling with rising costs?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The energy crisis and food price rises, as mentioned, are at the centre of this. The Deputy is absolutely right that those on the lowest incomes are most at risk and the percentage of their incomes going on basic essentials, such as food and energy bills, puts them at particular risk. It is important that we look at our social welfare system in that regard.

It is very uncertain. We have been looking at inflation rates for the past three months. It was 5.7% in December and then went down to 5.1% in January. My understanding is that, according to the figures release today, the rate was 5.6% for February. It is likely, from what we are seeing because of this war in global food prices going up and increasing energy prices, there will be further pressure. The food issue is particularly serious and grave, particularly for countries in the Middle East and developing countries that are reliant on Ukrainian and Russian grain for their basic daily sustenance and survival needs. First things first, we should be looking to our overseas aid and the Department of Foreign Affairs regarding what we can do to support that.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: When it comes to us at home in regard to agriculture, we will also have to be careful because our system is exposed and at risk, particularly the poultry and pig sectors.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Will the Minister admit that he and the Government have been played for absolute mugs by the major fuel providers in recent days? The financial resolution passed with assent last night by all of us has had zero impact. If Deputies were aon a garage forecourt this morning, as I was, they would have seen that not only did prices not go down, but they had actually gone up. When I inquired as to whether the excise cut had been passed on, the person behind the counter told me that the price of Brent crude oil actually went up last night at the same time. That is untrue but it was what that worker was told by his boss to say, which is a very unfair position to put that worker in. Will the Government agree to call an emergency meeting of all the major fuel providers to discuss this issue? Will it have examine a true price transparency mechanism for fuel, petrol and diesel? Will it examine whether a cap on fuel prices is needed? Will it look at further cutting public transport fares?

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Deputy Eamon Ryan: We are not just in daily contact but in morning, afternoon and evening contact with the fuel supply industry because we have a supply issue as well as a price issue that we have to manage and we will be able to do that. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission will look to make sure with a laser focus that all the proper approaches were taken and that there was not price gouging. It is very complicated because different forecourts have different circumstances. The excise duty applies when the fuel leaves the depot, be it in Dublin, Whitegate, Derry, Shannon, or Galway, not when it is sold at the pump. The relevant excise rate varies depending on when the fuel was purchased and the gap in time. It is also complicated because, as I said earlier, the price on the wholesale market, which tends to have a two- or three-day lag from the retail price, went up €22 on Tuesday and came down by a similar amount on Wednesday.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I acknowledge and commend the Government on the approach it has taken towards the Ukrainian refugees in the humanitarian crisis we are seeing. It is heartbreaking to see the images of women, children and elderly people trying to reach the border and queueing for hours in freezing conditions. I imagine when they get to the border, there is probably a sense of relief but also a sense of fear and sadness regarding what they are leaving behind and what lies ahead. While we have taken a good approach in this country, we have been very passive regarding what has happened on the ground in Poland. Will the Government send buses and planes to make sure that people who are coming to Ireland are supported in getting here and that we take as much stress as possible out of that journey for them and that we are there for them? That is a simple measure we could take. Will the Minister do that?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The best way we can do that, as I said earlier in response to another question, is by working with the Polish Government. We really have to follow its lead.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Germany sent 300-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister without interruption please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes, but we will respond and co-ordinate with what the Polish say because the last thing they want is an *ad hoc* approach and a variety of different actors coming in where they have to manage and marshal what they are responsible for. It is through working with the European Commission and the Polish Government, in giving a co-ordinated response, that we will be most effective.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Will the Minister offer that?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Absolutely, but we will not send Irish trucks or buses in an unco-ordinated way that is not at their behest.

Deputy Mick Barry: Bringing 100,000 Ukrainian people to Ireland and helping them start new lives is not an easy task for any government. It is much tougher, of course, for the refugees and it is the responsibility of the Government to remove unnecessary obstacles they may face. What steps will the Government take to ensure their qualifications are recognised and they can work here at a level for which they are qualified? What steps will it take to ensure their social insurance contributions can be taken into account here, given the difficulties that will invariably exist in accessing details? The Minister might comment on housing arrangements. Clearly, the market playbook is not going to work in that regard. Last but not least, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland constantly highlight examples of unscrupulous employers who exploit workers precisely because they are vulnerable. Workers who do not speak English are particularly vulnerable.

In-person English classes for all refugees are needed, which is something the State does not even provide currently. Does the Minister agree and if so, what steps will he take to achieve it?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We do not know the exact number of refugees that will come. We do not know the duration or future path of this war. It is likely that many refugees will remain in countries close to their homeland with a view to going back. We have experience in successfully managing workers and others coming from the new accession countries in the early and middle part of the previous decade and, therefore, we should use that experience. The Minister for Social Protection has made it clear that, on arrival, those workers will receive all the support available from the State, including a personal public service number, access to relevant social welfare schemes, and full health supports, as well as the basic welcome of being fed and given the sense that they are in a secure place. We will do that. We have to see how the numbers evolve but we will make sure they are welcomed in a proper way.

Deputy Verona Murphy: To follow on from Deputy Barry, for two years the Minister's Department has been dealing with the recognition of Ukrainian licences through the Road Safety Authority, RSA. Unfortunately, we are at a stalling point where the RSA says that it has not completed the due diligence on whether a Ukrainian licence can be accepted here on a par with an EU licence. Countries in the EU that have qualified the Ukrainian licence as being comparable are Italy and Portugal. I ask that the Minister instruct the RSA to complete its due diligence with those European countries. We must give these refugees every opportunity. Unless the Government is going to house all the refugees in the city where there is public transport, it is going to put them at a huge disadvantage in the country and rural Ireland. I heard the Minister mention caravan parks, which are generally in quite remote areas where there is no public transport. These people must be able to avail of transport and be in the same position as other residents.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have within promised legislation the Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021. In amendments we are seeking to introduce on Committee Stage are provisions that will help us on the licensing and recognition of licences from a variety of different locations. I look forward to discussing such arrangements the Deputy talked about when that Bill comes back from Committee Stage, which I hope will be soon.

Deputy Michael Collins: Approval was granted for the proposed building of a new fire station for Clonakilty town, which was announced by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, in 2020. This fire station was supposed to coincide with the building of Kanturk and Macroom fire stations, which are at this stage nearly finished.

The town of Clonakilty had to wait for years for approval of this fire station. It serves a huge population in Clonakilty, Timoleague, Barryroe and Courtmacsherry on one side and Pike and Rosscarbery on the other. The people of Clonakilty and its surrounds, as well as the fire brigade staff, deserve to be treated with some respect. They are sick of announcement after announcement and nothing happening on the ground while other fire station buildings announced at the same time have almost been completed. Can the Minister tell me today why the people of Clonakilty are being treated like second-class citizens by this Government? When will the building of the new fire station commence in Clonakilty?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: God help us should a fire take place in Clonakilty. I will make sure to discuss the matter with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and ask him to report back to the Deputy directly on the potential progress of that station.

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Deputy Thomas Pringle: We saw a small acknowledgement of the cost-of-living crisis from the Government. In reality, however, it will not even begin to alleviate the pain and suffering I am seeing on the ground in County Donegal. We need action on rents too, and one aspect of that is the housing assistance payment, HAP.

HAP limits have not increased since 2016. Rents have increased significantly in that time, however. In 2021 alone, the average rent in County Donegal increased by almost 20%. I know from talking to people on the ground, such as the Donegal Travellers Project, that this is a continuing trend in 2022. The HAP rate per week is a miserly €64.51 for a single adult in shared accommodation, rising to €121 for a family of five. Most people are making significant additional payments to their landlords and, therefore, live in poverty, the alternative being homelessness. There is no hope of getting a house either because of the Government's policies. Will the Government increase the HAP limits to reflect reality or, at the very least, instruct local authorities to grant the maximum flexibility of 20% in all cases?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My understanding is that there is provision within the HAP arrangements for increased flexibility under certain circumstances, and that is the appropriate mechanism of dealing with the particular circumstances rather than a universal increase.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: The risk of flooding for several large swathes of County Dublin and other coastal communities is a genuine environmental threat of which I know the Minister is acutely aware. I am sure he is also aware of the joint report on the status of Ireland's climate, which was produced in 2021, that shows sea levels have risen by 2 mm to 3 mm per year since the 1990s.

Will the Minister provide an update on the multiannual investment for flood relief schemes contained in the programme for Government? Will he support using such flood defences for the purpose of completing the coastal route of the Sutton to Sandycove cycle path, which he, I and others have long supported and campaigned for.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We should integrate coastal flood protection. We have met and discussed the particular example given by the Deputy at great length. It is a particularly sensitive habitat. It is an important special area of conservation. Dublin Bay eco biosphere is a United Nations-recognised important and sensitive site, therefore, it would not be done quickly. I believe we will have to do other measures in the interim while we go through the sensitive planning process. There is an opportunity, however, and not just in the Dublin Bay area. When we go further south, particularly along the coast from Bray to Greystones and further south to County Wicklow, there are huge issues of coastal erosion on the rail track and a huge requirement for coastal protection, which could be combined with greenways or other projects.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Petrol dealers are directly challenging the authority of this Government by not passing on the full discount to consumers, in many cases. The Government needs to show them its teeth. Instead of soft words and telephone calls, we need to ensure there are dawn raids by gardaí and that the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, enters these companies.

They are directly challenging the Government's authority by pocketing this money. People in this country need to flood the CCPC with complaints because it will only act if it has those complaints. There is a war situation right around Europe. If the petrol retailers get away with it, God knows who the next crowd will be. The Minister must act to protect the ordinary people

of this country. He must ensure the authority of this Government and insist the reduction is passed on to them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My understanding is that the CCPC will be issuing a statement shortly on this issue because it is leading to much public-----

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I was in contact with the CCPC today and it could not give me any comfort on that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy might just let me answer that. It will be issuing a communication, which is important, to allay public fears. If the Deputy has any particular evidence or examples-----

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I will send it in.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----he might direct them to the CCPC as well as our Department and we will follow up.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I again want to bring up the issue of Carlinn Hall, which is a communal district heating system. It was meant to be biofuel but, unfortunately, has ended up being gas.

Domestic users are supplied by Frontline Energy, which is supplied as a corporate entity from Energia and is, therefore, charged at corporate rates. There is no protection for these domestic users. It is an utterly inefficient system; 100 units of gas to gain 50 units of heat does not work in any way, shape or form.

A wider issue needs to be dealt with. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, stated that it has no responsibility in this regard. These people are paying bills upwards of between €300 to €800 and more, however, having paid much less in previous times. It is an issue of which the Minister is well aware. He was at the launch of this facility in a previous lifetime. We need a solution.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am aware of this situation and we have had lengthy discussions about it. The Deputy is absolutely right to point it out; it is a critical issue.

The underlying problem is that oil prices have gone up but the price of gas has gone from approximately 50p per therm two years ago - it tends to be priced in sterling - to just under £5 per therm. That is putting a lot of projects under pressure, be it gas-fired haulage or this sort of district heating system. I can see there is a very specific problem. I will ask the Department and through it have with the CRU whatever discussions are possible to help. We want to encourage district heating. We want to make district heating-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There are a number of these throughout the State.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There have been many challenges over the past number of years and more to come. The biggest, in fact, are yet to come.

I ask the Minister to address the issue of the European Union-wide response to the issues and challenges we are facing now. Will he ensure that security of the supply of food and energy, and accommodation for refugees and our own people, are the main challenges that must be dealt with? It is better to have a unified approach than everybody having their own individual

answers. Will the Minister use his influence with his European colleagues for that purpose?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely agree with the Deputy that our strength of response must be a unified one. I am sure the Taoiseach will carry out exactly that at the European Council today and tomorrow. He did us proud with that initial response in the Thursday night meeting of the Council in which we were very strong in the response in terms of sanctions and other approaches.

I will make one background point if I may. This is an example of why this is an underlying energy issue. We are providing €10 million in humanitarian aid but prior to the prices going up, Europe was spending €350 million per day importing Russian coal, oil and gas. That is the underlying strength that goes from Europe to Russia. There was an immediate humanitarian response but the main response from Europe will be, as the European Commission wrote this week, that we rid ourselves of the dependence on Russian gas by the end of this decade. That is the centre of our response.

Deputy James Lawless: I am sure the Minister will be aware of the awful affliction that is Huntington's disease. It is a rare disease but in actual fact, it is all too common and extremely serious. It affects not only the individuals but their families in terms of care. As a genetic disease, it also tends to run in families.

I acknowledge the work in my constituency of councillors Bernard Caldwell and Íde Cussen, who have been to the fore in campaigning on this issue and have brought it to my attention on a number of occasions. A Huntington's disease support group has been formed, bringing together key clinicians and families who have been affected.

1 o'clock

They are looking for co-ordinated support services. They have two asks in particular. The first is to establish a working group under the joint auspices of the National Dementia Office, NDO, and the integrated care programme, if possible. Separate to that is to provide funding for supports for dedicated Huntington's disease nurses, ideally one in Dublin and one on the west coast, to support the immediate care that they need. I know that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has been working with the group. I think that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has also. There are two specific requests that they would put to the Government. I would appreciate any comment on that.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I recently met with the Huntington's group and I met with some of the consultants who provide care for them. The office of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, was also involved in the meeting. We are currently working with them and we are looking at the recommendations they have made.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I fully agree with the reply of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to Deputy Durkan on energy security. What steps have his Department now taken to expedite this strategy for floating offshore wind and to bring the reality of that sooner? The legislation on maritime planning has passed. There is an opportunity for offshore fixed wind in my own constituency in Dún Laoghaire. I want to be clear that I support that for a whole range of different reasons but, primarily, for energy security and for the climate. There is also a tension about biodiversity and questions are being asked about that. Would the Minister like to comment on that?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The development of renewable offshore wind is the huge potential development for our country. It is Ardnacrusha to the power of ten in its significance, scale and importance. It will start in the coming days and in a short number of weeks. We will start the process of what is known as the relevant projects. These are the projects that have been in planning for over ten years by getting foreshore licences and other planning systems in place. They are largely on the east coast. There is one in the west. There is one in Dublin waters. That action process will kick in in the latter part of this year. That is phase one of this development.

Phase two will follow shortly afterwards. We will go further to southern and western waters where we will start to look at how we can develop the likes of hydrogen supplies on the back of this. Phase three is the big one. All this has to be delivered, in my mind, within the lifetime of this Government. This includes the contracts and the completion of those auction processes.

Phase three is the plan for the future energy and economy of this country. We will tap into our sea area, which is ten times larger than our land area, particularly to the north and west. We will get something like 30 GW, which is six or seven times the amount of power we are using at the moment, as the founding stone of our economy. This Government has to deliver all three phases in the next three years.

An Ceann Comhairle: We got the message. Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question is very specific in relation to decarbonisation zones. This was action 165 under the climate action plan. A message went out all the local authorities to identify an area. I understand 29 out of 31 local authorities have responded, including Galway City Council. It did everything right. It submitted the application. It identified the west side as a decarbonization zone. Yet, almost a year later, the application sits in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with no approval having been given. I am told by the Department that it is awaiting guidelines from the Minister, so I am delighted that he is answering this question. When will the guidelines be published? Furthermore, I am really worried not just about this delay, but about the further delays that there might be, as they are dependent on the action plans which each local authority has to produce. That is sometime in the far, distant future.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will follow up on the specifics of that. I do not have specific timeline here. I will return to my Department and revert to the Deputy as soon as possible about when those guidelines can be delivered. I want to make sure that we act and deliver at that local level. I will come back to the Deputy as fast as I can.

Deputy Brian Leddin: The war has brought escalating oil and gas prices and a consequent cost of living challenge here in Ireland. It makes sense that we should reduce our gas and oil use for that reason alone. It also makes sense to reduce radically our fossil fuel use because money spent on oil and gas in Ireland and across Europe, whether it is spent by individuals or by the State, goes towards Vladimir Putin's war machine. That machine is slaughtering innocent Ukrainians at this moment. Reports suggest the money flowing to Russia from Europe could be up to €1 billion per day and it may be more. As the Minister said himself in response to Deputy Durkan, who is sitting beside me, money that is being spent here in Ireland on oil and gas is giving Putin the power to wage war on an innocent country. That is unconscionable. Does the Government intend to introduce a range of emergency measures, in addition to the measures that have already been introduced, not alone to save on costs, but also to stop funding Putin's war on the Ukrainian people?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said to Deputy Doherty and others earlier, we have engaged in a series of measures. While the war has been happening for the recent two weeks, gas plants started to restrict the gas last year. This has been ongoing for a year. It is among a number of other reasons gas prices have become high. We will go further in the coming days, when the SEAI will come out with a public information campaign to help people understand what they could do and what efficiency measures we could introduce so that we keep the money here at home.

We will go further within the coming three or four weeks, where the SEAI, my Department and other Government Departments will come out with further measures - we discussed this in the Oireachtas committee the other day - the likes of time-of-day pricing, which might allow householders go further to save money and also to save the use of fossil fuels. Those sorts of practical measures are next up. We will have to go further.

