



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 5 Aibreán 2022

Tuesday, 5 April 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are just three weeks away from the Government's carbon tax hike on 1 May. This is the same day that the latest round of energy price hikes from providers will kick in. The carbon tax will make life harder for workers and families who are already struggling to keep on top of their soaring energy bills. They live in dread, in panic and, in some cases, in fear. People are being fleeced by big energy companies, which are making bumper profits. It is crazy that the Government, which should act to protect households, will come along at the start of next month and pile on more pressure. Instead of supporting households, the Government will ratchet up pressure on families with a tax hike that adds to the already unaffordable price of home heating fuels. At the weekend, Ministers, including the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, vowed that the carbon tax increase will go ahead despite the extraordinary crisis that households face. Almost in the same breath, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, told workers and families to save money by taking shorter showers and by driving less. That was the Government position on Sunday.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: That is good advice.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, the Taoiseach told the media the carbon tax is not a big issue in the grand scheme of things and that it was not a big deal. However, this is a big issue for households up and down the country where every euro counts and so a worn-out public is again left shaking their heads at the out-of-touch reaction from Ministers. People rightly ask where is the common sense and where is the sense of urgency or agility from the Government to respond to what is happening in people's daily lives. The carbon tax hike is the wrong decision at the wrong time. We have told the Government this time and again and more and more people are now coming to that view. Indeed, yesterday Dr. Cara Augustenborg of the Climate Change Advisory Council called for the hike to be deferred. This is an expert appointed by the Taoiseach's Minister to advise the Government on these matters. The Government's position is wrong and the Taoiseach must listen. People cannot afford a carbon tax increase. They do not have the money to give. Far too many lives are now defined by the awful choice

between heating and eating. This hike can only make matters worse as it disproportionately affects those on low incomes, older people who struggle to stay warm and it will of course hit households in rural Ireland especially hard.

Tá an t-ardú ar an gcáin charbóin ar an 1 Bealtaine an rogha mícheart ag an am mícheart. Tá teaghlaigh ag streachailt cheana féin le billí fuinnimh atá ag ardú as cuimse agus ní féidir leo an t-ardú seo a íoc. Caithfear stop a chur leis. It is time for the Taoiseach and Government to see sense because households have been hammered by more than 35 energy price increases in the last year and people are saying they cannot take any more. I want the Taoiseach to tell hard-pressed workers and families the Government will not add to pressure already on them. I want him to tell them Government will scrap the carbon tax hike due on 1 May and I would like him to give people that assurance today.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. In the first instance, we as a society and a country have come through a once-in-a-century event in the pandemic, which in 2020 brought about the greatest recession since 1939. Thankfully, because of the Government's interventions to underpin the economy and support companies and the whole range of measures we brought in, the economy bounced back very significantly as we emerged from the emergency phase of Covid-19. A record number of jobs were created in the process.

Notwithstanding that, the pandemic has still left its impact. Economists in the European Central Bank, ECB, described it as a pandemic cycle of inflation caused by the imbalance of supply and demand in manufacturing and global supply chains across the world as economies and societies collectively and at the same time started endeavouring to come back and grow their economies with huge demand on products and so on. On top of the pandemic cycle of inflation came a war. It is a war unprecedented since the Second World War. It is having very serious impacts on the global economy, the EU economy and on Ireland's economy. It has, beyond any doubt, exacerbated the inflationary pressures on our economy, especially when it come to energy and to gas, oil and coal in particular. It is also feeding through into food security issues. That is concerning into the medium term. It is also affecting other commodities and products as well, such as wheat, corn, soya beans and so forth. Their prices are all going up because of this war.

The one thing we are certain about is the uncertainty. We cannot deal with this as a society on a week-to-week basis or on one tax alone, in isolation, as the Deputy has endeavoured to present it. That does not represent a coherent, sensible response of substance. What we actually require is an inclusive process involving the social partners and stakeholders in society to intelligently and sensibly respond to this crisis, now, in the middle of a war. That means social dialogue, it means dealing with the pay issue, with welfare, tax and the costs across the economy that people have but it also means dealing with climate. We cannot ignore the climate issue in this respect. The tax to which the Deputy referred and the increase that is in the legislation this Oireachtas passed, would represent about €1.40 over a month. In the overall scheme of things, that is not the main issue by any yardstick and the Deputy admitted that herself on Sunday on RTÉ radio. She acknowledged that this was not anywhere near the very large increases we have experienced because of these global issues that are impacting on us.

The Government has responded. In the budget, we allocated €1 billion in tax and welfare changes. We agreed a further package of €500 million, including the €200 energy credit, which will start appearing on bills this month and which is essentially a cut in electricity bills, as well as a lump sum payment of €125 for those in receipt of the fuel allowance. On 9 March we an-

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nounced a 20 cent reduction in the excise rate for petrol and a 15 cent reduction on auto diesel, with a proportionate reduction on the excise on green diesel. That will save consumers around €9 to €12 on every fill of petrol or diesel. Since coming into office, we have raised the fuel allowance from €630 to €1,039 and if one adds in the €200 rebate, that amounts to €1,239 for recipients of the fuel allowance.

The Government has moved very significantly on this but we do need a more comprehensive response now, which is the way we should go as a society.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We have made the case to the Taoiseach for a more comprehensive response. In fact, we have advocated for a mini-budget to deal with the very many costs that people are struggling with including sky-high rents, childcare costs and insurance costs that are out of control but up until today, the Taoiseach has singularly failed to listen to or respond to that message.

Today I asked the Taoiseach about the carbon tax hike and I put it to him that it is neither intelligent nor sensible to add any level of additional cost to people's home expenses at a time of soaring inflation and at a time when we know there is more, and arguably worse, to come. I want to put the question to the Taoiseach again and I want him to confirm for the House and the watching public that this carbon tax hike will not proceed on 1 May. It makes no sense at a time when families are struggling so badly. Every euro in costs, including the additional €22 on a fill of oil or €17 on the annual gas bill, counts. I want the Taoiseach to demonstrate that he can act, as he put it, "intelligently and sensibly" and call this tax hike off.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's entire response is political and electoral and nothing more.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: No, it is factual-----

The Taoiseach: Any increase in the carbon tax will be offset, so there will be no additional cost to people.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is rubbish.

The Taoiseach: I said to the Deputy that we need an inclusive process here, involving and including climate change as well. Yesterday's report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, warned that it is now or never to avoid climate catastrophe. That is what the panel said. It warned that humanity has less than three years to halt the rise of planet-warming carbon emissions. The UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, called out doublespeak on climate. He said that some governments and business leaders were saying one thing but doing another. He said, "Simply put, they are lying. And the results will be catastrophic." That is the view of a number of people in this House, including the Sinn Féin Party. They doublespeak on climate.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Seán Crowe: Where is the just transition?

The Taoiseach: It seems to me that it is the St. Augustine approach you are taking to climate change; "Oh Lord, make me chaste but not yet". That is your approach-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have told the Taoiseach before that attacking me is not an answer.

The Taoiseach: We can deal with-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Attacking me is not an answer.

The Taoiseach: There will be legislation-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: My chastity or otherwise is not an answer-----

The Taoiseach: I did not attack the Deputy at all. Do not be playing the victim here. I attacked her party and her party's policy. That is what I did. The Deputy heard me very clearly.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach refuses to answer questions. He refuses to.

The Taoiseach: In the context of the carbon tax-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is the Head of Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, without interruption, please.

The Taoiseach: I have made it very clear that we have already brought down, by about €9 and €12, what would have been the cost for petrol, diesel and so on.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On our initiative.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: We will make sure that any increase in carbon tax will be offset, but we have to do much more than that. That is my point

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then do it.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are way over time, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: My earlier response was that it needs more substance. I heard what the Deputy said on Sunday morning about a mini-budget.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Good for you.

The Taoiseach: It was so threadbare in substance as to be beyond any credibility.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Really.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are way over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Attacking people does not constitute answers.

The Taoiseach: It was the Sinn Féin Party and its policies that I criticised.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome Deputy Bacik to her first Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I was here for Leaders' Questions last week and I got an immediate response from the Taoiseach to my request that we expel the Russian ambassador when he informed the House that four senior Russian diplomats were to be expelled. That was something I very much welcomed. I renew my call to the Taoiseach to expel the Russian ambassador given the horrific news yesterday from Bucha and the growing

evidence of atrocious war crimes and their committal by Russian forces in Ukraine.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad the Taoiseach mentioned yesterday's chilling report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, because it leaves us no room for doubt that time is running out to save our planet and ensure the future of humanity. The Labour Party and I believe that the Government response to the climate emergency has unfortunately been characterised by too many delays, an inadequacy of governance and a failure to address the clear interconnection between the climate crisis, the energy security crisis, which has been exacerbated by the horrific war in Ukraine, and the cost of living crisis that is biting so deep into so many households across our communities.

At the weekend, we heard very worrying news regarding emissions here. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, confirmed the extent to which our emissions are heading in the wrong direction and the extent to which we are seeing delays in ensuring that we are moving to meet our emissions reduction targets. We learned that emissions from electricity alone rose by 21% last year. The EPA branded this as disappointing, which is patently an understatement because this is clearly not the direction of travel in which we so urgently need to be going.

Last week, I raised with the Taoiseach the Labour Party's concerns about Ireland's over-reliance on imported gas - another sign of moving in the wrong direction - which will only worsen if we proceed to build eight new gas-fired electricity plants by 2024, particularly when we have no clarity as to from where the gas to power them will come. What we need to see urgently are dramatic reductions in fossil fuel reliance, rapid increases in our renewable capacity and usage and rapid moves to electrification of heat, transport and other sectors, along with drastic action on retrofitting and active travel infrastructure and a national green hydrogen strategy, for which I have been calling for some time. If we do not take these urgent actions, we know from the IPCC that the consequences will be catastrophic, we will fail to keep global temperatures below 1.5°C and that the chance to avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis will be lost. This is an immediate and critical issue for us in Ireland. As I have said, all we have seen is delays and an inadequacy in governance.

Will the Taoiseach accept that we have a problem with rising emissions and that emissions are going in the wrong direction? Will he confirm the establishment immediately of a just transition commission to manage our transition to a decarbonised future, as the Just Transition Alliance has sought, and to ensure that our transition to decarbonisation is carried out in a fair and just way that will not adversely impact on those who are most severely affected by the cost-of-living crisis, the energy security crisis and the enormous hikes we have seen in energy bills for so many people in recent weeks? I am looking for an answer on the just transition commission in particular, but I also want to know where the gas for the eight new power plants that are projected to be built will come from.

The Taoiseach: I agree that we face a huge challenge. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Yesterday's report from the IPCC is a stark warning to all governments and to all parliaments that it is going to be impossible to put this matter to one side or defer action. The first item on the agenda today was the carbon tax, as if it was the be all and end all of the increases in fuel energy when we all know it was not and is not. The overwhelming increases in oil and gas have been caused by our coming out of the pandemic and the war. We need honest debate about these things and we cannot always falling back on what is politically convenient in the

short term. Short-term political convenience will not save the planet. We passed legislation in this House. It is interesting that people in the bottom four deciles of income are protected from the carbon tax. Some people are better off because all of that tax is given back in the form of increases to the fuel poverty allowance and energy efficiency measures. We need those resources to drive on retrofitting in our homes. That money is not going to come from fresh air. There is not an endless kitty in the Exchequer, as some people would like to believe. We need honesty and consensus on this issue, and to stop playing politics with it all the time. I am not saying the Deputy is playing politics but whenever the Government does anything, someone in this House wants to knock it back.

The legislation has been passed. We have been in government for 18 months. There is going to be an enormous challenge to meet our targets for 2030, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 51%. The decisions we take today are critical. We cannot put them off. We will deal with this energy crisis but as we do so, we must protect the edifice we have in place around climate change. That is my point. We should try to get consensus in this House and stop playing politics with this issue. That is what we should do if we are sincere about climate change. I am open to working with all parties in the House on climate change because it is an existential issue. The least we can do, as a Parliament, is to make sure that we give the generations coming after us some chance of a quality of life. What awaits future generations is truly horrendous if we continue on in denial.

We will be establishing a just transition commission. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is extending the contract of the current just transition commissioner, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, to the end of the year, and a full commission will be established. A great deal of progress has been made in respect of responses, particularly in the midlands. There was frustration at the acceleration and delivery of projects in that area but that is a very important part of it. The carbon budgets will happen. There have been intensive discussions with various Departments in respect of the different sectors and the contributions they have to make to carbon budgets arising from the legislation.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for answering one of my questions, namely, the one on the just transition commission. I agree that there is a need to be honest and constructive in this debate. My party is serious about the environment and ensuring we take the urgent actions necessary to meet our ambitious targets. We support those ambitious targets because we see them as necessary. Indeed, the IPCC has clearly pointed out to us just how urgent it is that we start to take the necessary actions to meet our targets. However, our concern is that there simply is not sufficient urgency in the Government's responses. We need governance structures to be put in place to enable us to meet those targets.

I asked about the just transition commission. I am also asking about the climate action delivery board, which, I understand, failed to meet more than once last year. Has that board met in the past three months? If so, who attended? We need to get the governance right in order to ensure that we can meet those ambitious targets that we so urgently need to meet if we are to save the planet for our children and grandchildren. I agree with what the Taoiseach said about honesty and constructive debate. I am trying to engage in constructive debate, but I would like to hear some answers on governance.

The Taoiseach: The Cabinet sub-committee on climate change has been meeting regularly. There is an overall Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, now dealing with climate change. My Department has a co-ordinating role in terms of the delivery

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of climate change policy. We have made progress. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act, which is comprehensive legislation, became law in 2021, as the Deputy knows. That legislation fulfilled the commitments in the programme for Government to introduce the climate Bill, establish in law the 2050 target of net-zero emissions and make the adoption of five-year carbon budgets that set maximum emissions by sector a legal requirement.

At COP26, Ireland announced that it would more than double its climate finance contribution to developing countries to €225 million per year by 2025. A strategic roadmap setting out the delivery of those commitments will be published this year.

We are committed to the scaling and speeding up of our switch to alternative energy systems. The Maritime Area Planning Bill, which established the maritime area regulatory authority, MARA, was passed last year. We are working intensively on the wind energy piece in order to drive offshore wind energy projects that would enable us to be a net exporter of energy post 2030.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach would have people believe that all the price increases are down to the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the reality is that quite a few of them are down to profiteering here on the home front. Bord Gáis is increasing gas prices by 39%. Its parent company made a profit of more than €1 billion last year. The price of food goes up and up, but so too do retail profits. Tesco made £1.7 billion in profits in Britain and Ireland the year before last. The landlord class, who may well not have a word of Russian between them, jacked up rents at a rate equal to 10% per annum in the fourth quarter of last year.

What can the Government do about the cost-of-living crisis? I will tell the Taoiseach four things that can be done here and now. First, the Government can tell the ESB, which is a State-owned company, that 25% increases are just not on. This company made nearly €700 million profit last year. Tell the ESB it can break even this year - no more, no less - and that the profit margins can be used to at least freeze prices, if it cannot actually cut them. Second, the Government can send a cheque to households to ensure they can ride this crisis out. How much per cheque? I would suggest €2,000. How should we pay for it? By introducing an emergency 2% tax on the wealth of every millionaire household in the country. Allow them €1 million for their primary residences. I am talking about the €1 million on top of that. The tax would apply to the richest 5%. That would more than cover it. I will give the Taoiseach the maths if he wants me to.

The Taoiseach: Please do.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is not rocket fuel for inflation. The Government would be redistributing wealth, not printing money. On the third measure, the Government says it cannot bring in cost-of-living packages every week. That ignores the fact that households are being hit with cost-of-living increases every week. Here is one thing it does not have to bring in at all; it just has to cancel something. Cancel the carbon tax increase planned for 1 May. The Government cannot be on the side of the people in a cost-of-living crisis and at the same time be heaping more taxes on them. Do not talk to us about a green agenda. If the Government wants to make the green agenda deeply unpopular, then it will do precisely what it is planning to do. Instead, it should bring in a tax on the big corporate carbon polluters.

Last but not least, and this will not cost a penny - it is a bit of advice from me and I will give it free of charge - the Government should stop with the Marie Antoinette stuff. Stop talk-

ing to people about spending less time in the shower. It is patronising. People do not want to be patronised; they want action from their Government. The Taoiseach might comment on my action proposals and tell us what the Government is actually going to do.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's first premise is wrong, in my view. The overwhelming causes of the increase in energy prices are global. They derive from the pandemic and from the war, without question.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Excise duty.

The Taoiseach: Anyone with any degree of intelligence knows that. I would appreciate if we had less of the heckling and nonsense that is going on here.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You do not want to tell the truth. That is all that is wrong with you.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Carbon tax and-----

The Taoiseach: Everybody knows the cause of this is an unprecedented war on the Continent of Europe that nobody anticipated. In advance of that war, there was a deliberate strategy to cut energy and fuel supplies. There is no question about that now, in the full light of day. Unfortunately, that has created very negative impacts on us all, particularly workers and people on very low incomes. That is why, as I said earlier, that we need an inclusive, comprehensive and sensible response, as a country, to two major crises in a year.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Does the Taoiseach know what sensible is?

The Taoiseach: That means covering all aspects of this, including pay policy, tax, welfare and climate. To do it on a tax-by-tax basis makes no sense. It is incoherent. That is why I am not jumping to the political bait from the Deputy and others in the House who are attempting to make this about one issue or one tax., which is nowhere near the real cause of what is transpiring here. We have already brought down the excise duty on fuel by 15 to 20 cent. That equates to an average of between €9 and €12 when filling the average tank. That is what we have done already but that on its own will not be a coherent enough response to this.

On the carbon tax, as I said earlier, lower income families, when you talk about redistribution, get more back from the carbon tax receipts than they pay. The ESRI's research shows that households in the bottom four income deciles see all the cost of the carbon tax increase offset, with the bottom three deciles being better off as a result of these measures. That said, any increase can be offset and neutralised by the Government while protecting a medium-term instrument and mechanism that is urgently needed for climate change in the future. I know the Deputy asked me not to mention climate change because everybody wants to postpone any tough actions or difficulties around that. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, did not mention showers by the way but people go on with that nonsense anyway.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: April showers.