The Government is also looking, as we said at the Oireachtas committee the other day, at task forces to accelerate the delivery of renewable heating, sustainable transport, offshore wind among a number of other things. There will be different Departments, different agencies and outside expertise coming together to set the sorts of teams we had during Covid-19. This is so we can be fast in making the changes that we need to be made.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I want to raise the matter of the N2 Clontibret to the Border road project and the concerns of Monaghan County Council around it. It has now become clear that the level of funding available within the first half of the national development plan is not sufficient to progress this important infrastructural project through planning and design. As the Minister is aware, it is part of the same project, which is the Ardee to Castleblayney road scheme. It does not make any sense that the two are divided up and that they have been split into two different projects. It makes no sense that Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, would not treat them as one project. Ultimately, it is about safety. In my mind, the two should be done in parallel, together. Can the Minister give us clarity around this? Members are seeking a meeting with the Minister around this. I would very much appreciate if he would facilitate that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am familiar with the road and with the project. From my understanding, we had a meeting last week with some Deputies from different parts of the country, in the south east and in the midlands regarding the N24 and N4. There were similar circumstances. The project did not have immediate additional funding to go to the next stage in the planning process. There is a difference with the N2. As I understand it, it had an original preferred route. Then there was a further revised route. It is not the case that there is frozen land and of looking at a variety of different road options. This makes it slightly different to those examples. There is an underlying issue. We have a €35 billion budget for transport in the NDP, but we have €70 billion in projects. That was before construction inflation kicked in in the last year. It will therefore not be possible for us in this decade to progress all the projects which are in the planning system or which are even within the NDP. I will continue to liaise with the Deputies and with the TII about what might be possible. Nothing has been ruled out, but we have a limited budget. We have to prioritise for bypasses and for bringing town centre first life back into town centres. I know the Deputy will also support that.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I want to raise the issue of the difficulties patients are facing in trying to access dental care through the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS. I have been contacted by many people in my own constituency. They are finding it extremely difficult to find a dental practice that is taking part in the scheme. I contacted the HSE for a list of dentists

who are participating in this scheme in County Galway. I received a list of 24 in total. However, after contacting each of these practices, I understand that only 14 of those are participating in the scheme and only ten are taking on new patients through this scheme. Can the Minister tell us how often this information is being collected? What is the Department of Health doing to ensure the information is being updated to reflect the reality? Without that information, it is proving even more difficult for people to access the dental care that they need.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank Deputy Mairéad Farrell for her question. This has been raised many times over the last few months. The Government is aware of the importance of people's oral health and the need for them to have access to a dentist in the area in which they live.

I have an update. The Department of Health and the HSE officials met with representatives of the Irish Dental Association on 2 March, which was last week. At that meeting, the Department and the HSE proposed to increase fees across a number of items and proposed the reintroduction of scale and polish. These are interim steps. The Minister for Health hopes that the proposals that were presented to the IDA at the meeting on 2 March will stabilise and lead to an increase in the number of contractors in the DTSS. The Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has allocated an extra €10 million this year to get this over the line. This is on top of the €56 million that is already in the budget. We are conscious of this and hope to get a resolution as soon as possible.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It would be nice to believe the Government could absorb all the energy impact or that energy companies could be forced to absorb it but, in a small, open economy such as ours, that is fairyland talk. Could we see an immediate activation of economic resilience measures, among them an activation of the 1 million smart meters, only 40,000 of which have been activated; reasserting remote working as a priority; tackling the supply chain inefficiency that sees 25% of our food wasted; promoting vehicle sharing, given more than 90% of vehicles are idle every day; implementing lean energy; and activating 90,000 vacant homes? We have measures within our reach that we could work on immediately, and I urge the Government to develop a strategy in that area.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I might pick up on two examples the Deputy mentioned, which I very much agree we could, and should, advance. He mentioned a smart metering programme. As I said earlier in response to Deputy Leddin, the Oireachtas committee a few days ago discussed the idea of time-of-day pricing, whereby it would be possible to shift the demand. For example, if there is a load for the washing machine or the dryer, the power could be less expensive later in the day when there is less demand for fossil fuels. That is one measure which, if we work with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, and the Department, we could accelerate and introduce as an emergency response. The Deputy is correct in that regard.

He went on to mention food waste. This week, the Cabinet agreed the general scheme of the circular economy Bill, which has undergone pre-legislative scrutiny and we now have to implement. It will implement the waste action plan, which recommended 200 actions. It relates to reducing not just fuels but also materials. Being efficient in everything we do is going to give us protection. Included in the Bill will be a new food waste strategy. We will really double down to make sure we do not waste food. At a time food is expensive and the world is at risk of running short of grain and other basic supplies, that is exactly the sort of measure we should accelerate.

10 March 2022

Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: I advise the House that yesterday, the motion to refer this Bill to the select committee was not moved.

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

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Proceeds of Crime (Gross Human Rights Abuses) Bill 2020 [Private Members]: Referral to Select Committee

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice pursuant to Standing Order 95(3)(a) and 178(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.13 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.53 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.13 p.m. and resumed at 1.53 p.m.

Messages from Select Committees

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Select Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has completed its consideration of the Birth Information and Tracing Bill 2022, and has made amendments thereto.

The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the Patient Safety (Notifiable Patient Safety Incidents) Bill 2019, and has made amendments thereto.

Estimates for Public Services 2021: Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy John Lahart): The Select Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2022: Vote 33 - Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

The main purpose of this Bill is to provide for the introduction of caps on the cost of borrowing under a moneylending agreement.

While the moneylending industry has been contracting in recent years, it remains an important source of credit for a significant number of people. To give Deputies a sense of the market, according to Central Bank figures, at the end of 2020, the moneylending sector had over 283,000 customers with €141 million in outstanding loans.

Research carried out in 2020 shows that the customers of moneylenders are more likely to be women, to have dependent children and to be in their late 30s to early 50s where child-rearing is most expensive. The Bill will serve these people well at a time when the cost of living is going up. It will do this by reducing the cost of credit on new moneylending loans and by improving the regulatory framework to modernise the way providers operate. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission has been supportive of the Bill and the benefits it brings for consumers.

The Bill is the result of a detailed policy review within the Department of Finance, which included a public consultation in 2019. The report, Moneylending: Policy Proposals, was published by the Minister for Finance last July along with the heads of this Bill.

The main proposal is the introduction of an interest rate cap on moneylender loans. The feedback from the public consultation on the issue was that the introduction of a cap would protect low-income households who avail of moneylender loans, reduce the cost of credit for customers of moneylender loans and reduce the number of customers in default, and align Ireland with other EU countries that have an interest rate cap on short-term credit in place.

The Consumer Credit Act 1995 provides the regulatory regime for moneylenders. It is overseen by the Central Bank and it has regard to the high cost and high risk nature of this form of low volume credit.

Under the Consumer Credit Act 1995, the Central Bank may refuse to grant a licence to a moneylender if, in its opinion, the cost of credit to be charged is excessive or the terms and conditions of loans are unfair. As the Consumer Credit Act 1995 does not define “excessive”, the Central Bank, which took over responsibility for moneylenders in 2003, has continued to license moneylenders at the maximum rate as per their last licence issued by the former Director of Consumer Affairs, which was the previous licensing authority. While Ireland does not currently have a statutory interest rate cap, it has a *de facto* cap of 188.45% annual percentage rate, APR, excluding collection charges, and 287.72% APR, including collection charges.

2 o'clock

This rate is too high and it is important that this legislation progresses to introduce a statutory cap to deliver immediate reductions, which can be reviewed over time. I reiterate that, at the moment, the APR can be as high as 188%, excluding collection charges, and 288%, including collection charges. Every Member must support the proposal to bring that to an end and to do so swiftly. The highest rates at which the caps can be set are set down in the Bill. I will

discuss the different specific rates in a moment. These ceilings allow for a step-wise approach to be taken in time to come to further reduce the caps.

While lower interest rates are, of course, the preference for consumers, there is a need for balance in setting the ceilings to ensure this regulated sector remains viable and consumers do not face the difficulty of having to go without credit where providers leave the market either suddenly or *en masse*. When this legislation is enacted, borrowers of the most popular products should see immediate reductions of approximately 13% in the interest charged. This is a real reduction in the cost of credit for consumers. It also gives the sector time to operationally adapt to lower revenue from each borrower.

I thank the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, for its consideration of the general scheme. Officials in my Department have reviewed the report prepared by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service as part of the pre-legislative scrutiny process and that feedback has been taken on board in the drafting process, where appropriate.

The Bill contains 15 sections, which I will run through briefly. Section 1 sets out that the Consumer Credit Act 1995 is the Act which is amended by the Bill. Part VIII of that Act contains provisions dedicated to moneylending.

Section 2 is an amendment of section 2 of the 1995 Act relating to terms used in the Act. The section provides for the terms “moneylender” and “moneylending” to be replaced by the terms “high cost credit provider” and “high cost credit”. This language will help to differentiate licensed providers more clearly from unlicensed ones. Using the term “high cost credit provider” means that everyone will understand that when they go to such a place, they are paying a high cost. In some people’s mind, there might not be a clear distinction between legal and illegal moneylenders that operate in the marketplace and, therefore, it is important to use different terminology to show people they are dealing with a high cost credit provider.

Section 3 is an amendment of section 12 of the 1995 Act and deals with offences. The section introduces two new offences. These apply where a high cost credit provider grants a loan with a duration over 52 weeks, as per section 94A, with an interest rate over the set caps.

Section 4 adds a definition for “nominal rate” to the Act of 1995, as this is the type of interest rate cap being placed on running accounts. A running account operates similarly to a tied credit card and is a product sometimes offered by catalogue companies.

Section 5 modernises and streamlines the licensing regime in a number of ways. It removes the requirement for providers to register in each District Court area in which they wish to operate and allows them to operate nationally instead. This should go some way towards improving competition in the sector and increase the number of providers available to people in different parts of the country. It extends the licensing period from 12 months to five years. It updates the licensing process so that where a provider’s proposed interest rates are above the rates set by the Minister at any time, the Central Bank can refuse to grant a licence. That is very important. Up to now, some providers may not have registered in every District Court area in the country and instead have cherry-picked certain urban areas. By taking away the restriction on the need to register with every District Court in the country, when somebody has a licence, he or she can lend money anywhere. That will increase competition in areas where there may not have been the full range of competition up to now.

Section 6 inserts a new section, 94A, into the 1995 Act to require that cash loans will not be granted for a period greater than 52 weeks. The longer one is paying interest, the more of it one will pay. There is a strong argument then for banning high cost credit agreements of more than a year's duration because a key rationale of high cost borrowing is that such borrowing is necessary because of short-term circumstances and there may not be an alternative source of borrowing available at the time. That is the reason we have a limit of 52 weeks, which is one year, for such loans.

Section 7 requires providers to include the words 'high cost credit agreement' prominently on the agreement. This will ensure consumers are clearly aware of the nature of the product they are being offered.

Section 8 is the most fundamental provision in terms of reform. This section inserts a new section, 98A, into the 1995 Act to provide for the setting of a maximum interest rate that a high cost credit provider can charge for both cash loans and running accounts. Crucially, it will be an offence under section 12 of the 1995 Act for a provider to grant credit at a rate in excess of the maximum set at that time. Under this new section, the Minister for Finance may, following consultation with the Central Bank, make regulations providing for the maximum rate of interest at which a moneylender can provide credit. The Minister must have regard to a number of relevant factors when making such regulations. These are the impact on competition in the high cost credit sector; the impact on the supply of credit in the high cost credit sector; the average rates of interest offered to customers in the high cost credit sector and any trends in such interest rates; and where setting the proposed rate would reduce the supply of credit in the high cost credit sector, the impact of such a reduction on financial inclusion. Many of the people concerned are in a financially vulnerable position and only have recourse to high cost lenders.

In making the regulations, the Minister must also adhere to the following parameters: in respect of cash loans, the maximum rate of simple interest chargeable per week can only be set at a rate less than or equal to 1%, and the maximum rate of simple interest chargeable per year can only be set at a rate less than or equal to 48%; and in respect of a running account, under a high cost credit agreement, the maximum rate of monthly nominal interest can only be set at a rate less than or equal to 2.83%. A two-pronged approach is being recommended, with separate maximums for cash loans and running accounts. Using a simple interest arrangement for the interest rate caps will simplify the product and enhance transparency. Borrowers will be able to easily evaluate whether the interest rate they are being asked to pay for a loan is in excess of the statutory weekly or annual caps.

Different approaches are recommended for cash loans and loans provided on a running account basis because, in simple terms, running accounts operate similarly to a credit card account in that one can have a credit limit and can make purchases up to that limit and, therefore, the credit one owes could be the result of several purchases over a lengthy period, less the monthly payments. Applying term limits and simple interest rate caps to each purchase that ends up in a single outstanding balance on an account would be too difficult and would likely be unworkable. In addition, it might not be capable of being understood by people in a vulnerable position who are seeking the credit in the first place.

Following its enactment, the Minister for Finance will make regulations setting the cap at the maximum level allowed for under the legislation. These interest rate caps can be varied downwards in the future by regulation, if circumstances and consideration of factors outlined above warrant it. The Central Bank will also be required to prepare a report within three years

of the interest rate caps coming into operation.

Section 9 concerns the requirement to maintain a repayment book. This has been amended to include the option of maintaining an online version of a repayment book if the borrower requests it. This is intended as a modernisation of the product and to provide borrowers with greater options, where they could access their payment record in a straightforward way on their mobile phone. It is very important that people will be able to access the details of the repayment on their mobile phone through this requirement where we provide in the legislation for a digital option.

Section 10 amends section 102 of the 1995 Act to include collection charges on the list of charges which are not allowed. Moneylenders that currently charge home collection charges tend to charge a specified amount for every €1 borrowed, with the highest currently authorised charge standing at 14% per €1 borrowed. Moneylenders are in favour of retaining the home collection model because it reduces the occurrence of missed payments and bad debts. Some consumers like the convenience of home collection based on previous Central Bank reports. Several options were explored in respect of collection charges, from leaving the system as is, through introducing a cap per €1 borrowed, to abolishing charges in their entirety.

Abolishing collection charges has many advantages, including the fact the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that providers can implement remote payment systems and move away from an archaic form of collecting loan repayments, if necessary. Therefore, in light of these recent developments in the industry, the abolishment of home collection charges is proposed in the Bill. That is important. We are abolishing the charge that has arisen heretofore relating to home collections and home visits. The existing prohibition on all other charges should continue and this change should encourage the digitalisation of the industry, which could lead to the home collection model being naturally replaced by remote or online repayment options.

Section 11 deletes the previous provision regarding collection charges, which are no longer allowed. The Bill does not abolish the practice of home collection but merely the right to charge separately for it. Moneylenders choosing to continue the practice will have to accommodate the overheads associated with this in their revenue model, which can only be consistent with the rate of interest allowable in the legislation.

Section 12 amends the 1995 Act by inserting a new section 114A, which allows the Minister to require the bank to collect and publish non-personal data on the sector.

Section 13 sets down transitional arrangements for those who have moneylender licences issued under section 93 of the Act before the passage of the Bill. Due to the changes in terminology from “moneylender” to “high cost credit provider” in the legislation, these transitional arrangements ensure that the appropriate provisions are applied to existing moneylending licence holders for the remainder of the term of validity of those licences.

Section 14 provides for consequential amendments to the 1995 Act and other enactments arising from the renaming of moneylenders as “high cost credit providers” and the renaming of moneylending as “high cost credit”.

Section 15 is a standard provision. It provides for the Minister for Finance to commence different provisions of the Bill on different dates.

I look forward to hearing the views of Deputies on this very pertinent Bill. It will signifi-

cantly improve consumer protection for those borrowing from the high cost credit sector. It is my intention to seek an early date for consideration of the Bill by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach and to constructively engage with Deputies on any proposed amendments. There may be Government amendments at that stage to ensure the smoothest transition to the new regime following further engagement with the Central Bank and the Attorney General's office. I thank the Acting Chairman and look forward to hearing the views of Deputies.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. The issue of moneylenders has concerned me for many years. Indeed, it is more than nine years ago now since I accompanied a group of whistleblowers, people who were employed by the largest moneylender in the State at the time, to bring evidence to the Central Bank relating to the practices of moneylenders in this State. The information on those practices we gave at the time resulted in an investigation and a fine because of what moneylenders were doing. I have introduced legislation to cap the interest rates moneylenders can charge and have campaigned for changes to the law for several years now.

The permission for ultra-high interest rates charged by moneylenders is immoral and unethical. Had moneylenders never existed, nobody in this House could ever justify passing legislation allowing lenders to charge the level of interest they do, but that is precisely what the law does. It permits moneylenders to charge rates of interest that trap vulnerable borrowers in a cycle of debt. At present, under the law and under this and previous Governments, moneylenders licensed by the Central Bank are permitted to charge an APR of up to 187% on loans. That increases to 288% once collection charges are included. When compared to more affordable sources of credit, such as credit unions that have an APR charge of no more than 12.67%, there are no grounds whatsoever on which such high rates can be justified.

In 2013, the Central Bank published a report that found typical moneylender customers are predominantly female and from lower income backgrounds. The excessive rates charged by moneylenders risk driving vulnerable borrowers such as these into an unsustainable and vicious cycle of debt. In many cases, they already have. Imposing a cap on the cost of credit that moneylenders can charge is first and foremost a moral issue and one that can and should be addressed. Other stakeholders and I have been raising this social justice issue for several years now, with our calls often falling on deaf ears. It is clear a conservative reflex exists in the Department of Finance that gives focus to issues of economic and financial stability but gives too little regard to crucial issues of consumer protection. The imposition of an interest rate cap has been batted away by Minister after Minister, and the Department, for several years on spurious grounds, especially when so many other European countries have interest rate restrictions in place. In Spain, this is on the grounds that ultra-high interest rates charged are excessive; in Finland, it is on the grounds that they are unconscionable; and, in Germany, because they lack moral legitimacy. All those assessments are correct.

We should not allow an immoral financial regime that damages the economic interests of vulnerable borrowers to persist. In 2018, the landmark report published by University College Cork, UCC, and authored by Dr. Mary Faherty, Dr. Olive McCarthy and Dr. Noreen Byrne found that 21 of 28 EU member states had some form of interest rate restriction in place. Ironically, they found that while such a restriction was in place in this jurisdiction, it is the interest rate cap of 1% imposed on credit unions, with no such restriction in place on high cost moneylenders. The report, which was funded by the Central Bank and the Social Finance Foundation, was "to examine the extent and variety of interest rate restrictions within the EU and further

afield...[and to assess] the appropriateness of introducing such a restriction in the Irish market given its specific circumstances and financial environment". The authors of the report made a number of recommendations, including the adoption by government of a policy that prohibits excessive rates of interest, in the interests of fairness to the most vulnerable in society, by introducing a restriction on the cost of credit. In short, they called for a cap on interest rates. That was four years ago. How many loans have been issued, how many families have fallen into poverty and how many other people have fallen into the clutches of high cost credit as the Minister of State, his colleagues and those in Fine Gael in the previous Government sat idly by?