The Taoiseach: He did not mention it at all. He believes strongly and passionately-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He mentioned the wolves all right.

The Taoiseach: -----in energy efficiency, which is a legitimate pursuit and a good policy

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across the board, war or no war, and one of the most effective is to equip ordinary working people with the wherewithal to retrofit their homes so they can reduce their bills in the long and medium term. It is important that we do that work and that we are not deflected from it.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach has tried to do it again with his three-card trick again and attempt to con the people. He said it is the pandemic and what is happening in Ukraine. Of course, it is the pandemic and what is happening in Ukraine; we debate those issues and their effect on prices with the Taoiseach every day. I raised the third card; the card the Taoiseach clearly ignored in his reply, which is the question of profiteering. The Taoiseach stayed silent on the fact that the parent company of Bord Gáis made profits of more than €1 billion last year. He remained silent on the point I put to him; that the ESB, a State company, made nearly €700 million last year and yet is increasing prices by 25% in the coming weeks. Why is the ESB doing that and, more to the point, why is the Taoiseach allowing it to do it? That is the key question I am asking the Taoiseach to answer.

The Taoiseach: The only three-card trick I saw attempted in this House in the last month was from yourselves when at one stage, prior to the war, they had us believing the Russians were not going to start any war-----

Deputy Mick Barry: We never said that.

The Taoiseach: -----and that NATO was the warmonger. That is what the Deputy and others said in this House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We never said that once.

The Taoiseach: That is the only three-card trick I saw attempted in this House. I did not mention Deputy Boyd Barrett at all; he has been consistent enough but Deputies Barry, Paul Murphy and others had us believe that the warmongers in Europe and NATO were going to be the cause of this war. Now we know the truth of who caused the war. Less of that kind of trickery from the Deputy from time to time-----

Deputy Mick Barry: Is the Taoiseach going to answer?

The Taoiseach: In terms of the ESB and any price gouging there is a Competition and Consumer Protection Commission in place to investigate all of that. The Deputy should present the evidence-----

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach represents the Government.

The Taoiseach: -----on that and I will have no issue with that being pursued.

Deputy Mick Barry: What is the Government going to do?

The Taoiseach: There should be no price gouging or exploitation of the situation. The ESB has a huge capital debt on the other side of that balance sheet by the way. It has that debt from investing in making sure we have energy security and supply, which are also very important. I did not get an opportunity to make that point in response to Deputy Bacik's question. There is a balance in the short term in energy and security of energy supply and gas will be a transitional fuel; let there be no doubt about that. As we need to dramatically increase our renewables, we will need gas as a transitional fuel.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I want to acknowledge the range of supports put in place by Government to support businesses, particularly those in the hospitality sector, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Without these supports many businesses would have closed permanently but thankfully many were able to survive at reduced capacity for the last two years. While I appreciate that we are not out of the woods yet, hopefully in the next year or two things will be able to return to normal with the easing of restrictions. Many of these businesses are now facing a new and significant challenge to their future, namely, staff shortages. According to research carried out by Fáilte Ireland, as many as nine out of ten hospitality businesses are having difficulty recruiting staff with up to 40,000 vacancies. These vacancies are across all departments, including chefs, kitchen staff, front-of-house staff, waiters, waitresses, housekeeping staff and receptionists. Many restaurants are only operating for four or five days per week. One local catering company in Galway has 15 vacancies, with no applications or interest being expressed in the available positions. Before the pandemic, the tourism and hospitality sector was worth almost €10 billion to the Irish economy, with hotels, bars and restaurants employing up to 300,000 people, with 100,000 extra in the summer months. There is significant pent-up demand from international tourism and also domestic tourism, with traditional annual events and festivals expected to proceed this year.

Tourism should be expected to return to record numbers, but unfortunately staff shortages are threatening this recovery. The work permit scheme is strict about qualifying job categories and rates of pay. The work permit system should be looked at to enable the hospitality sector to secure essential workers and to help our economy to recover as quickly as possible. Difficulties organising visas, long processing times and many vacancies in job categories that do not meet the criteria need to be reviewed to help our economy in the short to medium term. Another significant issue is accommodation, with many hotels setting aside a certain number of rooms for workers. This takes capacity out of the tourism sector.

Will the Taoiseach look at the criteria for the work permit system and expand them to facilitate the hospitality sector?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and acknowledging the strong support the Government has given to the hospitality sector because, without question, it was a major victim as a sector as a result of Covid-19. It had a horrendous time during the two years of Covid-19. The Government allocated a record level of funding for tourism in budget 2022, of €288 million in total, which was an increase of about €67 million. That covered marketing strategies, with €80 million for the Tourism Ireland programme to strengthen its international campaigns.

We are responding to labour shortages through a combination of the employment permits regime and through upskilling, especially with training in the further education sector. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is working closely with the Department of Social Protection on the Pathways to Work plan to do everything possible.

A number of occupations in the hospitality sector have been removed from the ineligible occupations list and are eligible for the general employment permit. Access to employment permits was widened for all grades of chef in 2019, including experienced executive chefs, head chefs, sous chefs, commis chefs and so on. They can all now apply for a general employment permit to work in a restaurant at a remuneration level of at least €30,000.

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In 2021, 400 employment permits for chefs were expedited to support the sector as the economy reopened. In October 2021, the Minister of State, Deputy English, established a quota for 350 general employment permits for managerial roles in the hospitality sector, including catering, bar, hotel and accommodation managers. The demand for those permits is low. I accept that it is higher for chefs. Approximately 1,096 employment permits have been issued to chefs since January 2021. Some 1,079 were general employment permits, six were critical employment permits and 11 were reactivation permits. There are currently about 827 chef applications in the queue, awaiting processing, with 749 in the standard queue and 78 in the trusted partner queue. We will do everything we can to accelerate the work permit process to meet a genuine shortage in the hospitality sector. There is no doubt about that.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. As he knows, Galway is a culture capital, known for its many festivals and cultural events, including the Galway Arts Festival, the Galway Races and the Film Fleadh. No matter what weekend people come to Galway, they will find a festival somewhere. The lack of staff will have a negative impact on tourism and the success of many of these festivals. Businesses are now trying to plan for the summer season, but they are limited by the difficulty of securing staff. I am aware of a restaurateur who went to Portugal and secured six staff on the condition that they be provided with accommodation, which that person was in a position to do. I ask that the Taoiseach bring together the representatives of the State agencies, the restaurant associations, the Irish Hotels Federation and the vintners to look at this serious situation and to try to find solutions so that our economy can recover as quickly as possible. I acknowledge what the Taoiseach said about work permits, but hotels and restaurants cannot get many front-line staff, such as ordinary kitchen staff, waiters, waitresses and reception staff either. They cannot even get them within the EU, never mind outside it, because of the difficulties with work permits.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister again about that. I would just say that Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment advised that it only received 12 applications for hospitality manager positions under the newly introduced quota, which I referenced earlier. That might indicate that demand for those type of positions is low.

Processing times are not what they should be, but the Department has an action plan to reduce turnaround times. That plan is yielding results. The processing team has trebled in size and daily output has more than tripled from 2021 levels. That figure relates to the processing of the work permit applications. Internal processes have been streamlined, so progress is being made. For example, in medicine, hundreds of doctors have been removed from the system thanks to changes put in place following engagement with the Department of Justice and the Department of Health.

Waiting time for critical skills employment permits has been more than halved in the past seven weeks. The Department plans to maintain processing times for all critical skill applications at approximately six weeks for all of quarter 2, on the assumption that demand remains at current levels.

I will go back to the Department in respect of chefs, in particular. There are many people who could do with a weekend in Galway, given how the Deputy has described it.

Deputy Noel Grealish: You would want to be able to feed them in Galway.

The Taoiseach: You would find some way of doing it.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Deputy Denis Naughten: They are not agreed.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Naughten.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Ireland is setting out a very ambitious set of targets in our carbon budgets for the next 15 years. If we are to achieve such significant reductions, we will need to bring the public along with us on that journey. People cannot be commanded. Effective change means putting the levers of climate action into people's own hands. That will not be achieved by shoe-horning continental solutions into addressing the unique set of challenges that we face here in Ireland. We have a three-day debate every October in relation to our annual budget. Yet, the Government is only providing a 200-minute debate tomorrow on Dáil Éireann's final approval of a carbon budget for the next 15 years, which will have long-term economic and societal impacts on every single individual. We believe that amount of time is insufficient.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On the same question, earlier the Taoiseach asked us and other speakers to be meaningful and honest. We opposed this carbon tax two years ago when the Government put forward its ten-card trick. There was talk about a three-card trick. We want a full and meaningful debate, and we want it today. We are challenging the Order of Business for that reason, to ensure that people can live and that they can survive, given the increases in the costs of ESB, gas, excise duty, etc. The Taoiseach dances around like on the head of a pin telling fibs and alienating us. We will go off for two weeks on Thursday but we will be back and on 1 May we will add insult to injury with another carbon tax. It is totally unacceptable and totally unpalatable to our people. It is anathema to right thinking people. We do not deny climate change, but this is not the time and this is not the way to deal with it, with a stick rather than a carrot. All the Taoiseach is missing here is the múinteoir and the bata, lecturing us all on what we can and cannot do. We have been honest with the people. It is the Taoiseach who has been dishonest, not us.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I call Deputy Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The war in Ukraine has led the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to put serious challenges to farmers across the country around food provision. However, the huge increases in fuel, as the Taoiseach knows, have had a devastating impact on farmers and fishermen. Fishermen all around the coast are telling us that they cannot go out to sea, given these costs. Yet, there is no intervention. We asked for statements on this issue, so that we could put the concerns we are hearing from farmers and fishermen across the country directly to the Minister, focus on this and hear what the Government's plans are to assist the fishing and farming industries to meet the needs of our people in terms of food supply and food security. Will the Taoiseach please make time this week for that to happen?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: After a very brief respite during Covid-19 on the homeless situation because of the temporary eviction ban and the ban on further rent increases, now that those measures have been lifted, the family homeless situation is once again spiralling out of control. We need to address it in this House as a matter of absolute urgency. The figures are

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back up towards 10,000 people. In the past few days, I have been informed of 60 families who are going to be evicted from the Shannon Arms apartment complex in Limerick.

Yesterday, I spent most of the day on the telephone with a mother of three, whose husband works 12-hour shifts in a Dublin hospital, who was sitting in a park and had nowhere to live. This is someone whose husband protected us on the front line and now the family are homeless. They have been looking for tenancies for six months but they cannot find them. I am hearing story after story. The situation is getting decisively worse. We need to address it in this House as a matter of absolute urgency and have a discussion about what additional emergency measures we will take to stop the homelessness crisis spiralling out of control.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy; his time is up. Can the Taoiseach deal with those questions?

The Taoiseach: First, in terms of Deputy Naughten's question, the carbon budget is provided for in legislation. In fairness, he would have heard Deputy Bacik say earlier that we are not moving fast enough. We have to move too. There are three and a half hours tomorrow for the debate. The more substantive debate could be on the actual sectoral budgets, which will come later in the year-----

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Dáil has no say in that. The final decision is tomorrow.

The Taoiseach: -----but it is very important that we set this overall limit. Let us be under no illusions, however. This will be very challenging. I anticipate more pushback from the Dáil. As I said earlier, as the UN Secretary-General said, there will be a lot of doublespeak on this. Many people will be saying that we need to do this and that but not yet, not now, not that way or to do it some other way.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is the Taoiseach's way or the highway.

The Taoiseach: That is what is going to happen in this debate; of that I have no doubt. We have got to move ahead, however. There are three and a half hours for the debate tomorrow.

In terms of Deputy Mattie McGrath, I am nowhere near as a good dancer as he is. I have to put that on the record.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I can dance to music. Whose tune is the Taoiseach dancing to? He is dancing to the tune of the globalists.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to answer, please.

The Taoiseach: I would never attempt to emulate the Deputy in that regard.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: This is no joking matter.

The Taoiseach: I want to say this to Deputy McGrath, however-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Taoiseach is dancing to the tune of Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the music is bad.

The Taoiseach: I do not mind a meaningful debate at all. We should have a meaningful debate. I am not on the Business Committee. Only so much can be done on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays in terms of Dáil time. Again, there is Private Members' time, which people

have-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We will be using it.

The Taoiseach: -----if they want to put forward issues for debate.

In terms of Deputy Mac Lochlainn's question, the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, is very well aware of the issues. In fact, I was with him in counties Donegal and Derry on Friday and Saturday. It is clear that he has engaged with the fishers on an overall package of measures, which are obviously connected to Brexit as well, to try to enable them to get over this period. He also had engagement with the farming sector in terms of support for tillage farmers, in particular, around the food crop issues. Again, Deputy Mac Lochlainn is on the committee. We can only do so much in any one week but I have no issue in terms of debates on agriculture or fishers. If we cannot do it this week, maybe we can extend. I do not mind additional hours perhaps being added to the programme; I am open to that. There is also Private Members' time. The Deputy could maybe have put something forward in Private Members' time.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, again, I have no issue with a debate. There are many factors with regard to homelessness as well. It is not all to do with evictions, by the way. In fact, we have growing-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is all getting worse, though.

The Taoiseach: No, there are actually other factors, which are quite significant in terms of emergency accommodation we have to provide, which has nothing to do with Ukraine but in terms of normal inward traffic to the country. That is a factor as well.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: To clarify, a Ceann Comhairle, is the Government agreed to making time available for statements?

The Taoiseach: No, I simply said that the Deputy would have been involved himself in preparing the agenda.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Come on now. The Taoiseach knows how this works. The Government decides what is on the schedule.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin has two Private Members' Business slots this week and, for some reason, it did not decide to raise the issues relating to fishermen or farmers.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On a point of clarification, I do not like the mood music coming from the Taoiseach's lips. It is the dead man's waltz.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am now putting the question.

Question put: "That the proposal for dealing with this week's business be agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 64; Níl, 57; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stáon</i>
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	

<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Barry, Mick.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	

<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Mattie McGrath and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Evidence is emerging of brutal war crimes by the Russian military in Ukraine. Innocent civilians have been shot dead with their arms behind their backs by retreating troops in the town of Bucha and the area surrounding Kyiv. There is aerial footage of dead bodies on the side of the road. These actions are appalling and barbaric. They demand investigation by the International Criminal Court. Russia must be held accountable. Incredibly, however, the Russian Embassy in Ireland has dismissed the evidence as what it calls “another stage in the disinformation war against Russia.” Ambassador Filatov continues as an unapologetic propagandist for Russia’s criminal invasion of Ukraine. In the face of these war crimes, it is now long past time that Ireland acts decisively to stand four-square for human rights and justice. It is time to expel the Russian ambassador from Ireland. I ask the Taoiseach to act.

The Taoiseach: I condemn utterly the indiscriminate murder of civilians in Ukraine by Russian forces. The images we have seen from Bucha, Irpin and other small villages cut very deep and leave an indelible mark on the human conscience. These acts of depravity have to be responded to. Ireland and European Union member states have acted very decisively to this war in the form of the most severe and unprecedented sanctions yet deployed against the Russian

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Federation. There will be a fifth round of sanctions to which Ireland will be a party. We have been in discussion over the past 48 hours regarding those sanctions. We took significant measures last week in respect of four senior officials in the Russian Federation embassy by asking them to leave the country. We will work in concert with other EU member states to do things as collectively as we can and with the most impact.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I have just received notification this very minute that a company, Positive Care, which provides residential services for young people, is to be put out of business with the loss of up to 240 jobs. The company provides residential services for vulnerable young people in up to 25 facilities, as I understand it. I appreciate that I am inquiring with the Taoiseach about this matter at very short notice, but I ask him to make himself aware of what is happening. It is very serious for the provision of services for young, vulnerable people, especially those who are in residential care. The loss of this service provider represents a massive blow to the capability of this country to provide for the most vulnerable of our young people.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The measures that Tusla takes in respect of children in residential care, whether its own or private residential care, are really important. Where we use private residential care, all procurement measures must be adhered to. My understanding is that this company has not been successful in the recent tendering process and that Tusla is engaging with it to ensure that a care plan is put in place for all children who will be leaving the care of the company. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter, which I will continue to monitor.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There is an appalling disparity in the Government’s allocation of our national mackerel quota. Only 2% is assigned to all vessels under 15 m, while 98% is given to a few much larger boats. Inshore fishers make up the majority of the fishing sector and they engage in the most sustainable type of fishing which has been practised in our island and coastal communities for centuries, yet they only receive 2% of the quota. Last year, because of this massive disparity, inshore fishers were forced to stop catching mackerel in June. I spoke on the issue then. In the meantime, I have repeatedly asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to adjust the quota. He has refused to do so. It is very clear that last year’s situation will be repeated. Small family fishers who are just getting by will again be restricted in making their livelihoods without policy change. Will the Government please reconsider this blatantly unfair policy?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I know it is something we have discussed before. Mackerel is the species most impacted by Brexit trade and co-operation agreement. Between now and 2026, we will lose 25% of our mackerel-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: Sorry, but I am not asking about that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I know that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am talking about the national allocation of our mackerel quota.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I heard the Deputy’s question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am answering, but context is obviously really important.