In the same year, I introduced the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2018 to place a cap on the cost of credit moneylenders could charge. That legislation reached Committee Stage yesterday in the finance committee and, despite years of the Government blocking its progress for reasons that were party political rather than in the interest of consumers, the Government rejected interest rate restrictions on moneylenders' loans based on arguments that are now, in effect, redundant. The most popular argument was that the cap on interest rates would lead to moneylenders fleeing the market and borrowers being forced into the clutches of illegal moneylenders. I will make two points on this. First, the biggest moneylender by some way, Provident, left the market last year. The Government and this Minister were so concerned about this, and about the risk of borrowers moving to illegal moneylenders, that they did not even bother to offer any advice or guidance to Provident borrowers. It was shameful, disgraceful and a dereliction of their duty that there was nothing whatsoever. Second, the Government has been slow, even obstructive, in enabling credit unions to step forward and offer a credible alternative to moneylenders.

I will now turn to the provisions in the Bill that Sinn Féin welcomes. We support many provisions in this legislation, in particular the separation of home collection moneylenders from catalogue moneylenders. We support the elimination of collection charges for home collection loans, which is a proposal we brought forward under the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2018 and which was recommended by the Social Finance Foundation. We welcome the use of a simple interest rate rather than APR for home collection loans. We are aware of the challenges posed by APR as its meaning and application varies widely based on the loan term. We also welcome the proposed term limit of 12 months for home collection loans - we ask for further justification of 12 months as the term limit chosen - and we welcome the provisions that give the Minister the ability to amend rates further through regulation.

However, I will now turn to the biggest weakness in the Bill and what this Bill is supposed to be all about. It is the proposed interest rate cap, which will allow moneylenders to continue to charge rates of interest that are excessive, immoral and unjustifiable. That is shameful. The interest rate cap proposed under section 8 is extremely limited with no concrete commitment to a reduced cap in the years ahead. The Government proposes an interest rate cap based on simple interest of 1% per week up to a maximum of 48% per annum. Let us flesh this out properly. At present, on a cash loan of €1,000 a typical moneylender can charge interest of €560. That is extortion. In contrast, a credit union would charge interest of €60 on the same loan amount. Under this legislation, the Government proposes that moneylenders in the future will be able to charge €480 on a €1,000 cash loan. That is still extortion. As the Social Finance Foundation told the finance committee during pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill, permitting organisations to charge €480 interest on a 12-month €1,000 loan is simply wrong. The Minister should not be bringing this Bill to the House. It is not what is needed. It is wrong. Yet that is what this legislation will do. It imposes a cap that is modest at best and immoral at worst.

In contrast the interest rate cap that I proposed at the finance committee yesterday would initially restrict interest that could be charged on €1,000 loan to €360 and further down to €180 after a period of three years. This tapered interest rate cap would be meaningful. It would drive down an excessive interest rate charge by moneylenders and would protect vulnerable customers from exploitation into vicious cycles of debt.

Sinn Féin will table amendments to deliver that more ambitious interest rate restriction on Committee Stage and we ask the Government to work with us to achieve a meaningful cap to protect borrowers. I am not convinced whatsoever, despite the words of the Minister of State, that he will work with us because he absolutely gutted the Bill before the finance committee yesterday. That is the reality. The Government does not want to work with the Opposition. It wants to do as little as possible and leave interest rates immorally high.

There are many provisions of this legislation that I and my colleagues in Sinn Féin welcome. They include the separation of cash loans from running accounts, the restriction of cash loans terms to 12 months, and the ability of the Minister to further restrict interest rates at a future date.

Stakeholders, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, MABS, the Social Finance Foundation and the UCC academics who authored the landmark 2018 report, have been calling for a cap on moneylender interest rates for some time. It has been for too long. I and my party have been campaigning on this for years. The key issue is putting a hard cap in place on the interest rate that moneylenders are permitted to charge. Put simply, the interest rate cap in this Bill is not ambitious; it is modest. It will allow moneylenders to continue charging rates of interest that are excessive, immoral and will lock borrowers into continuing cycles of debt. It permits a practice to continue that is simply unacceptable.

The provision with respect to the interest rate restriction is window dressing. Sinn Féin will table amendments on Committee Stage to put in place an initial and then further interest rate cap that will reduce the cost of credit to levels that we can morally stand over. Financial inclusion and protecting vulnerable consumers from immoral credit provision is an imperative for this Dáil. We will continue to work to further that objective.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: All of us will be aware from our work in our constituencies and from our clinics that the most vulnerable in our society often rely on moneylenders. As a result, they lose large amounts and pay large sums attempting to repay these loans. We have all heard horror stories of people stuck in that cycle. It is welcome that we are here today to try to make some effort on this. However, the Bill is a poor cousin of my colleague, Deputy Doherty's, Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2018. It is something that the Deputy has campaigned on for some time. He has really shone a light on the matter. It is unfortunate that this Bill is weaker, watered-down version of his Bill because the situation is at crisis point. The rising cost of living, including fuel, is severely impacting on ordinary working people who will increasingly be pushed into borrowing money in an attempt to put food on the table and keep the lights on. As Deputy Doherty outlined, the differences in the two Bills are clear. We have to understand that those who use moneylenders are the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Much of the time they are locked out of the normal banking system and pushed towards moneylenders as a consequence. They can end up clocking up vast amounts in interest. That is why Sinn Féin introduced its own Bill, which would have limited interest rates to three times the market average, much less than that in the Government Bill. This is unfortunate.

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When we do not deal with these issues head on and in the best way possible it means the most vulnerable will go further into debt. They will incur higher fees and default rates will increase leading to more misery for our constituents.

It is a missed opportunity. Sometimes it feels as though this Government never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. The change to how moneylenders operate in this State should have been made years ago. It should have happened when Deputy Doherty and Sinn Féin introduced his Bill. We cannot have a situation of dither, dally and delay; we need action. It is good to have some action but just doing the bare minimum means that it will not have a massive impact on those people who continue to have to rely on moneylenders and even more so with the increased inflation rates, including for fuel and rent. It is unfortunate that this was not adopted in 2018 when my colleague introduced his Bill because we would have come a long way since then.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Many people in my constituency have contacted me over the years after they got into serious difficulties dealing with moneylenders, including some of the companies that go around door-to-door offering loans to people. Usually these are vulnerable people in more poor circumstances and on working-class housing estates. An unfortunate housewife's washing machine could break down and she has to get a loan. She may find herself paying almost double the cost of a washing machine by the time it is paid for. I have come across numerous cases of that; all of us have. While elements of this legislation are welcome, such as the removal of the charge for door-to-door collection, the use of simple interest rates and the limit on collection of term loans of 12 months, the key thing that we need to deal with is the interest that moneylenders charge. Yet that is the thing that the Minister of State has avoided. It is most regrettable that he has not gone far enough on that. I do not understand why a Government that is in the throes of a crisis - as the cost of living is going through the roof and people are hardly able to manage even though they are out there working hard to try to pay their bills and their rent - that it does not recognise that it needs to act on the things that it can do that will cost the Exchequer nothing but will make a big difference to hard working, hard-pressed people who are in the clutches of these money lenders.

What about the alternatives? Deputy Doherty noted that the excuse used in the past was that if we go too hard on these licensed moneylenders that people will turn to illegal moneylenders but the alternative is that they could turn to other institutions such as the credit unions, which have long been the people's bank or the community bank, as it were. The credit union movement has been campaigning. It has contacted me and I am sure every other Deputy about getting some relief on the 10% regulator reserve that is in place and a number of other issues. Yet nothing has been done to assist them to enable the credit unions to be able to offer more services. Members of credit unions have received letters from the credit unions to say there is a limit on what can be deposited with them now. There are huge difficulties there. If the Minister of State is interested in doing something to look after ordinary people who are struggling he needs to look at the credit union movement and enable it to be the people's bank and to deliver for people in those circumstances.

Returning to this legislation, it is very clear the individuals who need the assistance are again going to be let down by this Government. Perhaps in his closing remarks the Minister of State could address the issue of why on earth the Government feels it is appropriate for a person borrowing €1,000 to have to repay €480, 12 months later. How can the Minister of State think that appropriate? How can he go round to his constituents and sell them that and tell them he thinks it is okay? I cannot sell it to my constituents and would not try to. I do not think anybody

who is serious about delivering for their constituents, people in more difficult circumstances and hard-pressed people out there could possibly expect they would be able to convince people that is appropriate and is okay. I am aware the Minister of State has a measure there where that can be changed but there is no commitment to change it. There is no commitment from Government to press that down to ensure we bring it back to a level that is acceptable. In the proposals we have it would go to €180 after 12 months, which is 18%. Even that is very high. I think we all understand that. What is the block? The Minister of State should explain that. Why does the Government feel this is appropriate? Nobody in their right mind would consider it appropriate.

While it is welcome something is being done, the key thing that needs to be done is being avoided. The conclusion one would come to from looking at this is what the Government is doing is simply window-dressing the problem while leaving it there. Has the Government got a commitment to these people? Is that what is going on here? Somebody somewhere is lobbying or making sure the very wealthy companies making huge profits on the poorest people in our society are going to be enabled to continue to do that. There are, therefore, real questions to be asked about the Government's commitment to ensure it provides for the ordinary, decent people and to look after them as we move forward.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The main purpose of the Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2022 is to restrict the total cost of credit on moneylending loans. Under this Government, moneylenders are permitted to charge an annual percentage rate of 187%. That rises to 288% once collection charges are included. When compared with more affordable sources of credit, such as credit unions that have an APR of no more 12.67%, there are no grounds upon which such high rates can be justified. In 2013, the Central Bank published a report that found typical moneylending customers are predominantly female and from lower-income backgrounds. The astronomical rates charged by moneylenders risk driving vulnerable borrowers such as them into unsustainable and vicious circles of debt.

The Government proposes an interest cap of 1% per week up to a maximum of 48% per annum. In contrast, my colleague, An Teachta Doherty, has proposed in legislation an initial cap of 0.75% per week up to a maximum of 36% per annum and then a reduced cap after a period of three years of 0.35% per week up to a maximum of 18% per annum.

There are many provisions of the legislation Sinn Féin supports and previous speakers have mentioned this. These include: the separation of home collection moneylenders; the elimination of collection charges from home collection loans; the use of the simple rate of interest rather than the APR for home collection loans; the term limit of home collection loans of 12 months; and the ability of the Minister for Finance to amend rates further by regulation.

However, as was already said, the biggest weakness of this Bill was the proposed interest rate cap. It will allow moneylenders to continue to charge levels of interest that are excessive, immoral and unjustifiable. Deputy Doherty has spoken about this and I am going to speak about it again because I do not know whether the Minister of State really listens to what we say. The permitting of ultra-high interest rates is unethical. Many European countries have introduced interest rate restrictions. These high interest rates were described in Spain as excessive, in Finland as unconscionable and in Germany as lacking in moral legitimacy. The interest rate cap proposed under section 8 of this Bill is limited with no commitment to a reduced cap in the years ahead. We cannot allow an immoral financial regime that damages the economic interests of vulnerable borrowers to continue. Many of our older people have been victims of these moneylenders.

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I met the local chapter of the credit union in south Kildare last week. It is doing a fantastic job in helping vulnerable people, as well as those just starting out, and I highly recommend them. I have been a member of the credit union since I was 15 years of age and it has certainly helped me through lean times. We need to ensure they are given every opportunity to prosper because their success means the community is successful.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is unfortunate people must borrow money to make ends meet. They might need to replace a broken utility such as a washing machine or fridge, get their car fixed or cover the cost of family events like communions and confirmations or expenses at Christmas. For the most part, people mostly take out relatively small loans with moneylenders. These are then charged at a very high interest rate.

Research carried out in 2019 by the Social Finance Foundation found there are an estimated 330,000 customers of moneylenders in Ireland with an average loan size of €566. Loans tended to be offered over a nine-month period with an annual APR of 125%. Moneylenders give people these small loans that are then paid back over a short period of time and these loans are charged at exorbitant interest rates. Borrowing from moneylenders is perhaps one of the most expensive ways for an individual to borrow money.

Moneylenders can at present make door-to-door calls for payments but do so at a charge. This legislation will end this practice and that is to be welcomed. Figures from the end of 2019 show there were 38 licensed moneylenders in the country with approximately 300,000 customers. Of these, 28 were door-to-door moneylenders and two were catalogue moneylenders.

Findings from the research by the Social Finance Foundation further found the majority of those who use moneylenders are female and in the lower-income socioeconomic groups. They were typically aged between 35 and 55 years. For many, the moneylender is the lender of last resort and for those who use their services there is a high price to be paid, as people can be trapped in a cycle of debt and borrowing. For the most part, this makes a bad situation even worse in the long term.

While this Bill is an attempt by the Government to regulate moneylenders with a view to preventing those seeking loans from going to illegal moneylenders, the reality is the Bill does not adequately address the exorbitant interest rates moneylenders charge. We advocate a more substantial reduction than what the Government is proposed as the interest cap. If Government has a concern about people going to illegal moneylenders it should be noted An Garda Síochána has considerable powers under existing legislation to stop, question, search and seize money from those they suspect of illegal moneylending. There are also severe sanctions, such as massive fines and long prison sentences that can be imposed. It is important moneylenders are properly regulated and that people, especially vulnerable people in our communities, are not be exploited by moneylenders. I have concerns about this Bill and would like the Government to get it right now so we are not revisiting this issue in future.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Moneylenders have been a feature of this country since the 19th century. They have acted as a source of credit for low-income households when mainstream providers simply did not do that. However, this easily-accessible credit comes at a cost and as we know it is a very high one. For households that are already struggling, these loans are a heavy burden. They may seem at the beginning to be helping people out of a difficulty but they inevitably end up being a heavy burden. According to a report from University College Cork, entitled Interest Rate Restrictions on Credit for Low-income Borrowers, there are an estimated

330,000 moneylender customers in Ireland. The average loan size is €566 and these loans are most commonly offered over nine months at an APR of 125%. Compare this with the credit union where a loan is capped at 12.67% APR. It is difficult, if not impossible, to justify this large differential, not least when one considers the prevailing profile of borrowers who turn to moneylenders. The same report found that the majority of moneylender customers were female, in the lower socioeconomic group and aged 35 to 44 years. Typically, loans were taken out to purchase household goods and clothing along with covering the cost of family occasions as well as the exceptional cost of children returning to school.

The immediate access to credit and convenience of home collections are some of the reasons for many low-income families and individuals resorting to moneylenders. Satisfaction with legal moneylenders is high, with an average customer rating of 83%. This is attributed to the ease with which people are able to borrow. However, this convenience comes at a high cost for low-income families. In the UK, 52% of home credit users believed that using this form of credit trapped them in a cycle of debt and borrowing. This is an all too familiar experience. They felt trapped because most were living on low incomes and had limited options for accessing credit outside of moneylending. Unfortunately, moneylenders are eagerly meeting this unmet need with high interest rates that reach 187% and APRs of up to 287% when collection charges are included. These rates are eye-watering and are being offered to the individuals and families least able to repay them, namely, those living below the poverty line. In many ways, this is unconscionable and needs to be tackled on a number of different fronts.

Our fundamental difficulty is that there are significant problems with low incomes in this country. I mean this in terms of people who are dependent on welfare and those who are often described as the working poor. There was no increase in basic social welfare rates in 2020 or 2021. People dependent on welfare would have needed an increase of €10 in this year's budget just to stand still, but the allocation was a mere €5 per week. I appeal to the Minister of State that we need to move away from increases in welfare rates at budget time being dependent on the whim of the Minister of the day. That is not an acceptable way of operating. There needs to be a yardstick for what we consider an essential income to live a life with any kind of dignity.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice has done outstanding work in this area and it has for many years been working on producing the minimum essential standard of living, MESL. It examines various categories of people who are on welfare or who have income from work. Through very detailed research, it establishes the figure that would represent the minimum needed to survive. It includes the incidentals people face, general overheads and small amounts for family occasions - critical things we need if we are to live any kind of normal life or a life with dignity. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice estimates that the basic social welfare pension rate - the State pension rate - would need to be increased to €252 to reach the essential levels for survival. This is a good yardstick to use. If inflation increased, there would be a corresponding increase in social welfare rates. Other bodies recommend that the basic social welfare rate should be a percentage of average wages - this is another way of doing it - but we need to have some kind of clear yardstick to measure the adequacy of the basic social welfare rate, and we do not have that at the moment.

Many social welfare recipients started this year already behind where they would have been two years ago. Then they were faced with substantial increases in the cost of living, including the cost of energy, even before what happened in recent weeks. They are under extreme pressure. They are the same people who are forced to turn to the moneylenders calling to their doors. They are in desperate straits, so if someone calls to their doors and offers them €200 or

€500, there is a great temptation to take it. It is not just a matter of temptation, though. Often, many of these people need to accept such loans just to survive or get through particular points in their lives.

Another issue we cannot ignore is the fact many people are on low pay and in precarious working conditions. We have the second highest percentage of population on low pay at 22% or 23%. This is a dreadful reflection on the State. I made this point last night when discussing the Finance (Covid-19 and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The figures for the tax take for the past two years, which were during the pandemic, said it all. There was not a major issue because, in the main, the people who were out of work, forced onto the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and so on were those who were on such low pay that they had actually been paying very little tax anyway. This serious structural problem in our economy needs to be addressed and cannot be ignored in a debate on moneylending.

Moneylenders have filled a gap in the market for decades by targeting the most vulnerable in society. The gap is widening, though, with MABS, credit unions and others reporting client creep into more groups of consumers since the recession. I suspect the figures will be even starker following the experience of recent months and what we are likely to face over the coming months. Since the recession, more higher income groups have been utilising this service because they are also struggling to cope financially. This is further compounded by the spiralling cost of living, including rent, fuel and food, that all households are facing. More and more people are turning to high-interest options or solutions - of course, they are not solutions in the long term - and Government intervention in the sector is needed urgently, but more than the modest offering that is currently under consideration is required.

One of the most glaring omissions from the Bill is a cap on APR. APR represents the annual cost of the loan over its full term, including fees and additional costs that are not included in the simple interest rate. This is the true cost of the loan. It should be noted that this issue is dealt with in Deputy Doherty's Bill, which is on Committee Stage. It is a shame the Government did not learn from that Bill and pick up on some of its most important aspects. It is disappointing the Minister has not provided for a similar cap on APR in this legislation, especially when we know that shorter term loans have a higher APR and that these account for the majority of moneylenders' loans.

As reported in *The Irish Times* last year, a licensed moneylender - Penny Farthing Finance - charges 49% on a 12-month loan, which is just above the Minister's proposed upper interest limit, but the APR on that amounts to 131.59%. This is the real burden. This Bill does nothing to address that. In its submission on pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill, the Credit Union Development Association also cited APR as a fair metric in this regard. It is also the current comparative mechanism across financial sectors. If we were to introduce a cap on consumer credit APR, we would certainly not be an outlier because this is becoming standard practice. There are multiple international examples, including the Netherlands, which places a total cost cap of 14% APR. Further to that, the European Commission is in the process of revising its existing rules on consumer credit. Instead of a centralised approach, this proposal will place an obligation at member state level to set interest rates or APR caps with national discretion.

In some jurisdictions outside the EU, the relevant financial regulators have introduced regulatory responses which specifically deal with short-term, high-cost consumer credit. This includes the UK, Australia, Slovakia and South Africa. Unfortunately, the Minister remains vehemently opposed to any cap on APR in regard to money lending. It is very hard to under-

stand the rationale for this. The argument is there is a danger there could be a mass exodus from the market and that this, in turn, could reduce access to credit. However, there is very little international evidence to suggest that customers would turn to illegal moneylenders *en masse*. Even if this were to emerge as a major risk, it could be substantially mitigated by developing and supporting existing alternatives to money lending such as credit unions.

Credit unions are local trusted institutions and they are best placed to offer free banking and micro finance to low-income families and individuals. Since its very foundation, the credit union movement in Ireland has been encouraging people to assert more control over their finances. One of the founders, Nora Herlihy, began promoting this institution in 1958 to curtail the very issue we are discussing here today 64 years later. This network needs to be developed to meet the current challenge. However, as the Minister of State will know, reform of our credit unions is happening at snail's pace. There has been very limited progress towards establishing this sector as a strong, competitive force. There are many obstacles put in the way of the credit union movement in terms of it becoming a fully fledged player within the Irish financial market, not least because it is required to put its deposits with the pillar banks and that hugely restricts its capacity to operate in a competitive manner.

The Social Democrats have long argued for a strong, not-for-profit banking sector in Ireland. Not only would this create much-needed competition in the banking sector, it would support financial inclusion. We believe this can be based on a reformed credit union movement. There has been so much talk about that over many years, it is time now for action. We also strongly endorse the recommendations of the Oireachtas finance committee from 2017 in regard to the credit union movement and the credit union recommendations contained in the UCC report, specifically that credit unions should serve communities currently serviced by moneylending firms by increasing the 1% monthly cap on interest rates for credit unions. I understand that the Minister is open to this and intends to bring forward legislation to amend the Credit Union Act 1997. This would be a welcome change to the current regime as it would allow credit unions to cater for the significantly greater costs associated with small lending. I certainly hope we will be moving towards adopting that as soon as possible. An increase to 2% per month, which would work out at 24% per month, would be much more favourable to the rates offered by moneylenders. This is exactly where we should be encouraging people to access credit. Unlike moneylenders, who are profit-driven, credit unions are a social movement. Their ethos should be utilised to the full in order to ensure that everyone can access affordable credit.

In 2015, credit unions began the personal micro credit scheme, otherwise known as the "It Makes Sense Loan". This pilot scheme was designed to provide a creditable alternative to moneylenders. It is offered in more than 106 credit unions in 280 locations nationwide. Loans range from between €100 and €2,000 with a maximum APR of 12.68%. To qualify, a person must be a member of the credit union, or join, and be in receipt of a social welfare payment. The original pilot scheme initiative was launched in 30 credit unions under a common mission to deliver an alternative to moneylenders. An evaluation of this pilot found that 52% of pilot borrowers had used moneylenders in the past, while 22% had considered using moneylenders before taking out the pilot loan. Over 90% of borrowers rated the credit union service as good or very good. Since then, the pilot has been rolled out across the country. While it has been successful, many credit unions have not signed up, unfortunately. More work is needed in this area to increase the level of small personal loans across the country otherwise a significant portion of the population will continue to be cut off from accessing the scheme and, as such, will be still subject to relying on moneylenders.

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Another area of concern is the significant dearth of financial literacy education in our schools. Many people are completely unaware of the financial implications of APR and interest rates on their loans. People who are struggling to make ends meet will take the line of credit that is most easily available. That is understandable, but that is usually a moneylender. They often do so without realising the true cost of the credit or just accept that cost because it is their only option. There is an onus on the Government to ensure that basic financial literacy is a key part of the education curriculum, as well as the provision of support schemes through community projects around the country to improve financial literacy. This must be done in conjunction with renewed efforts to make low-cost credit available nationwide through our credit unions. I also think there is huge potential for extending deduction-at-source for many household bills. Very often, people have difficulty getting access to some of those schemes but they have been hugely successful where they have been used. There is a great need for an extension.

I reiterate my call on the Minister to do more. This Bill is not enough to deal with the myriad of issues in this area. While it is an improvement and that is welcome and overdue, it will not fundamentally change the current system. We need a move away from high-cost moneylending and a shift to not-for-profit banking. I accept this will not be a straightforward, easy task. The importance of tradition and friendships with door-to-door agents and so on will need to be overcome. However, these are not insurmountable issues if we are truly serious about limiting the use of moneylenders. This is all the more important now given the current context. High energy prices and rising food prices hit low-income households the hardest. This will likely cause a spike in moneylending. There is a real urgency about tackling this issue. Financial education and credit union reform, alongside tighter regulation, are part of the solution. We need to act fast, otherwise the most vulnerable in society will be saddled with even more debt. We simply cannot stand over inappropriate and misleading moneylending any longer.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. I welcome that we are going to put a statutory interest rate cap in place. It is long overdue in this country. The difficulty is the interest rate cap that is being introduced is far too high. To accept the prevailing interest rates and to enshrine that in law is not acceptable.

3 o'clock

The legislation will provide the Central Bank the power to recommend future reductions, but the starting point needs to be considerably lower than where it is at the moment, particularly in the current desperate financial situation many people find themselves today. Enshrining interest rates in this legislation at such a level is completely unacceptable. It is as though the Government is actually endorsing these types of exorbitant interest rates. It is imperative the Minister of State would look again at this in the context of the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The arguments being made to the Minister of State are that this will ultimately reduce the supply of loans from licensed moneylenders or that it will increase the number of illegal moneylenders. The reality is very different and the evidence is different. First of all, we have a very well-developed credit union movement in Ireland. The Minister of State can do far more to help, support and grow the credit union movement, and support it in actively taking over the business of the moneylenders. I will come back to this point.

Where rate caps have been introduced internationally it has not led to an increase in illegal moneylenders. It has not led to a reduction in the supply of loans. A report on interest rate restrictions on credit for low-income borrowers by the Centre for Co-operative Studies in

University College Cork says:

[T]here is no empirical and undisputed evidence that interest rate restrictions result in an increase in illegal moneylending. In the UK, it was feared that the price caps on payday loans would push a large percentage of people towards illegal moneylending. However, Citizens Advice has said that the caps on payday loans has not led to an increase in illegal moneylending, with analysis of debts held by Citizens Advice clients showing that the number of loan shark debts has remained constant since the introduction of the cap.

There is evidence from elsewhere, therefore, that having a significantly reduced interest rate does not lead to people going elsewhere and availing of illegal money lending. I ask the Minister of State to look at this actively between now and Committee Stage. Effectively, we are endorsing in legislation these exorbitant interest rates. This is unacceptable.

I am aware the Minister of State is working closely with the credit union movement, and I believe he met with its representatives earlier today. The Minister of State needs to actively work with the credit union movement to expand and develop its personal micro credit scheme to ensure every single credit union in the country provides the It Makes Sense loan scheme, and that the movement is actively supported, encouraged and marketed by the Government. Something similar can be done with An Post. Those areas need to be explored to provide real and viable alternatives to the moneylending industry in Ireland.

On the legislation, I welcome the change in the description of a moneylender from a licensed moneylender to a “high cost credit provider”. The Government is however making a mistake not to include in the name the word “licensed”. I ask the Minister of State to look at this for Committee Stage. The term “licensed” does at least give some element of authorisation. Above all things, we do not want people going to unlicensed moneylenders. It is important the word “licensed” remains in the title. I ask the Minister of State to review this again.

We are talking about providing credit and micro loans to people but we cannot do that unless we have a viable banking system in Ireland. We do not have that with the pillar banks. The Minister of State has seen it in his own constituency and I see it in my constituency where the main banks have been pulling out of rural Ireland and pulling out of our provincial towns. The whole area for providing credit is contracting. The moneylenders will fill that void unless we provide a viable alternative. We need to provide a new community banking force. It is frustrating because we have the bones of that community banking force already, but we do need to bring it together.

KBC Bank is pulling out of the market here, Ulster Bank is pulling out of the market and we have seen Bank of Ireland closing down branches across rural Ireland. Two distinct customer bases are being excluded by the pillar banks. These are the personal customers and small businesses. Both of these elements need to be addressed and their needs must be met by a new State-supported banking model. A total of 13% of people do not use banking online. That is a national figure but the Minister of State will know that across provincial Ireland and rural Ireland that figure is far higher than 13%. Even a simple service such as 24-hour access to an ATM for lodgements and withdrawals is being removed from many of our rural towns. That option is not available in many of our rural towns now. This makes a big difference to the development and growth of some of these smaller towns. The Government has recently launched its town centre first strategy, the principles behind which I support. It is very hard to support a town

centre first approach if people do not have access to an ATM, if they cannot make lodgements and if they cannot withdraw money at any time of the day or night. There is also a security issue for many businesses in this regard.

Unless this is driven by politicians and by the Members in this House, it is not going to happen. The financial establishment in Ireland does not want to see a community banking initiative developed here. The establishment in all its guises does not want to see a State co-ordinated banking force established to compete actively against the so-called pillar banks. There is an absolute mindset block against State involvement in the banking sector within the Minister of State's Department. This is why I believe this needs to be driven by us as parliamentarians.

The basic infrastructure is already in place but it is fragmented. Instead of taking a copy-and-paste model from some other country, we should start with the infrastructure we already have in Ireland: our post offices, our credit union movement and the two State banks that we have already, which are the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and Microfinance Ireland. They should all be brought together to establish a very effective community bank that would have a comprehensive branch network throughout the State. This would provide people with access to banking services in smaller towns and in our local communities that have been withdrawn by the big banks. We have the financial infrastructure there, which should be exploited.

In the Department of Finance Indecon report on the evaluation of the concept of community banking in Ireland, it was pointed out that An Post has in excess of 500 post offices in locations where there are no banks within 5 km.

It is not just about using the post office and the credit union. We also need to exploit the two State banks, namely, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and Microfinance Ireland. They have been specifically designed to provide flexible finance to small and medium-sized businesses. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, we need to build on these key strategic strengths in the physical financial network we already have. We need to build on the two banks that are controlled by the State so we can have the levers to support our indigenous business throughout this country and provide the type of sustainable, long-term regional employment we need.

The 250,000 SMEs in this country account for 99.8% of total enterprises, employing 65% of our total workforce. They are the backbone of the economy outside our cities and they need the types of supports that can be provided through an alternative community banking model. It is not just about personal customers or even business customers but also about providing a competitive mortgage market, which is something people do not have at this time.

I know the Minister of State has been meeting with the credit union movement. His has a specific role and responsibility for working with it. There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government to enable credit unions to grow and become a key provider of community banking. These are all words. What we need is real and practical action to make this happen. There needs to be a root-and-branch review of the regulatory restrictions curtailing credit unions. Credit unions have in excess of €15 billion sitting in the bank accounts of the pillar banks at the moment, which they cannot lend out because of the restrictions on them. That is money that could be used to provide a competitive mortgage market, support first-time buyers, support housing supply, support small businesses and provide the type of microfinance this legislation is providing. Under the current restrictions, credit unions can only offer 3% of mortgage loans and up to 10% of the SME loans required by this market. The pillar banks have

70% of the mortgage market tied up and the remainder is with KBC and Ulster Bank, which are leaving the country. Credit unions cannot reach their full potential and become a key provider of community banking, as committed to in the programme for Government, without alterations to the restrictive conditions on their day-to-day operation.

The Central Bank just does not want to work with the credit union movement. As far as the Central Bank is concerned, it is an irritant. If we are going to deal with the issue of micro-finance for individuals and wean them away from moneylenders, we need to support the credit union movement. If we are going to provide proper competition to the pillar banks, we should be accessing that €15 billion of capital that is currently losing money on deposit in the banks. The Central Bank has a responsibility to meet the needs of our economy and our citizens rather than just providing cheap money to the banks.

Let us compare what is happening with the credit union movement here in Ireland with what is happening elsewhere. In the United States, Canada and Australia, the system operates on a fairer and more equitable playing field. Regulatory rules in these countries mean credit unions are offering ten times the number of mortgages and business loans that Irish credit unions offer. If we can get a regulatory regime under the same type of legal structure as in the United States, Canada or Australia, surely to God we can come up with a system that provides the regulatory reassurance we need but allows cash to flow into communities and revitalise them. We need to create a proper community banking force in this country that puts it up to the pillar banks and provides active competition, which is not there at the moment. The credit union movement is more than willing to fill the void that has been created by Bank of Ireland, Ulster Bank and KBC, but there needs to be an urgent review of the current regulatory regime. We need a level playing field and a policy that is fair and inclusive to all the financial institutions in this country. I hope the Minister of State can reflect on this in his engagement with the credit union movement, with his own officials and with the Central Bank.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly on this Bill and I welcome the Minister of State's presence here today. I was in the fortunate position to be in the Chair while listening to some of the contributions. I am reminded of the fact that moneylending is still with us. We will have read about it in the New Testament and read as children about Jesus railing against the moneylenders in the temples. It featured strongly in some of the greatest pieces of Shakespearean writing as well. It is an old practice but that does not mean it is an acceptable one.

None of us would disagree that nobody should be forced to have recourse to a moneylender. I have highlighted some of the pieces in the Minister of State's introductory contribution. I know we are pushing an open door with him on a number of the themes that have been raised and that he will be sensitive and alive to many of these issues. I welcome how the Bill modernises and streamlines the licensing regime. It also puts some discipline on something that exists which I would prefer did not. It potentially provides for a degree of competition in the sector by nationalising the licence, as opposed to licences being provided on a regional basis and being stricter in some areas, so other people may move into this. However, there are obvious pitfalls, such as requiring a limit on cash loans as regards when they can be provided and repaid.

I was very taken by the points about the stereotypical person who has recourse to a moneylender. It is difficult to imagine people calling to a door to collect cash repayments in a modern society. I imagine it is quite intimidating in some cases, and very personally intrusive. That gets to the heart of the matter. Many people have asked why we do we not use credit unions in

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these instances. To some degree, that suggestion ignores the fact people may have exhausted every kind of formal route of borrowing. The Minister of State made that point in his contribution. Traditionally, to borrow from the credit union, people have to have a few quid in the credit union. Clearly, people who have to resort to a moneylender are at their wits' end and are in the last chance saloon when trying to a few quid together.

My late father was a milkman and when I was young, aside from delivering milk with him I used to go with him every Thursday and Friday to collect the milk money. We had our little receipt book and money bag and that taught me some early lessons. I was younger than most children would be allowed to work today and I enjoyed it. One of the lessons I learned was that the people who appeared to be most economically challenged were always the ones who paid their bills up to date and on time and who had the cash ready when you called. There was a facility in those days that you did not have to pay the bill in full if it was £10, which was a lot of money. I encountered families that had nice cars in the driveway, lived in good houses and seemed to want for nothing but they were never able to clear their milk money bills at the end of the week. They might have paid £15 off a £20 bill and then the next time they would pay £15 off what was now a £25 bill and then they would pay £15 off a £30 bill and it kept rising. We should not always rush to judge a book by its cover in that regard.

I will plead with the Minister of State on the following point in the context of retrofitting, which I remember raising at a parliamentary party meeting. It is staggering that there is between 250,000 and 500,000 customers of moneylenders and that by and large they fall into a particular gender and age group. It is also staggering that the products or services they spend that cash on can be narrowed down. It would be great if the Minister of State could provide more statistics on how many people repay the moneylenders in full and on how long it takes on average to pay back that €500.

When I was growing up and I had my first home I remember that the ESB had shops all around the country. I was very taken by the point that a lot of people seek money from moneylenders for instances like Deputy Martin Kenny mentioned such as the washing machine suddenly breaking and a replacement being needed or some other household good needing to be replaced. Some 20 years ago the ESB had a shop in every town in the country and one could buy a brand new washing machine and other things, as I did, and one paid a certain amount off it with each ESB bill as it came in over a period of two or three years. It might be helpful to look back on that. I suspect that it would be a source of embarrassment to turn up in the credit union looking for this money. Credit unions tend to be local and parochial with a degree of intimacy and local knowledge about people. If people are really stuck and strapped for cash it might not be the place they want to go. There is a huge degree of anonymity with moneylenders.