We have only a certain quota nationally. The point I am making is that 25% of that between now and 2026 will be lost due to the severe impact, particularly on mackerel, of Brexit. We have to manage what we have. There is not agreement that any of that would be reallocated from any of the sectors that currently use it to the inshore hook-and-line sector. At the moment, that sector, which extremely sustainable, viable and important, gets 400 tonnes per year. A few years ago, it did not get any. It has since been allocated 400 tonnes. Any decision to change that would require a significant and comprehensive consultation process.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is only 2% to the sector.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is correct. There is not agreement among the sector on that. It is certainly something I am considering.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am considering the matter but there has been no decision made in respect of it. This is not straight forward because fishers are not agreed on it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to quote back to the Taoiseach the words of the UN General Secretary, António Guterres. The Taoiseach quoted Mr. Guterres this morning as follows: “Some government and business leaders are saying one thing but doing another. Simply put, they are lying”. The Taoiseach seems to think that this applies to the Opposition because those in opposition, or some of u, at least, are against the imposition of punitive carbon taxes on ordinary people. Yet carbon taxes seem to be the only tool in the Government’s kit for dealing with climate change. While the Taoiseach uses this quote, at the same time he is leaving the door open to liquified natural gas, LNG, the proliferation of data centres and the reintroduction of gas-fired power stations. How does the Taoiseach answer that accusation? António Guterres is actually accusing the Taoiseach and the Government not the Opposition, which is opposed to the imposition of carbon taxes on ordinary people.

The Taoiseach: I disagree. I quoted that this morning because, without question, there is a lot of doublespeak in this House and there is a lot of doublespeak among the Opposition. When it comes to any measure relating to climate change that has any sense of unpopularity about it, the Opposition will resist it or find some excuse to go against it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: What is unpopular with the Taoiseach is banning data centres and shutting down the possibility LNG here.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Bríd Smith: What about the actual fossil fuels?

The Taoiseach: The ESRI’s research on carbon tax contradicts the Deputy’s assertion. It states that the lower four deciles are not negatively impacted by it because it is offset by-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: Nonsense. The Taoiseach should listen to the science not to his own logic.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Because the carbon tax is redistributed, the lower three are basically not negatively affected. The Deputy knows that. However, that does not matter to her because she

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is only interested in the electoral gain on this.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am asking the Taoiseach about the science of allowing in LNG and allowing data centres to use up our electricity.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: We do not have LNG in this country.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Government is allowing it in. It is leaving the door open.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy please. There is no provision for people to interrupt continuously while questions are-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: There is when you are angry and you cannot help yourself. The Taoiseach is accusing me of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No. There is no such provision. The Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I attended a presentation this morning on a report by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. I commend Sr. Bernadette MacMahon and her team, alongside Dr. Nikki Dunne of Family Carers Ireland, on the excellent work they have done and presented on the cost of care at home for those with disabilities and on the premise that everyone should have a minimum essential standard of living, MESL, based on one's essential needs not the wants. The report is a phenomenal piece of work.

One matter that arises from it is that being in receipt of carer's allowance is not an automatic entitlement for the fuel allowance. Given the times we are living in and that the research today says that at least €168 per week more will be required just to give that minimum essential standard of living, can the Government commit to including carer's allowance as an automatic entitlement to the fuel allowance, now and in the future, and remove it from the means test?

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and I commend the work of the Vincentian Partnership. We take on board many of its recommendations when compiling budgets. That is why in the most recent budget I was delighted to be able to introduce a broad range of measures to support carers. We increased the means threshold and the capital allowance. A great deal of work has been done in this area in order to improve the situation of carers. However, there is more to be done. Of course, we will take any reports of this nature into consideration when we are looking at our budget considerations in the coming months. I will be meeting with the Vincentian Partnership, along with the many other organisations to which we provide a lot of support, and asking it to highlight the issues outlined in its report.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This morning we learned that the Department of Health will pay the €187,000 salary of the former Chief Medical Officer, CMO, Dr. Tony Holohan, while he dips his toe into academia at Trinity College Dublin. The Department will also have to pay his replacement. Is this not evidence of a cosy cartel or a two- or three-tier society? People are hard-pressed to try to survive and yet the Government can do this for Dr. Holohan, its friend. This goes all the way back to Aughinish Alumina. They covered up for each other and this is his reward. He can go into Trinity College and the Department of Health will pay his money while people wait for all kinds of treatments for cancer, orthodontics, spina bifida, you name it. As stated, the Department is also going to pay his replacement. The Government is taking

the public for right patsies. That is one thing they are not. We have decent people. Show them some respect and stop this double-jobbing and scandalous waste of money.

The Taoiseach: I am not familiar with the arrangements between the Department of Health and Trinity College. I was not involved, one way or another, in the decision taken by the Department of Health to create this post on public health and pandemic preparedness and second the CMO to it. That is my understanding of the matter from the perspective of the Department of Health. The Deputy's personalisation of it between myself and Dr. Holohan should be withdrawn. I had no hand, act or part in it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Personalisation. Shocking. Is the Taoiseach in charge of the country or not?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is the Cabinet in charge?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please. I call Deputy Connolly.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where has collective responsibility gone?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Taoiseach referred selectively to the report that was published earlier today. He talked about doublespeak and putting things off. The decarbonisation zones were an action under the Climate Action Plan 2019. Almost a year ago, local authorities were requested to submit decarbonisation plans. Galway City Council did that. There has been absolutely no action on the part of the Government in a year. It is really since 2019, but it is more than a year now because April was the closing date. The plans sit in the Department awaiting approval in the context of guidelines. If that is not doublespeak in action and complete hypocrisy, I do not know what is. I am raising this matter for the second time in a month. When will we get action on the decarbonisation plans that sit with the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government pending the introduction of regulations?

The Taoiseach: Let us be clear that in the last 18 months there has been unprecedented action on climate change. Legislation that has been passed on carbon budgeting and the maritime Act will give us the opportunity to develop wind energy. The idea that the Government is engaged in doublespeak - the Deputy itemised one issue and through that made the generalised accusation against us - does not hold water at all. That is a flawed premise upon which to base her assertions because the Government has been very strong on climate change on a whole range of issues of substance. Country councils do not need Government guidance on what is required-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Department is sitting on the applications.

The Taoiseach: -----because most local authorities-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: A Cheann Comhairle-----

The Taoiseach: Just hear me out please. You have this facility - you ask the question, you do not like the answer and you interrupt. You are not alone in that. Others are doing the same.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I did not get an answer.

The Taoiseach: I have been around the country. Local authorities-----

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Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will move out of the way.

The Taoiseach: -----are advancing right across the country on active travel, a whole range of environmental schemes and on biodiversity. The Deputy has overstated the position.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. I call Deputy McAuliffe.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Connolly has overstated the position.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: This weekend we had another person murdered in my constituency in what has been reported as being a gangland assassination. This follows weeks in which other people have been murdered following the discharge of an illegal firearm. We have had homes that have been petrol-bombed or suffered arson attacks. We have had a kidnapping. We have had social media platforms being used by rival gangs to issue threats. We had one family home where people were intimidated so it could be turned into a headquarters for a drug cartel and retrofitted with bulletproof glass and CCTV.

There are many people in my community wondering what is coming at them next due to these actions by the rival gangs. Will the Taoiseach join me in condemning this illegal drug industry and what it is doing to my community? Can he raise these matters with the Garda Commissioner? There is a good history of success of Dublin City Council and An Garda Síochána working together to tackle some of these issues. More resources would benefit that.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for articulating so vividly the horrors of what is occurring in certain locations across the city. In the area he represents there was, at the weekend, the shocking murder of a young man. Certainly at Government level we will do everything we can. The Garda and Minister for Justice are doing everything they can through the criminal justice system to stamp out this criminality. At a broader level, we want to work with communities on the social side through initiatives like, for example, the North East Inner City, NEIC, which is a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach. We want to apply that to other communities not just in the city of Dublin but across the country.

Deputy Alan Farrell: As the Taoiseach is aware, the HSE is having significant and sustained issues with retaining suitable staff to complete the 91 children's disability network teams across the country. Will he please outline the steps the Government is taking to arrest this critical deficit within the service, which is having an adverse impact on young people across the country?

The Taoiseach: I will certainly raise that and follow that through for the Deputy. He has raised a very fair point.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I raise the lack of secondary school places, especially in Midleton. I acknowledge the Carrigtohill campus is going ahead but I was made aware the Minister for Education had turned to asking the additional schools to open additional classes last year. I ask the Taoiseach if there are any plans to build another secondary school in Midleton.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Buckley, along with Deputies O'Connor, Stanton and others, has been raising this issue for quite some time about the need in the east of County Cork. Very substantial investment has, as Deputy Buckley knows, been sanctioned for the Carrigtohill site. I understand there are further challenges with school placements. I will follow that through with the Department of Education and see where we are.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The number of unfilled consultant posts at Mayo University Hospital is reaching critical levels. I have a responsibility to the people of Mayo to raise this issue as I want our hospital in Castlebar to succeed into the future. With over 700 unfilled consultant posts in hospitals around the country and the age profile of consultants in Mayo University Hospital being much closer to retirement age there needs to be action to get new specialist registrars into our hospital. I understand there are still issues ongoing to remediate consultants pay parity and restore trust between consultant bodies and health service management around financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI. Will the Taoiseach provide an update on when we will see agreement reached on the implementation of consultant contracts, which we need if we are to have any chance of getting vacant posts filled?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. First, the total number of funded consultant positions in Mayo University Hospital is about 64, with 60.5 currently in post when locums are included. The area of difficulty in filling posts in Mayo University Hospital is predominantly within the medical speciality, so there are a range of issue there. Interviews will be held in April for two obstetric consultant posts and one consultant endocrinology post. Other posts that have been advertised and have interview dates pending includes positions in geriatrics, emergency medicine, respiratory medicine, cardiology medicine and medicine in general. At a broader level, there has been substantial recruitment of consultants across the board. It is higher than was sometimes anticipated. On the advancement of new contracts in line with the Sláintecare proposal, we have had intensive discussions on that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Taoiseach is aware, coach operators are not at present eligible to register for VAT. That would enable them to claim back the VAT paid on fuel, tyres and other running costs. I understand some EU requirement does not allow for such registration. The Taoiseach has been advocating at EU level for some flexibility on VAT issues. In that context, this is an area that needs urgent consideration.