The interest rates, even the rates we are talking about capping them at, are staggering. I welcome this move. Deputy Doherty said he has been raising this for years and he acknowledged the fact that this Government and the Minister of State are moving on it. It is important and it has been lying around the legislative process for far too long. I commend the Minister of State for introducing the Bill and moving it to Second Stage. I will be watching its progress as we go along.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I thank all the Deputies for their time and interest in contributing to the debate on this Bill. As I mentioned earlier it is my intention to seek an early date for consideration of the Bill at the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, where we will constructively

engage with the Deputies on any proposed amendments. In the meantime my officials and I will reflect on the points raised and give further consideration, in consultation with the Central Bank and the Office of the Attorney General, to any amendments that may be necessary to ensure as smooth a transition as possible to the new regime and that the measures can be implemented as early as possible for customers. This is an important Bill and it will significantly improve protection for those borrowing from lenders in the high-cost credit sector and deliver reductions in the cost of credit.

The benefits for consumers include the introduction of an interest rate cap to bring the interest rate down by an average of 13% on the cost of interest on most popular loans. This will bring about an immediate reduction in the cost of interest on the majority of loans out there, which is important. We will introduce a one-year cap on the loans because the longer people have a loan out, as was just referred to, the more dangers keep creeping up. We will ban home collection charges. The practice that people can call and collect a loan will continue if it suits individuals for the money to be collected but there cannot be a charge for this. We will also introduce a repayment book, which will be available online for people to be able to check the status of their accounts on their mobile phones. We will rename the licensed moneylenders to high-cost credit providers, as clear and different from the current system of illegal moneylenders. Providers will be licensed nationally instead of having to go to each District Court. That will help the consumer and competition. From the industry point of view we will be banning the higher rates and the long-term high-interest loans, not to mention there will be a one-year restriction. We will ban home loan collection charges and it will be a requirement to make repayment books available. The administrative burden of charges will be improved. The licences will be valid nationally, which will assist the industry as well as the consumers. The licence terms will be increased to five years from one year, which we currently have.

I acknowledge that a number of Deputies have said this legislation is long overdue. A lot of work has been done on this issue, reports on it go back a number of years and there are a lot of good elements in this legislation. A lot of Members accept that but some have raised particular issues on the interest rates. Deputies Doherty and Mairéad Farrell spoke about this, as did Deputy Martin Kenny who highlighted the credit union issue in particular. I will come back to that in a moment as it has been the theme of a lot of what has been said and an issue I have spent a lot of time dealing with recently. Deputies Ellis and Patricia Ryan spoke about the vulnerable nature of many customers and that is why we are here. Many people are vulnerable and they are paying high interest on their loans.

Deputy Shortall also mentioned the credit union and the cap on the APR. I know she is no longer here but the reason some of these loans will not be based on APR is that we will have a one-year restriction on the length of the loan. Many of these loans might be obtained for three or six months so they will not exist for a full year; therefore they cannot be considered as an annual loan to calculate an APR. The fundamental issue with APR is that the loan will extend for at least a year or more. For a loan that exists for three or six months it is not appropriate to use an annual rate. It would be a notional concept because it would not apply to the particular loan, which is interesting. Deputy Shortall made an interesting point on the cost of credit in relation to credit unions, which has been discussed at length before. There is an interest rate cap in Ireland, which Deputy Doherty referred to, and that is 1% in the credit union sector. There are proposals from a lot of people in the credit union movement that the cost of 1% to administer small fluid loans with short repayment dates is not making it feasible to provide those loans in many cases. There is strong support out there that it be raised to 2%, which would be in the

order of 23% or 24% per annum, which is in the order of what people pay on credit cards. I listened carefully and took on board everything the Deputy said about considering that for the credit union movement.

Deputy Naughten also mentioned the credit unions at length. Half of the time I was here I was wondering if this was a Bill on credit unions. Deputy Naughten mentioned the micro credit scheme and the misconception that the credit unions have €15 billion that they cannot lend because of the restrictions from the Central Bank. He used the word “misconception” every time he referred to it because it is a misconception. They can lend billions of euro more tomorrow if they choose to do so. There are only certain restrictions on the amount they can lend for mortgages; there is no other restriction on them. Credit unions currently lend about 26% of their assets and that can go to 36%, 46%, 56% or 66%, as many of the credit unions used to do historically. There are restrictions on the small business and mortgage sector and that section of lending.

Deputy Lahart mentioned the issue of the old ESB shops. We all understand that. They are not there now. Yesterday, we passed a Bill in this House that deals with the “buy now pay later” facility, which is the exact same thing. A person can go into most shops to buy a fridge, freezer, TV, couch or suite. We passed a Bill in this House last night to regulate that sector, in detail, for the first time. It also relates to personal contract plans for car financing. I look forward to the Bill being passed in the Seanad in the coming period. This sector has effectively replaced, in practice, what the ESB used to offer. This facility is being regulated now. The Bill will pass through the Oireachtas in the immediate future, after which strict measures will be in place. They are the main points.

We have completed a process of extensive consultation about legislative changes for credit unions. I had a good discussion with all representatives. I hope we will be able to bring a memo to the Government as a result of the discussions with the credit union sector. I believe we will have progress in the relatively near future on the practical steps we can take to improve the credit union model and to assist their members and the people to whom they want to lend money. I cannot put a date on it yet because it has to go to the Government. That in itself will not solve all the business model issues with the credit union movement. Many people are looking for new organisations to manage their financial affairs with Ulster Bank pulling out of the market, KBC closing and some Bank of Ireland branches having closed last year. There is an opportunity for the credit union movement to take on many new accounts. I know it is not a legislative matter. We will do what we can from a legislative point of view, but the credit unions know that they will have to be to the forefront in terms of increasing their lending capacity.

I wish to re-emphasise a point in the legislation that has not existed heretofore to a great extent. Section 3 of the Bill introduces specific offences for any breach of this legislation. Rather than people having to get approval and people going around checking, section 3 adds two new offences. This is important here. Companies lending money that breach this section will immediately be guilty of an offence. It is not a question of “they should not have done it”; it will be an offence. The Central Bank will monitor this closely. The two new offences will apply when a moneylender grants credit in a way that breaches either one of the two new provisions, in the first instance by providing a loan of more than 52 weeks’ duration. We want to limit it to 52 weeks in order that the credit providers are not extending loans to two or three years and charging interest on a rolling basis. We want to have a 52-week timescale for these loans. If they breach that, it will automatically be an offence. It will also be an offence if they provide a rate above the interest rate cap that will be set in the legislation. It is not a question of “they

should not have done it"; it will be an offence.

I understand the issue regarding the interest rate cap, but I want to explain to people where we are coming from and the landscape we are in as we speak about this issue today. It is an issue we need to take into account. At the moment, no matter what rate of interest we introduce, including the rate the Government is proposing in the Bill, it will lead to a reduction of the interest charges payable on loans by a significant amount compared with what is being charged today before we pass this legislation. No matter how one looks at it, this legislation will reduce the interest charges paid by people who borrow from these high-cost lenders in the future. I will set out the full extent of what is out there. Deputy Doherty and I quoted some of these figures in our opening statements today. I want people to be clear that there is no statutory interest cap in Ireland as we speak. However, the de facto interest cap in Ireland, which we both quoted earlier, is 288%. That includes the collection fees that are applied for calling to a house. As we speak today, people are being charged an interest rate of up to 288% on borrowings from money lenders. We are proposing to reduce that figure - the maximum currently being charged, compared to what will be charged when we pass the legislation - from 288%, which people are paying tonight and tomorrow to those who collect money from them, to 48%. We want to cut the de facto interest rate by 240%. I hope people get that. It is a reduction of seven eighths on what they are currently being charged. It is a phenomenal reduction to go from 288% to 48%. I am not aware of any other country that has brought in legislation to make such a change.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Opposition-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order-----

Deputy Sean Fleming: What is being proposed-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How long does the Minister have to conclude?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I am in the middle of making a point.

An Ceann Comhairle: He has 17 minutes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: But the schedule states ten minutes. The time was up at 30 minutes.

Deputy Sean Fleming: What I want to say in relation to the point I am making is that the legislation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is 30 minutes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is ten minutes in the schedule.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister is speaking.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State does not understand his own Bill.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I think the figure of 288% was quoted by both of us in our opening speeches. The Opposition is proposing that the 288% be brought down to 36%, a reduction of 252%. Our legislation is proposing a reduction in the maximum rate of 240%.

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Deputy Pearse Doherty: Jesus Christ. One is APR and the other is simple interest. You do not even know what you are talking about.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is embarrassing.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It will be a reduction from 288% down to 48%. What is being proposed is a reduction of 252% from 288%-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State's officials are cringing. It is embarrassing. Oh my God.

Deputy Sean Fleming: That is the scale of what is being proposed in terms of where we are with the de facto rate that is out there at the moment - the interest rates being charged - and what will come in under the new legislation. There is a difference between what the two sides of the House are proposing, but the message going out that everybody needs to hear, whichever is being introduced by this legislation, is it will represent an actual reduction on the amount on the average loan that is out there today. It will also mean that the crazy-high figures will be brought down dramatically by whichever measure we chose to take. I look forward to teasing these matters out on Committee Stage because I know the Deputy is very keen to discuss these issues. I wanted to make those points in relation to the legislation. I look forward to continuing the debate in the context of amendments on Committee Stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does Deputy Doherty wish to make a point?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: APR, which is what exists already at 288%, and simple interest, which is in the Bill at 48%, cannot be compared. They are simply different ways of calculating interest. To make that suggestion is cringeworthy. The Minister of State should correct the record of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Consumer Credit (Amendment) Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

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 Michael Moynihan - to discuss the interaction and co-operation of planning departments in local authorities with community and sporting groups; (2) Deputy Joe McHugh - to discuss plans to accommodate Ukrainian refugees in Ireland, including housing, social protec-

tion supports and education; (3) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss preparations for the introduction of free contraception for women between the ages of 17 and 25; (4) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the sharp decline in dentists in the medical card scheme; (5) Deputy Niamh Smyth - to discuss procedures for children's school absences of more than 20 days due to Covid-19; (6) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss the issue of pedestrian safety and active travel on the M1-R104 intersection in Dublin 9; and (7) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss increasing the electricity allowance for carers, especially those using pay-as-you-go meters.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Moynihan, Joe McHugh, Martin Browne and Paul McAuliffe have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Planning Issues

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I sincerely thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to discuss this issue, which arises when community groups, particularly those in rural communities, come together in a voluntary capacity to develop community facilities. There should be an open door policy on the part of the Departments down to the local authorities in regard to developments proposed by community groups. From my experience, it has been very frustrating for community groups in the way they engage with the planning regulations. They have to jump through hoops to get planning for a community group or very small community facility. There is so much red tape. Much of the time community groups come together and have no resources. They look for funding from other mechanisms to try to fund projects. They must come up with matching funding, whether from volunteer labour or from the communities themselves by having to raise funds, which is a difficult thing to do.

They see the regulations they must go through in terms of environmental and ecological consultants. In terms of planning itself, reports by architects, who much of the time, may be working voluntarily for the community, must be provided but, on top of that, professional reports by archaeologists, ecologists and so forth must also be provided. They are hugely cumbersome for community groups.

Community groups come together to try to do something in a meaningful way and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which oversees planning, should recognise that they should be encouraged. There should be a clear pathway as to how they do their business and how they are accommodated within the planning system.

We are not talking about willy-nilly planning or anything like that. We are talking about planning for community groups. We quite often see their frustration when they are met with large bills when to try to get consultants in to do something that is minuscule in the overall planning scheme of things. The Department should look at this and there should be priority in terms of small community groups planning relatively small developments. There should be a clear policy.

Departments are well used to issuing guidelines to local authorities and asking them to look at things. Clear guidelines should be issued by the Department on how to address and encour-

age these community groups. They are putting in facilities for everybody. Only for these community groups coming together in a voluntary capacity, many of these facilities would never be built. They come together but end up not having a clear pathway and being frustrated by the system. It is time the Department looked at it and issued clear guidelines for the entire the country, not just for rural Ireland but for urban Ireland as well in order that specific reference is made to volunteer and community groups which are providing for their greater community.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Moynihan very much. This is an interesting one.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): It is an interesting one. I can most definitely empathise with Deputy Moynihan's points regarding the importance of community facilities.

I am taking this response on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for local government and planning, Deputy Burke. The title of this Topical Issue matter was picked up and taken by the planning department. The points raised by the Deputy, however, are much broader than the planning aspect necessarily. I accept completely what he said. I am not going to read response I have here because it talks about public consultation. I think the Department misinterpreted the point the Deputy was going to make or sought to raise on this Topical Issue matter.

The Deputy highlighted not-for-profit community organisations that provide resources for local people and communities and, in doing so, they should be aided and assisted by the State insofar as we can. While planning is one part of that, when we look at the different guises in which they might get that State funding and support, it tends to come with conditionality.

With many streams of State funding, the initial core funding for many of these projects tends to be to get them to a point where they have carried out a feasibility study and detailed design but, at the end of that first lot of money being spent, construction has not started. We do not have that physical building. The second part is the shovel-ready element. We have to get the balance right between supporting communities to deliver what is needed and ensuring what is delivered is right, but not overdo the bureaucracy.

I am very minded that this Topical Issue matter could just as easily have landed on the desk of, let us say, our colleague, the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys. Her Department manages Our Rural Future through the town and village renewal scheme and community enhancement grants, which are obviously on the smaller scale. That is the funding body for many of these elements. One could also say that sports capital grants are an element of this because sports clubs, by their nature, provide these community facilities as well. Conditionality will always come with the sports capital money but that is something the Department is very good at navigating through. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, could talk at length on that element.

The Deputy made broad points, however. Whether it is through LEADER funding or otherwise, there is conditionality with all this funding. We, as a Government, have put in place much funding here, as well as in the urban side. The €2 billion in urban regeneration funding has been in place for some time. We had the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, announced last year. That was a really significant investment across those larger urban areas. Some of the linkages of that were going into community groups as well.

The Deputy's point is a valid one, however, in terms of a whole-of-government approach to ensure we support community organisations to deliver what is needed. The community facilities the Deputy talked about are so important to our rural communities. I will bring his points on the planning side back to the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, but the points he raised are broader than that one Department. If he has specific examples in terms of blockages he has found in his constituency, I am happy to hear them and perhaps debate them further.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I have specific examples. I am mindful of the parliamentary regulations not to comment on or criticise any person or entity so I will respect that. We looked at this from the ground up. There should be recognition from the planning department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, right across the Departments and down through to county development plans, that what we need here are clear guidelines on how community groups should be looked at and engaged with.

We engage with community groups in the very same as we do with large commercial entities. It is the same planning policy, regulation and detail. There should be clear guidance from the Department to local authorities around community groups. There are regulations in terms of agriculture, houses on farms and different things. There are clear guidelines along the way but there should be a clear guideline in recognition of the voluntary capacity in which people who set up voluntary and community organisations and do tremendous work go about their business. There should be clear recognition from the State to say we applaud the work that is done by voluntary and community groups, and that we are making a provision within the planning regulations to ensure these people are guided and helped through it and do not end up in a bureaucratic and legislative cul-de-sac. There should be clear guidance that local authorities and, indeed, Departments have to work through. There should be clear guidance and help from the State to all community and voluntary groups. They are ultimately providing a service for the State for the benefit of its citizens.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Again, I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this important topic today. I concur and I will bring these points back to the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, and his officials in the planning department. There should be uniformity of approach here. Community groups looking to go through the planning process to deliver a community facility should not have different experiences depending on what local authority they are in or the mood or approach of the relevant chief executive, director of services and officials throughout that local authority.

It is, therefore, really important that we support them and that community groups are not necessarily put through the same rigours as big industry or a commercial entity in trying to deliver. Community groups are volunteers. They generally tend to have thrown their own day jobs. Sometimes, the onus on them can be considerable to deliver something that is not for any material gain to themselves but to the broader community. The point the Deputy made is a valid one. I will bring it back to the Minister of State and highlight those points.

Ukrainian War

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this issue. Deputy Cannon planned to be in the Chamber for the Topical Issue debate on Tuesday and Wednesday but it does not suit him to be here today.

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On the education side, many young Ukrainians, and primarily their mothers, will be overwhelmed on arrival by having to deal with such a dramatic change in their lives and the trauma of the recent past. Their fathers might not be with them. This will be very difficult.

The first point of contact in the community will be through the schools. Already, we are seeing schools facilitating so many young people. There are many schools. Even in my own constituency today, I was copied into an email from a primary school that was written to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. It said that they are ready, willing and able. They want to help and they want to facilitate young people and young Ukrainians. While that process is overwhelming, I would like to especially acknowledge the officials who are working closely with organisations such as Dóchas and the Red Cross in trying to prepare the ground for such a massive undertaking. We are talking about over 100,000 individuals. In dealing with the trauma part of it, there will be a role for the schools. There will be a natural healing in getting students - young people and young Ukrainians - into the schools as quickly as possible so that they can be with people their own age. Obviously, other services will be needed. Our services are already stretched in this area. However, we have to ensure we have support systems for people who are dealing with severe trauma in this regard.

The Committee on European Union Affairs, which I chair, is being proactive. The Ukrainian ambassador will be before the committee next Tuesday. The Moldovan and Georgian ambassadors will be there too. We have reached out to the Romanian and Polish ambassadors. We want to be as proactive as possible to help on the humanitarian side. We are also looking at the real, urgent needs that Ukrainian citizens have at the moment.

The opposite of hope is despair. There is still so much hope out there when you speak to people. People are finding it difficult to deal with the visuals that they are seeing on social media and on television on a day-to-day and hour-to-hour basis. They are struggling with those visuals. That being said, people are trying to help. I believe there is such a capacity in the Ukrainian people who have become part of our communities over recent years. I am finding through my own office that individuals are reaching out to me, directly and indirectly, to offer help, such as in the area of translation. I know a particular Ukrainian individual who has translated for the HSE and has also been a support teacher in a secondary school. Politicians like myself and the Minister of State, in his office in Kildare, need to have a one-stop shop to direct that. I know this will not happen straight away. We will not have everything right straight away. It is important from an information point of view, where people are trying to help. I will add another point at the end. I acknowledge the role of both Ministers, Deputies McEntee and Humphreys, in the social protection aspect of this matter. That is already up and running so that people can get a personal public service, PPS, number quickly, which is so important. I am delighted to see such a pro-active approach in that regard.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy McHugh for raising this important matter and I thank the Minister of State for being here to deal with it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy McHugh for raising an issue that is foremost in all of our minds across the Government right now. I know Deputy Cannon was working with the Deputy on it earlier in the week. I assure the Deputy and the House that along with officials in all Departments, including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, on behalf of which I am participating in this Topical Issue debate, I share the Deputy's concern. We are all working on it. We are monitoring the situation very closely. All Departments, particularly the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth,

which is quite a mouthful of a departmental name, are responding quickly and effectively in the event that Ukrainian nationals come to Ireland seeking international protection. We know they are doing so, and they have begun to do so already. They will do so in much greater numbers into the future.

The Department is working closely with key stakeholders, the European Commission, other EU agencies and other member states to be prepared for a sudden increase in individuals seeking international protection in the EU. The Department is ready to assist if the EU develops a more co-ordinated approach to supporting nationals from Ukraine. Deputy McHugh rightly highlighted that this is an evolving situation and one to which we are responding in real time. We will continue to do so as the picture becomes clearer about what is required in Ireland's role in supporting people who need it. We are liaising with the Cabinet and with EU colleagues to ensure there is an effective humanitarian response, as well as a whole-of-government approach.

I can confirm that accommodation will initially be made available by the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, within the Department, to those Ukrainian nationals who seek international protection in Ireland and require it. IPAS is providing accommodation to Ukrainian refugees arriving in Ireland. It is scaling up operations as the number of arrivals increases. Some 955 Ukraine nationals to date have sought IPAS accommodation. We are working across the Government to source accommodation from as many sources as possible. Officials are actively working to procure accommodation and supports for Ukrainian arrivals to Ireland through hotel accommodation in the first instance, as well as various accommodation solutions, including the use of modular housing on State-owned land.

We appreciate that many people may wish to make offers of accommodation to support people who are seeking temporary protection in Ireland. The Government is working with the Red Cross in this regard on the logistics. They have put in place a national pledge, the website of which has been launched and is available online at registerofpledges.redcross.ie. There has already been a remarkable response from the public, as the Deputy is aware. Over 10,000 pledges have already been received, showing the Irish céad míle fáilte hospitality, the sense of charity and the sense of outrage that our citizens share at what is happening to Ukrainian people right now. We all want to play our part to help.

As the Deputy will be aware, Ukrainian nationals arriving in Ireland at this time are being granted - if they wish to avail of it - temporary protection for at least one year. This means that Ukrainian nationals who are fleeing the conflict will be allowed to work. They will be given access to health services, accommodation, education for children and other social supports. Details of the new measures have been published on the Department of Justice's Irish immigration website, irishimmigration.ie. Our colleagues, including the Ministers, Deputies McEntee and Humphreys, are all working in conjunction on the supports in that area. Last night, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth published a frequently asked questions document on its website to help people with any questions they may have. More information on supports and services has been published on gov.ie.

Departments are extremely busy working with colleagues across the Government to assist the humanitarian efforts regarding Ukraine. As this situation, which is unprecedented in our lifetimes, unfolds, our team's primary focus remains on critical operational matters as the situation evolves. IPAS staff, along with staff from Departments of Justice and Social Protection, are at the receiving area in Dublin Airport to provide PPS numbers as Ukrainian nationals arrive. The Department of Social Protection will also provide an income support through the

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supplementary welfare allowance scheme. This is a weekly social welfare payment. It is also paid for adult and child dependants. Details of this are available on the Department website. I can go into further detail in a supplementary response.

Deputy Joe McHugh: I thank the Minister of State for a comprehensive response. I will conclude by saying that at this stage I think there are over 10,000 pledges by individuals who want to help and want to accommodate individuals and families in their homes. That has to be acknowledged. Yet, from speaking to people within the Red Cross, there has to be a level of patience in getting it right, through vetting and by ensuring it is done in a proper way.

I call on insurance companies to facilitate arrangements in respect of individuals and families who will go to rural areas and will be keen to have their own independence and freedom of movement. Should insurance companies look at stepping up to the plate if families decide to add people onto their own contracts with those companies? The insurance companies should step to the plate. I am calling on them to think about that. In rural areas, it can be more difficult for individuals to get around.

I mentioned in my earlier intervention, and I will finish on this, that without hope there is despair. The Irish people have responded in a way that has shown that there is hope and that there will be light at the end of the tunnel. I want to finish with a quote from a relatively new Ukrainian friend of mine. While I am not sure he will agree that we are on the friendship spectrum yet, I will take the liberty of saying so. I asked him how he thinks things will evolve. He just said, "I know our people are very strong and they will make it through". I think we need to hear those words of hope.

4 o'clock

There is light at the end of the tunnel but, for the moment, we will have to work hard and efficiently and ensure we do right for these many people who are relying on us.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Government will not be found wanting in supporting the Ukrainian people. The 2016 census showed that 3,000 Ukrainian nationals were resident in Ireland at the time. They all have loved ones about whom they are greatly concerned and they may be looking to bring them here. We are taking a whole-of-government response to ensure we offer them all the supports they need. As I mentioned, there is the initial support of social protection and the supplementary welfare allowance for child dependants. Similarly, the HSE has a role to play in healthcare. Ukrainian nationals will be supported to access public primary and post-primary education, and Tusla will also provide assistance in these matters.

To date, all Ukrainians who have sought access to the IPAS system have been accommodated. We will continue to work hard to provide the additional accommodation that will be needed to meet the increased demand we expect. From 1 October to 9 March, 3,800 new arrivals sought international protection. We are aware pressure on the system will grow, which is why departmental officials are actively working to procure accommodation and supports for Ukrainian arrivals through hotel accommodation, in the first instance, and various other accommodation solutions.

The Deputy made a point about the need for industry and businesses such as insurance companies to take a mindful approach. We are taking a whole-of-government approach, including the Departments of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and Social Protection. All the Departments are working together in a

co-ordinated way and we need business to support us in that regard. This unprecedented challenge will throw up many anomalies and we need to be agile to respond to them. The Government will not be found wanting in supporting these people. I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter.

Social Welfare Payments

Deputy Martin Browne: I raise this issue because it concerns another example of difficult circumstances in which many people, whether they are carers or not, find themselves. It relates to the inability of people who care for a loved one to pay for the additional electricity consumption that caring for someone requires. As the Minister of State will be aware, many people find it easier to keep on top of electricity bills by using a pay-as-you-go meter. Unfortunately, they spend more this way but many people feel they must use a meter because they cannot take the chance of receiving an astronomically high electricity bill they might have difficulty paying. Carers, in particular, have to be mindful of these costs because they are under-resourced. They have to stretch every penny, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree.

This week, I was contacted by one such family. They care for their son, who has needs that require the assistance of certain medical devices and equipment. He is an 11-year-old boy who has a number of conditions, including cerebral palsy, sleep apnoea and epilepsy. Because of these conditions, he needs the assistance of a number of medical machines while at home. One of these is a high-flow oxygen concentrator. While it is known to be heavy on electricity, it is vital equipment. It is not the only machine he needs but it is a significant one. It is turned on every night from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and frequently during the day, which has a considerable impact on electricity use, meaning the increase in energy costs is really biting.

The family sent me a video in which they ran through the payment records on their meter. The increased costs are obvious. They are paying between €70 and €90 a week, yet the boy's mother has told me she gets between €64 and €70 every two weeks under the household benefits package, and that is before the impact that the increasing energy and fuel costs is having on securing other areas of treatment for the child, which I might get to later. When I spoke to the family this week, their question was whether the Government will increase the electricity allowance for carers.

Speaking about the budget is pointless, given we are into only the third month of 2022 and these are the issues facing families. I am sure the Minister of State will outline figures on the household benefits package and the €200 electricity subvention, which will be minus VAT, and so on, but the question remains. Other families are in similar circumstances. They may have loved ones at home who have exceptional needs that require specific supports. In many cases, maintaining these specific supports, such as the machine I referred to, involves costs that are hidden from the State. I say "hidden" because this family is not being supported to meet these additional costs. The costs are on them, hidden from view and forgotten about, and the families are left to get on with it.

I ask the Minister of State, on a compassionate basis, what the Government can do to address the needs of families such as the one I have mentioned. Given the rising costs that have been incurred by these families, is the Department considering taking the needs of carer families into account and providing them with further assistance to meet the increasing costs they are incurring by providing for their loved ones?

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Deputy Martin Heydon: The household benefits, HHB, package comprises the electricity or gas allowance and a free television licence. The Department of Social Protection will spend approximately €273 million this year on the HHB package for more than 484,000 customers and their households. The package is available as a supplementary allowance to those in receipt of various social welfare payments, including but not limited to the carer's allowance, the State contributory and non-contributory pensions, and the widow, widower's or surviving civil partner's contributory pension. The electricity allowance is paid to all recipients, regardless of domestic meter type. The package is generally available to people living in the State aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of social welfare-type payment or who satisfy a means test. It is also available to some people under the age of 66 who are in receipt of certain welfare-type payments.

As part of the overall welfare budget package of €600 million in increases the Minister for Social Protection secured in 2022, she was pleased to be able to increase the fuel allowance payment by €5 per week, effective from budget night. This brought the weekly rate of payment to €33. In addition, as part of the budget, she increased the weekly income threshold for fuel allowance by €20, bringing it to €373.30 per individual. The fact fuel allowance is a means-tested payment ensures it is targeted at those most in need of it. These targeted increases were informed by ESRI research that indicated that certain household types, such as those living alone, were at higher risk of poverty than other households.

The Government is acutely aware of the increases in consumer prices in recent months, especially in regard to fuel and other energy prices. To mitigate the effects of these rising costs, it has announced additional expenditure measures totalling more than €500 million, which will make a positive impact on the incomes of all households. The issue is multifaceted and the Government has responded across a range of Departments' services. As part of these measures, an additional lump sum payment of €125 will be paid to all households in receipt of the fuel allowance payment. It is expected this will be paid soon, within the month, at an estimated cost of €49 million. An energy credit of €200 including VAT, which is estimated to impact just over 2 million households, will be paid in April. Furthermore, a temporary 20% reduction in public transport fares will apply from April until the end of the year. The original Sláintecare report proposed a reduction in the drugs payment scheme from €144 to €100, and the Government has decided to reduce this further, to €80. This will benefit just over 70,000 families. The working family payment, increased on budget day, will be brought forward from 1 June to 1 April. Caps in respect of multiple children on school transport fees will be reduced to €500 per family at post-primary and €150 for primary school children.

The recently announced electricity costs emergency benefit payment is a key measure being developed by the Government to mitigate the effects of the recent unprecedented increase in electricity prices. The scheme, under the auspices of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and supervised by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, will be paid in addition to the gas and electricity element of the HHB package to qualifying households. Approximately 2.1 million households will benefit by €200 from the new scheme. The President recently signed the required legislation and it is expected payments will begin in April 2022. Furthermore, due to the continuing rise in inflation as part of the economic consequences of the tragic conflict in Ukraine, the Government decided yesterday to reduce excise duty on fuel, with effect from midnight last night. The Department of Social Protection operates both an exceptional and urgent-needs payment as part of a supplementary welfare allowance scheme for people who have an urgent need they cannot meet from their own resources. These pay-

ments are available through community welfare officers, with whom all of us will be familiar.

All further measures will be considered, while taking account of the overall Government policy and budgetary constraints. The Government will keep these measures under constant review, with a focus on the cost of living, not least for the most vulnerable in society.

Deputy Martin Browne: As I predicted, the Minister of State rattled off figures from the budget and mentioned some of the other measures the Government has brought in, but carers have told me, and I have no doubt they have told him too, that the measures are not enough for them. I told him about the video I received. That family's electricity bill has jumped from €197 to €349 in five months, so a once-off €200 payment will make but a slight difference for them for one month. On top of the domestic demands they face, they have the travel costs associated with attending appointments for young Alex. This week, travelling to Temple Street, the parents put €70 of fuel in the car, which only half-filled the tank. Accommodation and food also had to be paid for. They ask how they are expected to live and call on the Departments of Social Protection and Health to increase supports for carers who are in such circumstances. The family also pointed out that the Government is pushing for electric cars. There is no point in that if there are no electric wheelchair adaptable cars.

Families who are looking after ill loved ones are among the family carers who have kept much of the pressure off the hospitals, especially during the pandemic. For decades, they have provided a service that saves the Government an estimated €20 billion each year. I am asking for some compassion and for someone to review the situation of Alex's family and others and give them an extra bit of help. That is all they are looking for. There are not many families in this position. Considering this family's electricity bill jumped from €197 to €349 in the space of a couple of months, the €200 payment will only help for a couple of weeks. After that, these families will be in severe trouble again.

I thank the Minister of State for taking my questions and for his time.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Martin Browne. All Deputies deal with carers in our constituency offices and in the course of our daily work as parliamentarians, and we are in awe of the fantastic work they do. That is why the State provides supports for people on fixed incomes who are providing such a vital service to a loved one. The State recognises that this service is of huge value.

I accept there are difficult challenges. There is the impact of the conflict in Ukraine. The increase in the cost of living was a problem before that but it has been exacerbated by the conflict. That is why people on carer's allowance qualify for the household benefits package.

The Deputy stated that I had rattled off a lot of figures. There are a lot of different figures because we take a whole-of-government approach to this matter.

Deputy Martin Browne: Family Carers Ireland says it is not enough.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is not only the €200 payment. As I said, we also have a community welfare system. In individual cases that do not fit the norm, community welfare officers provide support that may be needed for a time, including to meet exceptional needs.

I outlined many interventions the Government has made since the budget. A record budget has been provided to the Department of Social Protection for 2022. An additional €500 million

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package was announced in February to mitigate the cost of living. We also had a cut in excise duty yesterday. This is the response of a Government acutely aware of the challenges that people are facing and working to support them in every way it can. In individual cases such as the one the Deputy outlined, measures are in place to have them looked at on a case-by-case basis.

The Government will not be found wanting in supporting people. We know the pressure people are experiencing. I outlined many of the supports in place. The Department of Social Protection provides a number of more targeted payments to help people with their household costs. These include the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance, the telephone support allowance and, in particular, exceptional and urgent needs payments as part of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme for people who have an urgent need they cannot meet from their own resources, as the Deputy outlined. The Government will support people at this difficult time.

Deputy Martin Browne: The Government needs to realise that these families save €20 billion a year. What would happen if they withdrew the service they provide tomorrow morning?

Deputy Martin Heydon: That is why we are supporting them.

Deputy Martin Browne: It is not enough.

National Transport Authority

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to raise this issue. Having had the pleasure of sitting through the earlier Topical Issue debates, I often think this portion of the week better reflects the work I do in my clinic every week and probably the work every other Deputy in this House does.

We are all committed to active travel. The Government has invested more in this area than any other Government. We are doing so to deal with climate change. Across Dublin, I see examples of how that investment is being turned into more cycle lanes and better access for people with disabilities and pedestrians. However, in one location, the interchange at the M1-R104, better known as the Oscar Traynor roundabout, we are not seeing those improvements. It is a classic tale of two local authorities and a transport authority not coming together to service the needs of a community that is divided as a result of an outdated form of roads engineering project that did not take account of cycling and walking.

Children living in Oak Park, Royal Oak, Santry Villas or any other part of Santry who attend Gaelscoil Cholmcille must effectively cross a motorway interchange to get to school. One traffic survey in 2017 found there were more than 3,000 traffic movements between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. at that junction. As Members can imagine, this makes it impossible for a child on a bike. We can imagine a young mother or father taking young children to school and trying to negotiate what is effectively a motorway interchange.

I would not normally bring an issue such as this to the House but in this case, the north side of the roundabout is dealt with by Fingal County Council, the south side is dealt with by Dublin City Council, and the National Transport Authority, through Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, manages the roundabout. Nobody seems to be availing of the considerable resources the Government has put in place to ensure there is proper cycling and pedestrian facilities at this interchange. I ask the Department of Transport to take an active interest in this issue to ensure

that one of the local authorities takes the lead on it and that it is supported by the TII. In all of that, we must ensure there are better facilities on the ground for the people who need them.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this important issue in his constituency. I am responding to this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

As the Deputy will be aware, the programme for Government sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging set of commitments in relation to walking and cycling, supported by an increased multi-annual budgetary allocation amounting to some €1.8 billion over the lifetime of the Government. From 2021 to 2025, we will see 20% of our total transport budget, approximately €360 million per annum, invested in Ireland's walking and cycling infrastructure to provide a safe and connected network for those who commute, walk or cycle to work or school and those who walk and cycle on our more recreation-focused greenway network.

The Minister was recently delighted to recently announce an allocation of €289 million to local authorities to fund active travel infrastructure in 2022. This funding will support approximately 1,200 projects throughout the length and breadth of the country to make walking and cycling in our villages, towns and cities safe and sustainable.

Coolock Lane junction, which the Deputy highlighted, is located at the intersection of the R104 regional road and the M50. A section of motorway previously designated as the M1 was redesignated as part of the M50. The current arrangements at this location, as the Deputy rightly highlighted, are not pedestrian- or cycle-friendly. Similar to other projects developed in the same timeframe, this junction was designed as part of a motorway, with the objective of maximising vehicular traffic movement.

As the boundary between Fingal and Dublin City Council areas runs through this junction, any proposal for development of pedestrian and cycling facilities would involve a number of parties, namely, Fingal County Council, Dublin City Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland given the proximity of the Dublin Port tunnel and the national road status of the corridor. I have no doubt the Deputy has raised this matter with officials in the local authorities as well.

The National Transport Authority is fully supportive of improving the pedestrian and cycling facilities at this location and has had discussions with some of the relevant parties on the potential for such enhancements. It is a matter for one or other of the local authorities to develop proposals to address the deficiencies at this location. In such circumstances, the National Transport Authority is prepared to fund either Fingal County Council or Dublin City Council to undertake the design and planning phase for a scheme to enhance the pedestrian and cycle movement at this junction and to obtain planning consent for the proposal. That is positive news. As regards any subsequent construction, the National Transport Authority expects to be able to fully fund such implementation. However, this is subject to confirmation of the final design and can only be confirmed at that stage.