Coach operators are under particular pressure at present. One small-scale operator in my county operates a cross-Border service established in 2012. The same fares are being charged today as back in 2012. That is not viable in the long run and the coach operators need some particular assistance in that regard, especially with costs to try to reduce them. They cannot pass any more costs onto the consumer. In that context there are particular difficulties in the Border region because in the neighbouring jurisdiction, such businesses are eligible for VAT registration.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. The Department of Finance is advised by Revenue the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to EU VAT law. In general, the VAT directive provides all goods and services are liable for VAT at the standard rate, currently 23% in Ireland, unless they fall within categories of goods and services specified in the directive. The directive also allows for historic VAT treatment to be maintained under certain conditions.

Ireland has retained the application of VAT exemption to the transport of passengers and their accompanying baggage. This means the supplier does not register for VAT, does not charge VAT on the supply of their services and has no VAT-recovery entitlement on costs where such costs are used for the exempted supply of passenger transport. Ireland may continue to apply the VAT exemption on the supply of domestic passenger transport as governed by Article 371 of the VAT directive. However, it cannot change the conditions under which the exemption was granted. In accordance with the directive a reduced rate of VAT could be introduced to the

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supply of passenger transport in place of the exemption that currently applies. While this would give the transport operator deductibility in relation to VAT on their business inputs it would involve charging passengers VAT on their fares.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We will have to look at other ways. We will work with the Deputy and engage further on this to see what we can do.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time but I will call the remaining Deputies if they can put their question in 30 seconds. Deputy Mythen is first.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I have had several smaller childcare services in Wexford contacting me regarding the new core funding for the early childhood care and education, ECCE, sector. Some services, through the online portal, are only showing they will break even or see a slight increase in funding allocations. Will the Taoiseach contact the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and ensure that where there are such small margins, and where smaller operators will continue to struggle and possibly close altogether, extra help will be given to them?

Deputy Patrick Costello: The Department of Education has announced an alternate sitting for leaving certificate 2022 for students who have close family bereavement, Covid-19 illness or certain other categories of illness. I have been contacted by families of students with epilepsy who are trying to be included in that scheme, especially students who may experience a seizure just before or during an exam. So far they have had vague, uncertain answers on whether students with epilepsy will be included in the scheme. Can the Government give certainty a flexible and compassionate approach will be taken for students with epilepsy by including them in the scheme?

Deputy Michael Collins: Last Monday week a lady of 88 years of age fell on the roadside near her home in Bandon. She was lifted by her family back to her house knowing she had a hip and shoulder injury. We found out afterwards she had a fractured hip and broken shoulder. They called an ambulance immediately at 2 p.m. but it did not arrive until 4 a.m. and she was in hospital at 5 a.m., 15 hours later. I have heard similar stories from around the country. In order for the people of west Cork and throughout the country to regain confidence in their ambulance service, I ask the Taoiseach to investigate how this lady was left waiting for 15 hours for an ambulance and to make sure that ambulances appointed to specific areas are not travelling all over the country but are where they should be.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I want to raise the impending wipe out of the pig industry in the very near future if we do not act quickly to plug the hole in the colossal losses engulfing family pig farms around the country. Teagasc has estimated that pig farmers are losing an average of €56,000 per month, and rising. The war in Ukraine has had an impact on feed prices and Teagasc is also taking into account what is happening with energy costs. I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, for his interventions, including his recent visit to Cavan and I ask the Taoiseach to give us an update on those interventions now.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I want to raise the ongoing industrial action at Lisk in Gort, County Galway. The company is refusing to engage with the workers' trade union, SIPTU, despite a Labour Court recommendation that the company should recognise the trade union and negotiate with it on worker's concerns. Of course, companies like Lisk have representative

groups, such as IBEC, and should, therefore, give the same opportunity for representation to their workers through their trade unions. I ask the Taoiseach to use his office to encourage the company to recognise the State's industrial machinery.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we have a very brief response to those matters please?

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Mythen, €220 million in core funding went into childcare this year. It should be within the capacity of the sector, given that level of funding, to deal with the issue he raised, although I do not know the details of the individual case.

On Deputy Costello's point, I will talk to the Minister for Education. The move the Minister has made in having an alternative exam is quite a radical shift from the traditional stance in terms of standardisation, assessment and so on. I say that as someone who served in the Department previously. I will talk to the Minister about the Deputy's point on epilepsy but the move that was made, in itself, is very significant.

In response to Deputy Collins, I will ask for that incident to be investigated. I will raise the issue with the HSE and the National Ambulance Service. The Deputy has made a very legitimate point. It is very unacceptable that a woman in a frail condition with a broken hip would have to wait so long to get to hospital.

Regarding the issue raised by Deputy Farrell, I would appeal to all parties to that dispute to utilise the existing labour relations mechanisms to have it resolved.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Niamh Smyth raised the issue of pig farmers.

The Taoiseach: Sorry. On the pig industry, Deputy Smyth will know from her interactions with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, that he is working intensively with the pig farmers. It is an industry that ordinarily is viable but because of a unique set of circumstances, a perfect storm has emerged for the industry. We want to protect the jobs and the industry and the Minister is working on that basis.

Competition (Amendment) Bill 2022: Instruction to Committee

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

That, pursuant to Standing Order 187, it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment on the Competition (Amendment) Bill 2022, that the Committee has the power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill, in relation to the National Standards Authority of Ireland Act, 1996 in order to make a technical amendment to the wording of Section 12 of that Act relating to the charging of fees and to make other consequential amendments required.

Question put and agreed to.

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Proposed Authorisation by Dáil Éireann for Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to Instruct Legal Representatives: Motion

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to section 4(2)(f)(iv) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Acts 2003-2021, hereby authorises the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission to defend Workplace Relations Commission proceedings against a member of Dáil Éireann entitled: *ADJ-00035213*, and which proceedings arise solely out of the performance by the member concerned of their parliamentary functions as a member of Dáil Éireann.

Question put and agreed to.

Protocol and Arrangements for President Zelenskyy's Address to Joint Sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann resolves—

(1) (a) a joint sitting of both Houses of the Oireachtas shall be held in the Dáil Chamber on Wednesday 6th April, 2022, at 9.50 a.m., and His Excellency Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, shall be invited to address such joint sitting *via* video conference;

(b) the Ceann Comhairle shall be Chairperson of the joint sitting and shall adjourn the sitting immediately following the concluding statement by the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann;

(c) the arrangements shall be as follows:

(i) the Ceann Comhairle shall open the joint sitting by inviting the President to address the Houses;

(ii) following the address, statements in response may be made in the following order and not to exceed the times indicated:

(I) an Ceann Comhairle – 2 minutes;

(II) the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the leaders of the Green Party and Sinn Féin – 6 minutes each;

(III) the leaders or a representative of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Dáil Independent Group – 3 minutes each; and

(IV) the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann – 6 minutes; and members may share time;

(2) in the event that President Zelenskyy is unable to participate, the Ceann Comhairle shall be empowered to cancel or postpone, or to suspend, the joint sitting;

(3) the protocol and seating plan for the joint sitting shall be as agreed by the Dáil Business Committee and the Seanad Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight; and

(4) following the adjournment of the joint sitting, the Dáil shall meet at 12 noon on the same day.

Question put and agreed to.

Report of Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Standing Orders: Motion

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

That the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business be amended as recommended in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 4th April, 2022, entitled “*Amendments to Standing Orders relating to digital order paper, the Joint Committee on Public Petitions and the Working Group of Committee Cathaoirligh*”, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 4th April, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

Report of Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform on Leaders’ Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding the Orders of the Dáil of 16th December, 2020, and 14th December, 2021, the sequence in which Leaders shall be called upon to put questions between 26th April, 2022, and 7th July, 2022, pursuant to Standing Order 36(*ca*), shall be in accordance with the rota contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform dated 4th April, 2022, entitled “*Rota for Leaders’ Questions pursuant to Standing Order 36 from 26 April to 7 July 2022*”, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 4th April, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

Council Recommendation on the Conversion of Hryvnia Banknotes: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on the European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to accept the following measure, Council recommendation on the conversion of hryvnia banknotes into the currency of host Member States for the benefit of persons fleeing the war in Ukraine, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 5th April, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Commissions of Investigation

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach the number of commissions of investigation under the remit of his Department that are currently ongoing; the cost of each commission to date; and the projected costs of each in tabular form. [14279/22]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach the number of commissions of investigation under the remit of his Department currently ongoing; the cost of each commission to date; and the projected costs of each in tabular form. [14282/22]

3. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach the number of commissions of investigation under the remit of his Department currently ongoing in the State; the cost of each commission to date; and the projected costs of each in tabular form. [17580/22]

4. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach the number of commissions of investigation under the remit of his Department currently ongoing in the State; the cost of each commission to date; and the projected costs of each in tabular form. [17876/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 4, inclusive, together.