The current framework for road safety is set out in the Government's fifth road safety strategy. The Road Safety Authority has overall responsibility for overseeing implementation. On 15 December 2021, the Government and the Road Safety Authority launched Ireland's Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030, along with an associated action plan for the first phase of the strategy running from 2021-2024. The programme for Government 2020 commits to the introduction of "an ambitious road safety strategy targeting the vision zero principle" and "a new road

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safety strategy focused on reducing death and injuries of vulnerable road users, pedestrians, and cyclists". The new strategy meets these objectives. The strategy aims to deliver a 50% reduction in road deaths and serious injuries by 2030. The phase 1 targets are a 15% reduction in deaths in the period and a reduction of 10% in serious injuries. This will be a major step on the way to the EU vision zero target of zero deaths or serious injuries by 2050.

The strategy adopts a safe systems approach. This is recommended as best practice by the UN, the EU and the WHO. It is a holistic approach that takes into account all factors, including allowing for the fact that even with the best systems, people will make mistakes, and so such areas as road design and emergency response need to be tailored to this reality.

I say all that in the context of the junction on Coolock Lane highlighted by Deputy McAuliffe. It is an area that fits with the type of improvement that is supported by the State agencies in conjunction with the local authorities.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is very welcome to hear the news that the National Transport Authority, NTA, is prepared to fund either Fingal County Council or Dublin City Council, subject to the details of an application. Oscar Traynor Road has been in the news for many other reasons, not least because of the new housing project that Dublin City Council will construct on the site for affordable, social and cost-rental housing involving up to 800 homes. Those homes, and additional new homes built in Santry village, put extra demand on the area. There is real frustration that the infrastructure is not keeping up with the homes are coming on stream. This roundabout is a classic example of how we can easily demonstrate how we are going to invest in infrastructure as much as in housing.

We have heard in the news about lots of controversial cycling projects. They often involve politicians being climate-brave and communities being climate-brave as well and rewarding people who are willing to take difficult decisions and compromises to tackle climate action. This roundabout does not involve us being climate-brave. This interchange involves applying a bit of logic. No one is objecting to the facilities here. I encourage the chief executives of the two local authorities involved to take up the offer outlined by the Minister of State that the NTA will fund a project of this nature and that it will have a real benefit for the residents I spoke about in Santry, in Oak Park and Royal Oak, and in the Coolock area. I thank the Minister of State. I very much appreciate his response.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Deputy McAuliffe has an offer to bring back to the chief executives. It is on the record of the House that the offer of support is there and we need them to drive on the project now. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and making his contribution to the discussion today. It is great to see investment in active travel starting to bear fruit.

The Government is keen to accelerate the delivery of sustainable transport modes as we come out of the majority of Covid restrictions. It is vital that we do not allow a return to gridlock as we come out of the pandemic.

Deputy McAuliffe referred to politicians needing to be climate-brave. This is a quality-of-life issue. It is about us making a modal shift. According to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, 29% of trips currently are less than 2 km, and 57% of those are made by car. Moreover, of trips up to 6 km, 79% are made by car. Local authorities and the NTA have been provided with an unprecedented increase in funding for additional staff for active travel to help deliver all the necessary infrastructure to enable more of the longer journeys to be made by walking and

cycling, in particular in heavily populated urban areas such as the one highlighted by Deputy McAuliffe today.

The increase in the number of people opting to make journeys by walking or cycling during the period of Covid-19 restrictions shows the potential to make real strides in a modal shift away from fossil-fuelled vehicles and towards more sustainable modes of transport. The funding committed to in budget 2022 for investment in sustainable transport projects is proof of the Government's commitment to active travel. I look forward to the development of active travel plans that will promote sustainable transport options for people across the country and in the area of Coolock Lane highlighted by the Deputy today.

Education (Voluntary Contributions) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

In the first instance, I extend an apology to the Minister from Deputy Carthy, my co-sponsor of the Bill. He is at Dublin Airport to provide a lift for a family coming back from Ukraine. That is a fairly legitimate excuse. He asked me to give his apologies. I asked him if he wanted me to make any particular points, for example, on County Monaghan. He specifically asked me to say, "This is the year." The Minister can make of that what she will.

The legislation before the Minister is reasonable and thought-out and offers us a staged removal of voluntary contributions. To put the Bill in the current context, we have a cost-of-living crisis across the State. Ordinary families are doing all they can to keep up with sky-high bills and runaway price increases. It is the main issue people are talking about every day, be it fuel, housing, rent or childcare.

Education is another area of cost, be it for books, voluntary contributions, uniforms and everything else. Voluntary contributions are a significant element of the cost of education. They could be €100, €200 or €300. In reality, they are often anything but voluntary.

Ní mhaith le tromlach na scoileanna gur ghá dóibh iarraidh ar thuismitheoirí na deontais seo a chur ar fáil ach cuireann roinnt de na scoileanna brú millteanach ar thuismitheoirí. Tá na litreacha ag teacht de shíor agus bíonn ócáidí, is oth liom a rá, go mbíonn na scoileanna ag rá leis na leanaí agus leis na tuismitheoirí nach mbeidh lockers, dialainne, imeachtaí spóirt agus ealaíona agus an saghas sin rud ar fáil. Níl sé sin maith go leor ar chor ar bith.

People are crucified with the extortionate costs of housing, childcare, energy and fuel, groceries and insurance. They are being hammered by a cost-of-living crisis, where every cost is going up and nothing is coming down. With these increased living costs, families of school-age children will be looking ahead and starting to wonder how they will meet the costs of the return to school this summer. We must begin to plan how to address that now because it is a significant cost. It could be well over €1,000. We know that in this State, there is talk about the concept of free education but it is a myth. In reality, the hidden costs and fees that are associated with sending kids back to each year place a crippling financial burden on parents.

A survey from the Irish League of Credit Unions, ILCU, last summer painted a stark picture of the pressure of back-to-school costs on a family's finances. Two thirds of parents surveyed said they found the costs a significant financial burden, with just under a quarter of families in

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debt over the return to school, and 21% of families having debts of more than €500. I have heard of parents going to illegal moneylenders, and I am sure the Minister has also heard such stories, and the pressure that puts them under.

Our education system is being heavily subsidised by families. Many parents are forced into debt in order to give their child equal access to an education, through meeting the cost of uniforms, books and transport. Among these costs, one of the most significant is the voluntary contribution. Families can be asked to pay €200, €300 or even €400 per child. The total amount can add up to a significant amount. These contributions add significant pressure on families, as schools mainly seek the payment in September, which on top of all of the other expenses, can tip many families to breaking point. Tagann na costais seo i ndiaidh do go leor teaghlaigh cuid mhaith airgid a chaitheamh ar na cultacha scoile, ar na málaí scoile, ar na leabhair, ar theicneolaíocht agus ar gach rud a théann le dul ar ais ar scoil. Cosnaíonn sé breis is €1,000 ar chuid mhaith teaghlach.

There was no significant measure to increase capitation for primary and secondary schools in the previous budget. There was a marginal increase for a very small category of schools, and welcome and all as that was, the vast majority of schools saw no increase in capitation. The Minister may point to additional Covid funding in the past two years as an increase in capitation overall, but this was ultimately to meet essential costs for personal protective equipment, PPE, additional space, and high-efficiency particulate absorbing, HEPA, filtration. That was welcome but it does not address the fact that the Department does not provide enough money to run schools. We have an almost Victorian situation whereby schools must turn to parents and ask them to fundraise and ask them for voluntary contributions, in effect, donations, albeit that they are not entirely voluntary, just to keep the lights and the heating on.

Voluntary contributions, despite the name, are often not voluntary at all. In reality, the vast majority of schools do not want to be in this situation but there are schools that chase up parents who cannot or do not pay. This causes serious anxiety and stress for families to cough up sums that they do not have. Last summer, we asked families to get in contact with us and tell us their stories and experiences with back-to-school costs and voluntary contributions. Many of the families we heard from felt that they had been disengaged from their children's schools and were embarrassed about not being able to cover the costs of these contributions. Others said they would avoid going into the school grounds to pick up their children in case they saw a staff member and were asked about their voluntary contribution that had not been paid. That is putting shame and embarrassment on families and children that is completely unjustifiable.

We know that reminders of non-payment are often sent through students and parents fear their child will be stigmatised in front of their classmates or will be denied access to lockers or extracurricular activities. One family who were in contact with us said their child had come home from school very upset because they had been singled out from their classmates and not given a school journal because the parents were not in a position to pay the full contribution. This family had a weekend of stress and panic trying to pull together their funds so that their child would have the diary when they went back in and would not continue to be singled out. It is not just about the diary; the child obviously wanted the diary. It is about being singled out and the shame and embarrassment foisted on this child and the family. It is a shocking situation to put a family in, but we know exactly why this is happening and why schools are chasing up these voluntary contributions.

For many schools, their backs are against the wall because continued underfunding and Gov-

ernment cuts have left them fundraising just to cover basic things such as keeping the heating and the lights on. Since 2008, the capitation grant has been slashed by successive Governments meaning schools believe they have no choice but to place the burden onto parents to make up the shortfall through these voluntary contributions. As already stated, we could point to the Covid funding but it does not make up the shortfall that has been there for a long time. The additional Covid funding covered only the baseline of what was needed to address additional Covid-related costs. It was not a magic wand to reverse the large-scale funding issues schools have been facing for nearly 15 years, nor is it a sticking plaster for repeated cuts to capitation, as the Minister has tried to suggest, and it will not bring an end to extortionate voluntary contributions. Parents are still having to fundraise to keep the lights on in their children's schools. A Barnardos survey last year reported that 61% of parents of primary school children and 57% of parents of secondary school children are paying classroom resource fees for photocopying, stationery and art supplies. This again comes down to the underfunding of our school system, which is not funded well enough to run. That is just a simple fact.

It should not have to be this way. This Bill would bring an end to the pressure on families to bear the financial brunt of the underfunding of successive Governments. It will place an obligation on schools to make clear to families that these contributions are in fact voluntary. It will ensure that no child is stigmatised or denied access to lockers or extracurricular activities because their parents are not in a position to make a contribution. It would make it unlawful, which it should be, for schools to treat children any differently because of the situation their parents are in. If anything, the Minister's proposal to delay this by nine months surely means, on that basis alone, we should proceed with this straight away. It should be the case, right now, that no child should be treated differently because a parent or family cannot afford contributions. This Bill would prohibit schools from contacting parents more than once per school year looking for contributions and will bring an end to the stigma and shame by preventing reminders of these contributions being sent home with their children.

Dhéanfadh sé cinnte de go mbeadh soiléireacht ann. Chuirfeadh sé dualgas ar scoileanna agus ar an Roinn an méid atá bailithe sna deontais agus cé mhéad a chaitear i ngach scoil gach bliain a fhoilsiú. D'fhéadfaí sin a dhéanamh gan aimniú a dhéanamh ionas nach mbeadh aon duine ná leanbh tar éis a bheith ainmnithe agus ní bhféadfaí a dhéanamh amach cé hiad. Tá seo fiorthábhachtach agus cuireann sé bóthar romhainn conas gur féidir deireadh a chur leis na deontais seo.

The Bill would ensure transparency by placing an obligation on schools and the Department to publish online the total amount collected in contributions each year, and how this has been spent in each school, in a completely anonymous way so that no one family or child can be identified. Crucially, the Bill sets out a pathway for bringing an end to voluntary contributions for good once capitation levels have been adequately restored by the Government. That is a key point. I do not want to hear from the Minister that voluntary contributions are needed and this Bill is a problem because schools will be left short and will be underfunded. We anticipate that. We know that we need to fill the funding gap first. This Bill is about figuring out what the funding gap is because the Minister does not know. Nobody knows. Some organisations have estimated that it could be in excess of €100 million, but the Minister does not know what the gap is and we need to find that out. This Bill provides for the Minister to request a report from the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General to evaluate how effective Government funding alone is in meeting all reasonable operating costs. It paves the way for abolishing voluntary contributions once and for all, once Government funding is found to be sufficient to meet all of

a school's costs.

Last summer, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul reported experiencing a significant increase in calls from parents who were worried and anxious about meeting back-to-school costs that were up 10% on the year before. In the context of this cost-of-living crisis, I dread to think of the number of calls that charity will be getting this year. It will be far more dramatic than previous years; it is already far in excess of those levels. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Irish League of Credit Unions and Bernardos will all highlight the pressure that families come under. If this Bill and other measures to tackle return-to-school costs are not supported and taken seriously by the Government, then it will be ever more severe.

It is very disappointing to again see the same approach. It is always the case, and just seems to be the mechanism the Government has decided it needs to employ in every instance, that it will delay this by nine months, or it might come back to it, or there might be a report or something like that. Nine months down the line, children will have returned to school. Children will be back in school for the next school year and the Government will put things off until the following year, and probably the year after that again, before we give these parents and families some respite and address the funding imbalance in our schools.

Despite the constitutional protections of the right to education, as well as the notion of Ireland having a free education system, the reality is that many children do not have equal educational opportunities due to a lack of resources. Níl sé fíor go bhfuil oideachas saor in aisce do scoláirí agus do theaghlaigh sa Stát seo ar chor ar bith nuair a fhéachtar ar na costais atá ann i ngach uile slí. This is through no fault of their own or of their parents, many of whom must ignore their personal needs to provide for their children. We need to secure a level playing field for all children and young people by ensuring adequate funding in areas when it is needed most. That necessarily means properly funding our schools so they are not forced to rely on parents to make up this shortfall. My colleagues and I in Sinn Féin will continue to listen to families, to take on board their concerns, and to deliver real change for ordinary people. This Bill would make things fairer for parents, families, children and schools. It is a simple Bill but it is one step towards ensuring that free education is more than just lip service and that equal opportunities can be secured for all children and young people on this island.

I appeal to the Minister yet again. The root factor here is very obvious and very simple; schools do not have enough money to run and they turn to parents. They ask parents who are already hard-pressed and broke from the summer months due to buying uniforms, books and whatever else goes with it, which can cost hundreds of euro. We need to address that too. As parents go into September, they are down €1,000, or €1,500 if they have a few children, and they then get a letter from their school through the door asking them for €250 or €300 because that school does not have enough money to keep the lights or heating on. That is the simple reality. If the Minister is serious about ensuring that we have a proper system of free education, she should support this Bill and do everything she can to ensure this so-called voluntary contributions regime is brought to an end by funding schools properly and then putting a ban in place so they cannot continue to be such a burden on parents. I ask her to reconsider her position and, certainly in nine months' time, to take this Bill more seriously and try to ensure it and the objectives in it can be supported.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

“Dáil Eireann resolves that the Education (Voluntary Contributions) Bill 2021 be deemed to be read a second time this day nine months to allow for the progression of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 and for that then to be taken into account in the consideration of this Bill.”.

Táim fíorbhuíoch as an deis mo thuairimí ó thaobh an Bhille a chur os comhair na Dála. I share the Deputy’s desire for greater clarity and transparency for parents and guardians around voluntary contributions and I am supportive of measures which will support and enhance that. While very many schools already provide great clarity to parents and the broader school community around how financial contributions and resources are used within the school, I recognise that further work is needed to ensure that this becomes uniform across the board.

I am particularly conscious of the need for this clarity, given the financial pressures which many families find themselves under at present. However it is my strong view that Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 is the correct approach to achieve this goal. The programme for Government contains a commitment to enact the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019. The charter Bill has already been passed by the Seanad and completed Second Stage in the Dáil and now awaits progress to Committee Stage. It is well under way in the legislative process and has received support from many Members of the House and within the broader education sphere in its overall aims and objectives.

The overall aim of the charter Bill is to improve the level of engagement between the school community by inviting feedback, comment and observation from students and parents and by further developing a listening culture in schools. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult students and their parents on individual school plans, policies and activities. The charter guidelines will set out the form and manner in which information is to be provided to students and parents, which may include publishing information on the school’s own website about voluntary contributions and how they are spent. This Bill seeks to require the school to state clearly that any contribution made by parents and guardians toward the operating costs of the school is voluntary and that there is no obligation on parents and guardians to make such a contribution. This is backed up in previous legislation, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, which already contains a provision prohibiting the charging of admission and enrolment fees for admission to or for continued enrolment in a school. This Private Members’ Bill also proposes that the Department of Education publish details of the total moneys collected annually by schools, as well as details of the expenditure of those moneys.

The charter Bill requires schools to prepare, publish and implement a charter in accordance with national guidelines which will be published by me, as Minister for Education, after consultation with unions, management bodies, parents and student representatives. The charter guidelines will set out the financial information that schools must provide to students and their parents. The information provided to students and parents must include information about how the school has spent moneys that it has received, including any funding obtained through fundraising and voluntary contributions. In the charter Bill, I am putting in place an obligation on schools to be transparent in relation to voluntary contributions and to provide key information to parents on the moneys raised and how they have been spent. I am doing this in a structured and clear way as part of a school’s obligations under its own charter. Publishing data that allow for comparison of schools based on moneys raised and spent in a given year without any consideration of context could be misleading for parents and unfair to the schools concerned. For example, such comparisons would not reflect the difference between a school that consistently seeks high levels of contributions and a school that in a given year or for a short period is raising

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funds for a particular project or facility but typically does not seek or raise significant amounts from parents. I believe the approach taken in the charter Bill in this regard is clear, fair and balanced and will not be unduly burdensome for schools.