The only commissions of investigation for which I am the specified Minister under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 are the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Commission of Investigation and the National Asset Management Agency Commission of Investigation, both of which are fully independent.

The IBRC Commission of Investigation was established in June 2015 following consultation with Oireachtas parties. It is investigating certain transactions, activities and management decisions at the IBRC and in its first module, it is investigating the Siteserv transaction. Its original deadline was 31 December 2015 but following multiple requests from the commission, and after consultation with Oireachtas parties, its timeframe for reporting has been extended. Most recently, I granted a further extension, this time until the end of August 2022, following a further request from the commission in its 11th interim report dated 11 March 2022.

From the time of its establishment to the end of February 2022, the commission has cost approximately €11.15 million, excluding third party legal costs that have been incurred but not yet paid which will be a matter for the commission to determine at the end of its investigation. In its seventh interim report in February 2020, the commission estimated that the final cost of the Siteserv investigation will be between €12 million and €14.5 million. This estimate assumed the investigation would be completed by the end of 2020, not the end August 2022 as is now the case, and excluded costs or delays associated with possible judicial review hearings. The commission also acknowledged that it involved a substantial degree of uncertainty regarding the amount of costs actually recoverable by the parties before it and assumed its legal costs guidelines are not successfully challenged. The commission's most recent interim report does not provide any update on the €12 million to €14.5 million estimate but my Department has

given its view on many occasions that the final cost is likely to significantly exceed the commission's estimate and could exceed €30 million. That is what my officials advise and the further extension of its timeline, as well as the commission's acknowledgement of the possibility of court challenges, further supports that view.

The NAMA commission was established in June 2017 following consultations with Oireachtas parties to investigate the sale by NAMA of its Northern Ireland portfolio, known as Project Eagle. Its original deadline for reporting was 31 June 2018 but following several requests from the commission and consultation with Oireachtas parties, its timeframe for reporting has also been extended. Most recently, earlier this month, I granted a further request for an extension, this time until the end of June 2022.

From the time of its establishment to the end of February 2022, the commission has cost approximately €4 million, excluding any third party legal costs incurred but not yet paid which will be considered by the commission at the end of its investigation. The estimated cost for the commission when it was established was approximately €10 million, excluding the cost of any litigation that may arise. The commission has not provided an updated estimate for the cost of its investigation but the expenditure incurred to date suggests it is unlikely to exceed the original estimate.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: When one thinks about all of the tribunals and commissions of investigation we have had, how long they went on for and how much they cost, they are quite telling about the history of this country. A commission of investigation into NAMA related to the housing crisis and what developers did to this country; a commission of investigation into the IBRC, a dodgy bank that lent money to developers who helped to wreck the economy; planning tribunals to do with dodgy planning decisions; and investigations into mother and baby homes and the scandal of the mistreatment of women and children for decades. I could go on.

There is one lesson that we should take from all of these. I do not know exactly what the model for investigating past scandals is but one thing we could learn is that it would be best for these scandals not to happen in the first place. I want to warn the Taoiseach today about a scandal that we are going to be investigating very soon, namely, the scandal of children who are homeless being put through the trauma of being made homeless and living in emergency accommodation or direct provision for years. Indeed, we may well be investigating the state of some of the accommodation that Ukrainian refugees are being put into now, judging from early reports. There is a serious problem with putting vulnerable people, particularly children, into totally inadequate housing, into emergency accommodation, direct provision centres, hostels and elsewhere. I promise the Taoiseach that we will be investigating the damage and the trauma caused in years to come. As I did earlier today, I ask the Government to prevent having to set up a commission of investigation in a few years and to take emergency measures in this area now. Families and children, wherever they may be from, should not be in these absolutely dire and inappropriate situations.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is quite rare to see prosecutions around corrupt practices arising from lengthy tribunals of inquiry or commissions of investigation, even where there are negative findings. The Moriarty tribunal is a case in point. It has gone back and forth between the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, and the Garda Síochána since it reported in 2011.

There are alternatives to tribunals of inquiry. We need to get to that point where we have a satisfactory means of dealing with issues that require inquiry. Commissions of investigation are

supposed to be a more cost efficient way of dealing with issues than tribunals of inquiry but that is not always the case. In December, we got a new suite of measures arising out of the Hamilton review group. It made 22 recommendations, some of which are due in quarter 3 of this year, but are the milestones in that regard being met?

The Social Democrats put forward a proposal for an anti-corruption agency with requisite powers as a means of dealing with issues in real time. It is not always the case that prosecutions would follow, but where there is the possibility of prosecutions, we need such an agency rather than a litany of tribunals and commissions of investigation that do not have the prospect of resulting in sanctions. For example, there has been backwards and forwards between the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement, ODCE, and An Garda Síochána with regard to the provision of garda. The new Corporate Enforcement Authority is supposed to have a relationship with An Garda Síochána on the issue of a guaranteed Garda strength. When I raised the issue with the Garda Commissioner at last week's meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts he told me the memorandum of understanding has not been signed yet. That is unsatisfactory. Very high profile cases are stalled because of that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is salutary to look at the length of time for which these commissions have been under way and the projected costs. I am conscious that they have not yet concluded. The Siteserv inquiry will be over seven years in existence when it reaches its latest deadline at the end of August. The Taoiseach outlined that there has been another five month extension and that the cost according to his Department's estimate is likely to be about €30 million, which is more than double what the commission originally estimated the final cost would be. Could the Taoiseach indicate if it is envisaged that the work of the Siteserv inquiry is likely to be extended again beyond this August and confirm whether that will then increase the level of projected cost?

On the NAMA commission of investigation, which has now been in existence for five years, is it expected that it will report by the end of June 2022 and, again, will the cost exceed the projected €10 million? When commissions of investigation were introduced in 2004, the intention was that they would replace in a much more cost effective and time limited way the pre-existing tribunals of inquiry. They have mushroomed and morphed into effectively the same entities as the tribunals of inquiry. Does the Government have any immediate plans to ensure this will not happen in any future commissions of investigation such that we can see them return to the more trimmed down and nimble entities they were supposed to be?

Deputy Matt Carthy: The scoping exercise into the death of Shane O'Farrell was established by the previous Government more than three years ago. By their nature, scoping exercises are expected to take weeks, possibly months but not years, and yet three years on from the initiation of that exercise we have no idea as to when that work will be finished. Members will recall that nobody bar the previous Cabinet wanted this scoping exercise. Both Houses of the Oireachtas unanimously passed motions calling for the establishment of an inquiry. In 2018, the Taoiseach, when on this side of the House, stated: "In all honesty and sincerity, it is time the Oireachtas responded in the only way possible to Shane's death, which is the establishment of an inquiry." The Taoiseach was right then and his case is even more valid now.

The failures of the policing and justice system that led up to Shane's death and the actions thereafter and to this day are significant not only to his family, but are in the wider public interest. We acknowledge the independence of Judge Haughton who is carrying out the scoping exercise and we know that Government cannot interfere, but will the Taoiseach accept that the

scoping exercise as a process has not worked and that it has become yet another protracted delay to advancing the inquiry that we have all agreed is necessary?

The Taoiseach took a very firm stance on this matter when in opposition, and rightly so. I ask that he follow it through.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for the issues raised. With respect to Deputy Boyd Barrett, we need a better model of inquiry. More important, existing agencies should be the principal mechanism for holding Government agencies and bodies and, generally, society to account and contemporaneously. One of the difficulties in looking back is that we use the prism of today to judge actions 30 or 40 years ago.

In respect of the financial issues, I agree very serious issues were raised, particularly in terms of the IBRC. It is seven years since that inquiry commenced. In regard to Deputy Bacik's point, the draft report has been completed. In July 2021, the commission issued a draft of its report, which runs to 1,280 pages, to all relevant parties and gave them until 22 October to provide submissions on it. Since then, the commission has received detailed submissions on the draft report, running to more than 1,600 pages, from 12 different parties. These submissions raise a number of complex matters which the commission is currently in the process of carefully considering along with some additional evidence, which it is also considering. The commission stated that once it has completed this review process, it will prepare a revised draft report for circulation to all relevant parties on or about 30 April 2022. It proposes to provide relevant parties with an eight week period, which will expire on 13 June 2022, to review the draft report and make observations. It will then take it from there.

In terms of the emergency accommodation issue and direct provision, Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned Ukraine as well, which I think is a bit unfair.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I heard a report today-----

The Taoiseach: Of course, but-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----from a journalist-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please let the Taoiseach respond. We have less than a minute and a half remaining.