On the broader context of the funding of our schools, as raised by the Deputy, I know that our schools and our education system can only prosper with the right supports and the right investment. We are fortunate in Ireland to have teaching and school staff of an extremely high quality and to enjoy the support and commitment of many volunteers from board of management members to parent representatives to local community members. This must be accompanied and reinforced by strong State investment in schools and their communities. That is why I have, as Minister for Education, prioritised successive funding increases for our schools through the last two budgets. For example, yesterday I announced a €32 million investment in the DEIS programme, which provides targeted and tailored supports for students at greatest risk of educational disadvantage. This is the single most significant investment in the DEIS programme since its inception and will benefit 347 schools across the primary and post-primary sector. It will mean that nearly 25% of Irish pupils are enrolled in a DEIS school and will bring the total number of DEIS schools in Ireland to 1,194. We know that the DEIS programme works and that it has helped to dramatically increase Ireland's school completion rate and to narrow the attainment gap between schools. The supports provided to schools vary by school type and DEIS tier, but the supports offered under the DEIS programme can include a lower pupil-teacher ratio in DEIS urban band 1 schools, separate DEIS grant funding, access to professional support services, enhanced schoolbook grant rates and access to the home school liaison and school completion programmes. We make this investment because there is no greater leveller than education. I know that the Deputies here appreciate that. We know that being supported through school is associated with positive outcomes for a person throughout their life, be it accessing further work and study opportunities or their broader well-being, which is equally important.

I know that the Covid-19 pandemic has presented considerable challenges for the education sector. I remain deeply appreciative of the leadership, dedication and courage that was shown by so many people throughout the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, inclusive, €860 million has been allocated for Covid-related supports and capital funding. Throughout the pandemic, this has supported an array of measures from additional staffing allocations to Covid grant payments to purchase PPE and hand sanitiser, to provide enhanced cleaning and to carry out Covid-19 related building works, such as reconfiguration works. Thankfully, while we remain vigilant in respect of the pandemic, we continue to see its effects on our children and broader society decrease.

On the more general funding streams for our schools, capitation grant funding is paid to schools to meet their day-to-day current costs such as insurance, lighting and heating. This is separate to minor works funding, which is capital funding intended to support maintenance and minor upgrade work within schools. A standard rate of capitation is paid in respect of each mainstream pupil at primary and post-primary level, with enhanced rates of capitation provided for pupils enrolled in special classes and special schools and pupils from a Traveller background. At second level, additional funding is provided to support individual programmes within the school, including the transition year grant and the leaving certificate applied programme, and to schools providing Irish-medium education. That said, I understand the need for improved capitation funding. In recent years, there has been a 7.5% increase in such funding and I intend to seek further funding increases in future budgets. All schools have received the

benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date.

Finally, I am deeply conscious of the need to minimise the cost of school attendance for all families, parents and guardians. As a Government, we have a number of measures in place to help to do this, from the back-to-school grant, which last year supported over 200,000 children, to the school book grant, which this year provided over €17 million to schools to support book rental schemes for their pupils. Approximately 96% of primary schools and 69% of post-primary schools operate book rental schemes.

Just last month, the Government announced further measures aimed at mitigating the rising cost of living, including a reduction in the maximum amount payable for families to access the school transport scheme, an increase in the threshold for the working family payment and a €200 energy credit for households. It is my strong view that the particular policy objective of this Bill will be achieved, but it will be achieved by the enactment of the charter Bill. Rather than opposing the Bill, the amendment I am seeking to move allows time for the progression of the charter Bill that will achieve the objectives set out in this Bill of improving information and transparency for parents and guardians around the collection and use of voluntary contributions by their schools, while avoiding any unintended consequences and not placing any unnecessary burden on our schools in this respect.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I find these debates depressing. There is an absolute poverty of ambition or vision in the Minister's speech and from her Department with respect to any real belief in what our education system could be like.

In Finland 50 years ago they had an educational revolution. We have been through two crises in the last ten years. One was an economic collapse and we are at present coming out of a health emergency, yet there has been no real attempt by the Department or the Minister leading it to have a vision of a wholly different education system. What the Finns did, if the Minister were to study it, was put equality at the heart of the education system. Everything that was received and handed down was torn up and they started again. What is absolutely illegal now in Finland is fundraising or fee-paying schools because they said equality should be at the heart of the education system. The problem is that far too many of the conversations happening in school communities, between schools, between parents or between parents and their children are about money. They are about money.

There is a poverty of ambition and vision within the Minister's Department. Earlier we had a conversation about schoolbooks. One only has to look 100 miles up the road. Anybody in the North would consider it bizarre that people would have to put their hands in their pockets to buy schoolbooks for their child so they could go to school. This is the type of mentality we need in this Republic, namely, that it is bizarre that people have to put their hands in their pockets to buy schoolbooks for their child - because the Republic should provide that. However, there is a poverty of ambition and of vision. School parents' associations are just fundraising bodies. They just organise fundraisers. They do not talk about education. They do not talk about child development. They do not talk about all the fantastic, wonderful, experiences children should be having in the school environment. They do not talk about any of that stuff. They just talk about money and how to raise it. It is pathetic. It is pathetic that one would have to have a fundraiser for a school.

As for the idea of voluntary contributions, it has been pointed out they are not voluntary. They are voluntary in name. How crushing must it feel for a parent that a notice comes down

from the school in their child's fist and know this a barrier between the child and his or her full involvement in school life, because if one cannot come up with the goods, if one cannot come up with the money, one is less likely to fully engage in school life. One is less likely to go to the school gate. One is less likely to go to the parent-teacher meeting, the football match or the school play, lest one comes into contact with a school staff member who feels he or she must ask one because the money is needed to run the school. Money, money, money, money, money - the conversation always comes down to money. It is not just the fact you feel humiliated by that, it is also about the replacement conversation people are not having. People are not talking about, as I mentioned, child development. People are not talking about advances in educational thought. People are not talking about how their child might be struggling in school. People are not talking about potential bullying incidents in school, about subjects or about innovative initiatives in learning. People are not talking about any of that stuff. It is money, money, money, money, money.

Here is a vision for the Minister we could all work on together. The Government threw away €500 million on tax cuts in its last budget and it comes back to those choices. If the Minister took €100 million, which is one fifth of that, she could make every schoolbook in this State free for every child at primary and secondary level and €45 million would replace the amount of money taken in in voluntary contributions, according to the Catholic Primary School Management Association. Imagine the freedom a school principal would have. Imagine the time that would be saved by a school principal, who is supposed to be a learning leader. Rather than chasing after parents for money, organising fundraisers, turning off lights and worrying about heating bills, the principal could think and talk about the delivery and leading of learning. Imagine that. This is what I am challenging the Minister and her Department to do. They should think differently, just as was done in Finland 50 years ago, and dispense with all this tinkering around the edges. This is what is so depressing about these debates. It is so much tinkering around the edges.

We have come to the conclusion that a parent should expect to have to go to a fundraiser for his or her child's school. Is there not something utterly pathetic about that? However, we are just so used to it we accept it. The Minister would get broad support from across these Houses if she were to institute budgetary measures and the legislative underpinning to rule out certain things. Why do we not ban voluntary contributions rather than only making it more clear what they pay for? We should ban them. Alternatively, the Minister could take the view we could look towards what happened in Finland and say that over a period of time we could have a fully-funded education system that does not come down to conversations about money.

We could take the template from the Six Counties, where nobody puts their hand in their pocket for a book. We had to ask the Minister to get rid of the fee for the leaving certificate earlier this year. Again, those from the North who are living here think it bizarre one would have to pay money to sit a State exam. We accept all these things as being the norm, we tinker around the edges and have debates in this House, all while the Minister has such a capacity to drive forward a revolutionary change in the way education is run and in how schools are run. However, there is a poverty of mindset within the Department and people there who really do not think it is their problem. They do not think it is down to them. One has all the power with the individual patron bodies, the board of managements will do what they can do and then if a school must have a fundraiser then that is the way it goes. Inevitably, there is a deep inequality in that because as the Minister knows, in affluent areas people can raise an awful lot more than can those in areas of disadvantage. The Minister knows that. However, as long as she allows

that to continue there is going to be a fundamental inequality in how schools can run themselves. I know this because, as Deputies across the House will be aware, we are in a post-Covid era and so the fundraisers have started again. Teachtaí Dála are getting requests to take out ads in various different fundraising booklets because are they beginning to ask their Teachtaí to come to fundraisers. Is it not absolutely pathetic that part of a Teachta Dála's job is to give money to a school fundraiser?

Why do we not completely recast our brains and come to the bizarre conclusion that maybe the State should just fund the schools, pay the bills and not have this constant, money-oriented, transactional conversation between school communities, parents and children? I know what it is like to chase a mother for the book-rental money. It is humiliating for the school and the parent. With the best of good will and from a genuine place, I challenge the Minister to go back to the Department and say maybe it is absolutely pathetic that in a republic there are such things as school fundraisers, voluntary contributions and that we ask parents to pay for schoolbooks. She should suggest we front-load the funding to our schools so all these transactional, financial conversations are replaced by conversations about education. Imagine that as a revolutionary thought. The Finns did it and it is the day-to-day reality in the North.

5 o'clock

Rather than tinkering around the edges, let us have a genuine conversation about the State having a day-to-day, genuine funding role in the running of our schools and let us rule out certain elements of school community life, for example, being expected to raise money or contribute voluntarily to the running of a school and having to pay for a schoolbook. It is fundamentally pathetic. Until educational leaders such as the Minister and those in her Department get that into their heads, we will just be tinkering around the edges.

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): With all due respect to the Deputy, who does not have the courtesy to wait to hear my response, in my experience, righteous indignation and rhetoric are no replacement for action and delivery. He has referred to a lack of investment in education, but the largest budget that has ever been made available to the education sector of in excess of €10 billion is a considerable investment. Last week, there was an announcement of a €32 million investment in DEIS, meaning that one in four of our students is now availing of DEIS supports in our schools. Some €17 million is being made available for the book rental scheme and there is a €20 million investment in the delivery of books, access to literature and promotion of same in our schools. In light of the challenge of Covid over the past two years, more than €860 million has been made available to schools so that they can continue operating and remain places where students can attend and work. That involves ambition and vision. In what has perhaps been the most challenging time this country and the rest of the world have ever experienced, the Department of Education, in co-operation with stakeholders, found a pathway forward for the classes of 2020, 2021 and 2022. Unique in the world in 2021, we offered both a written exam and an accredited grades process. This year, we are ensuring that seated exams are provided for. There is no absence of ambition or investment in education. Empty rhetoric and righteous indignation serve no purpose because, at the end of the day, this is all about action and delivery and I am content with the action and delivery that have been provided by my Department.

The overall aim of the Bill is to ensure greater clarity for parents and guardians about voluntary contributions collected by schools but it remains my view that these objectives would be better met through the advancement of the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019,

which has reached an advanced stage. The approach that I am taking in the charter Bill is to put in place a set of legislative measures that will establish a framework and help support and foster a cultural change in schools in terms of engagement across the whole school community. The charter guidelines will be developed following a consultative process with the education partners. This consultative approach is of fundamental importance. It will help to ensure that the reporting requirements put in place under the charter guidelines are clear to all, ensure that the relevant information needed for transparency is made available and, importantly, are straightforward and workable at school level. The charter guidelines will set out the form and manner in which information is to be provided to students and parents, which includes publishing information about voluntary contributions and how they are spent, and, therefore, it is considered that the particular policy objective of the legislation before us will be achieved with the enactment of the charter Bill. This is an important consideration. It is my firm belief that what Deputy Ó Laoghaire's Bill sets out to achieve will be achieved in that way.

The charter Bill has already been passed by the Seanad and has completed Second Stage in the Dáil. It now awaits progress to Committee Stage. Therefore, I am seeking the House's approval for my timed amendment.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank Deputy Ó Ríordáin and the Minister for their contributions and I appreciate the former's support for the Bill.

The Minister's speech would have been fine save for the part where she stated that the Bill's primary objective was to provide greater clarity and transparency. Of course, it is not. That is just one relatively marginal part of the Bill. We want greater transparency. We also want a prohibition - this was not addressed by the Minister and is not addressed in the student and parent charter Bill - on children being treated differently while voluntary contributions remain in place. However, the primary objective of the Bill is not transparency. That part is only about addressing a reality that we must deal with until we can get rid of it. The primary objective of the Bill, which the Minister has not really referred to, is to fill the funding gap in our schools that require them to seek voluntary contributions. That is what this legislation is about - schools being underfunded and parents and children suffering because they are being asked to make voluntary contributions on account of that. The Minister has not addressed this in either of her contributions. She has not signalled any view that voluntary contributions are undesirable, any objective of increasing capitation to ensure that the funding gap is closed or any desire to find out what the funding gap even is. She has not signalled that she ever intends to bring an end to the need for voluntary contributions or to their existence itself.

The Bill's primary objective is not even slightly addressed in the student and parent charter Bill. Even the elements that the Minister referenced are scarcely addressed by it. Nor is the issue of the unequal treatment of those children whom Deputy Ó Ríordáin and I have instanced, who are denied a diary or locker, who are denied access to extracurricular activity, the shame that goes with that and the disengagement from and avoidance of teachers and the school, with children almost scurrying away from the school gate. None of that is addressed in that other Bill.

There is no statement from the Department saying that it will ever properly fund schools. Every month or two in every school, a bill lands from SSE Airtricity or some other provider for heat and light. The Department does not meet the full amount of that bill. The shortfall is made up by John Cotter, Eileen Murphy and whoever else we care to think of from the local community, but the Minister is not proposing to do anything about that. This summer, parents

will spend €1,000 or €1,500 on sending all of their children back to school, yet the Minister is not proposing to give them any relief from any direction. There will be nothing on books, nothing on uniforms and nothing on voluntary contributions. There will be nothing at all from the Minister or any other member of the Government to relieve that burden.

I appeal to the Minister. We are still in March and the budgetary negotiations will happen over the summer, so I hope that she will remember this debate. This does not just have to do with her, of course. It also has to do with the Minister for Social Protection and other Ministers. I hope that the Minister, Deputy Foley, will have a discussion with her colleagues – the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys – on trying to arrange some relief. I hope she will bear in mind not only what I have said but the testimonies she will have seen and read from Barnardos, the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I am sure the Minister can think of instances from the school in which she taught in her teaching days. I hope she will remember that in her budgetary discussions. I hope this is not the end of this debate for this year and that we can address some of the burden on parents.

The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 very clearly does not address any of these issues, but it can. I hope that following this debate the Minister will discuss with her officials whether some of the provisions of this Bill can be included as amendments in the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019. I will be tabling amendments which will not be out of order. There are all sorts of ways amendments can be ruled out of order. I hope the Department will take it on board and table some of those amendments.

The Department of Education does many good things. I readily acknowledge that. I welcomed yesterday's announcement, albeit that I was not thrilled with the way it was handled in advance. DEIS is a fantastic programme. It will do wonderful things for those schools that get it. For many schools in my constituency and across the country from Kerry to Donegal to Wexford and so on it will do marvellous things. I know a lot of work went into devising that very complex model. I might disagree with certain elements of it and there might be areas in respect of which things can be overlooked, but I know a lot of work went into it. The Minister and I differed in regard to some issues around the protection of schools, but I know a lot of work and money went into supporting schools during Covid as well. It is beyond dispute that our schools are underfunded. Schools would not be seeking voluntary contributions if they were properly funded. I will draw a distinction between the voluntary contributions and bona fide fundraising. Perhaps when the Department does confront this issue that is something we can tease out. I do not have a problem with schools and parents fundraising for a school trip to France or new sports equipment and so on. There are areas that schools can legitimately fund-raise for that do not necessarily impinge on the operation of parents' associations, schools and principals in their ability. The basic running of the school should not be supported by fundraising or voluntary contributions. That should be done in full by the Department of Education.

Tá súil agam go ndéanfaidh an tAire smaoineamh air seo. I gceann naoi mí b'fhéidir go mbeidh deis eile againn labhairt faoi seo ach ní hé seo deireadh an scéil. Tá deis ag an Aire smaoineamh air seo arís i gcomhthéacs cainteanna an bhuiséid, i gcomhthéacs an Bhille seo nuair a thagann sé ar ais, agus i gcomhthéacs an Bhille a rinne sí trácht air maidir le cearta tuismitheoirí agus scoláirí. D'fhéadfaí leasuithe a dhéanamh ar an mBille sin mar níl aon cheist ann nach ndéileálann an Bille faoi mar atá leis an ábhar seo ar chor ar bith. Ní dhéanfaidh sé aon rud do thuismitheoirí atá faoi bhrú ó thaobh airgid agus ní dhéanfaidh sé aon rud chun déileáil leis an easpa maoinithe atá ar fáil do scoileanna ó thaobh caipitíochta de. Caithfear

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déileáil leis sin agus tá súil agam go smaoinoidh an tAire air sin arís. Caithfidh roinnt relief a thabhairt do theaghlaigh an samhradh seo. Caithfidh gníomh a dhéanamh ó thaobh leabhar, cultacha scoile agus fordheontais mar cuireann na rudaí seo brú millteanach ar dhaoine. Is fíor le rá go bhfuil na costais seo millteanach agus go gcuireann siad tuismitheoirí i dtreo daoine atá ag déanamh cíós ar airgead ar bhonn mídhleathach, agus gach baol a bhaineann leis sin. Tá sé contúirteach agus cuireann sé daoine i dtreo bochtanais.

It is undoubtedly the case that parents find themselves under very severe pressure in the summer. Twenty-one per cent of families have debts of over €500. I would say a proportion of them have very significantly more than that in debt. In many instances, parents are spending over €1,000 and many are going to illegal moneylenders. The State should not be forcing parents who are just doing their best to go to illegal moneylenders to ensure they have enough for the return of their children to school. The State should be paying for their children's books and it should ensure that schools are properly funded so that they do not have to be sending begging letters to parents and families.

The debate is as it is. I will oppose the amendment. As we leave here, I hope that we can return to this issue, that the Department will reconsider the approach it has taken and that the Government can reconsider the approach it has taken and give some relief to these workers and families at a time of a cost of living crisis when they are going to be asked for hundreds, if not over €1,000, to pay for their child's basic education.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): A division has been called. In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 23 March 2022.

Estimates for Public Services 2021: Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2022: Vote 27, International Co-operation, and Vote 28, Foreign Affairs.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.18 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 22 Márta 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.18 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 22 March 2022.