The Taoiseach: Approximately 18,000 Ukrainians have come into this country in the space of six weeks. In parallel with that, in terms of normal migration outside of Ukraine, more migrants and asylum seekers have arrived here in the first two to three months of this year than arrived here in the entirety of last year. Within Europe, we have internal migration into Ireland, which we have to deal with and respond to in terms of emergency accommodation. It is not all simple and the Deputy should not pretend that it is.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am not saying it is simple.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is saying that because he is already building up the case for an inquiry against people who are working flat out within our system to do everything they possibly can to accommodate people with respect and with dignity. We are doing that.

In terms of ending direct provision, the Government has a policy in that respect. There are hundreds of families in direct provision who could leave it, but the housing situation does not

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facilitate them doing so. We are building. There were 31,000 commencements last year, up to 33,000 in the 12 months up to February this year, which is the highest since 2008. However, that will not be enough. The inflationary pressures on construction are very significant, which is being seen in all of the tenders that are coming in. There is a lot of strain out there because of the impact of the war and the huge inflationary cycle that has occurred because of energy and input costs. We cannot go on blindly making commentary as if we are somehow oblivious to those realities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up. We must move on to Question No. 5.

The Taoiseach: If I could just-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I am sorry we have to move on to Question No. 5. We are way over time.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Can I get a brief response?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I am sorry.

The Taoiseach: I just want to very quickly-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I am sorry. It is not the Taoiseach's fault. People will have to be a little more succinct in the questions they are asking otherwise we will not get any answers. Deputies can talk as much as they like but if they want answers, they must curtail their contributions.

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent European Council meeting on 10 and 11 March 2022. [13968/22]

6. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [14203/22]

7. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [14206/22]

8. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [15476/22]

9. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach what measures have been agreed at European Council level in response to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. [14475/22]

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [14278/22]

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [14281/22]

12. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [14285/22]

13. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent European Council summit on the invasion of Ukraine. [14356/22]

14. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent meeting with the EU leaders in Versailles. [15098/22]

15. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [16205/22]

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent European Council meeting. [16692/22]

17. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent informal meeting of heads of state or government in Versailles on 10 and 11 March 2022. [16693/22]

18. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent European Council meeting. [16695/22]

19. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent informal meeting of heads of state or government in Versailles on 10 and 11 March 2022. [16696/22]

20. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the most recent European Council meeting. [17677/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 20, inclusive, together.

I attended a number of meetings of the European Council in recent weeks. A special meeting on 24 February was called in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I also attended an informal meeting on 10 and 11 March that took place in Versailles and the regular March meeting of the European Council on 24 and 25 March. All those meetings were dominated by events in Ukraine. We have condemned the war since the start as immoral and unjustifiable, and rightly so, but the evidence emerging at the weekend of horrific crimes against civilians in regions north of Kyiv is especially and profoundly shocking. Such unspeakable deeds cannot go unanswered and those responsible must be held to account.

At our meeting on 24 February, in addition to condemning Russia's unprovoked and unjustifiable action, we adopted a range of sanctions in the financial, energy and transport sectors, as well as export controls and visa policy. We also listed a number of Russian individuals associated with or supporting the Putin regime.

When we met in Versailles on 10 and 11 March, we adopted the Versailles declaration, committing to protect our citizens, values, democracies and the European model in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

In light of Ukraine's application to join the EU, we invited the Commission to submit its opinion on the application and, pending this, we agreed to further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership, without delay, to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path. As the House will be aware, I have publicly expressed my support for Ukraine's accession in due course. As we agreed in Versailles, Ukraine belongs to our European family.

At Versailles, we also set out how the EU can reduce our energy dependencies, reinforce our economic base and reduce dependencies on third country markets in critical sectors.

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Our meeting in Brussels on 24 and 25 March coincided with summit meetings of NATO and the G7. Our meeting was joined for a period by President Biden and, via video link, by President Zelenskyy. We discussed the situation from a range of concerning perspectives. We discussed humanitarian concerns, migration, energy, nuclear security and safety and reconstruction. We agreed on the establishment of a solidarity fund for Ukraine, both to support the Government's current expenditure and to help rebuild the country after the war. We invited third countries to join us in this endeavour.

On security and defence, we endorsed the strategic compass. This strategy document will provide enhanced political direction for the EU's approach to security and defence policy for the next five to ten years. Ireland has engaged constructively in the development of the EU's common security and defence policy, guided by our traditional policy of military neutrality and our contribution to crisis management and peacekeeping. This will continue to be the case. As I said, we are militarily neutral but that does not mean we are politically or morally neutral. We have already seen how new forms of warfare, including cyberattacks, can have real and profound consequences. It is appropriate that we co-operate with our partners in combatting those threats.

We also discussed energy issues and the significant impact of current high prices. We need to move away from dependence in Europe on Russian gas and oil. This can be achieved by diversifying supplies and routes, accelerating the development of renewables, improving energy efficiency and further developing the interconnection of European electricity and gas networks.

At our meeting on 24 and 25 March, we also discussed the latest situation on Covid-19, including vaccine production and sharing; economic prospects; the EU-China summit meeting, which since took place on 1 April; and increased political tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We also re-elected Charles Michel as President of the European Council for a second term due to end in November 2024. I congratulate him on his re-election and look forward to working with him into the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: We must be practical about the 25 minutes we have remaining. There are 15 questions and ten questioners. Are Members agreeable that we would give that 25 minutes to this block of questions? There is no chance of getting through any other questions.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the following questions be taken tomorrow?

An Ceann Comhairle: Either that or they will be taken next week.

The Taoiseach: The next batch of questions relate to the phone call I had with President Zelenskyy. They become irrelevant afterwards.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do Deputies want to hear the response to those questions?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can we take all of those questions together?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes. Shall we do that?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Taoiseach's Communications

21. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent conversation with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [13969/22]

22. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his discussions with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [14204/22]

23. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his discussions with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [14207/22]

24. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent conversation with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [15477/22]

25. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent conversation with the President of Ukraine. [16207/22]

26. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent conversation with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [17678/22]

27. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his discussions with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [17985/22]

28. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his discussions with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [17988/22]

29. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent conversation with the Prime Minister of Ukraine. [18039/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 21 to 29, inclusive, together.

We have condemned the war since the start as immoral and unjustifiable, and rightly so, but the evidence emerging at the weekend of horrific crimes against civilians in regions north of Kyiv is especially and profoundly shocking. Such unspeakable deeds cannot go unanswered and those responsible must be held to account.

I spoke to the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, by phone on 16 March during my visit to the United States. I found him to be calm, focused and determined. He expressed his gratitude to the Government and people of Ireland for their support for Ukraine, including in welcoming those fleeing the war; for our support for Ukraine's application for EU membership; and for our support for the most robust and severe sanctions against Russia. He also expressed his condolences on the death of Pierre Zakrzewski, the Irish photojournalist killed in Ukraine alongside his colleague, Ukrainian journalist Oleksandra Kuvshynova, on 14 March.

President Zelenskyy briefed me on the very difficult situation on the ground in Ukraine, which has included indiscriminate attacks on civilians. He also made the case for a no-fly zone over Ukraine. I assured him of Ireland's ongoing solidarity with his Government and people in the face of the brutal and illegal war they are suffering.

President Zelenskyy also engaged remotely with the meeting of the European Council that I attended in Brussels on 24 March. He set out the desperate circumstances facing civilians in Ukraine and called for the EU to exercise the maximum pressure on Russia to end its appalling

war.

I welcome that President Zelenskyy has accepted the Ceann Comhairle's invitation to address the joint Houses of the Oireachtas this week.

I also spoke with the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Denys Shmyhal, on 1 March, when he briefed me on the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation on the ground at that time. I conveyed the Government's and the Irish public's strong solidarity with Ukraine and its people, and outlined the steps we are taking as a country and as an EU member state to support Ukraine.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the work of the ambassador of Ukraine to Ireland, H.E. Larysa Gerasko, and her team, in the face of very difficult circumstances. I know that all of us in this House appreciate her ongoing efforts on behalf of the Ukrainian Government and people.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We have seen absolutely horrific pictures from Bucha which, I hope, will leave nobody in any doubt that the illegal Russian invasion and bombardment has crossed the line into war crime. I note Lithuania has expelled the Russian ambassador in response to events in Bucha. I again make the case that we should follow suit and rather than inviting the Russian ambassador to the Dáil, we should be instructing him to pack his bags and leave. We are a neutral country. We should be proud of our military neutrality. Our response to these types of actions need to be diplomatic and robust. Expelling the Russian ambassador is one strong measure we could take.

The Taoiseach, in his response to questions about the European Council meetings, did not reference the issues of food security and agriculture supports, unless I missed it. A number of questions about the pig sector were put to the Taoiseach earlier. Some 5% of pig farmers have now left the sector. They are in desperate need of further supports. They acknowledge the supports that are in place but farmers from across all sectors have for several months been suffering as a result of increased input costs and, in many cases, depressed prices. Will the Taoiseach inform us as to whether or not he will be utilising and leveraging the European crisis reserve and co-financing to the maximum permitted level of 200%? Will he ensure that some of the Brexit adjustment reserve package of €1 billion that was secured by Ireland, primarily as a result of the stories of Irish farmers, will go to Irish farmers? Those farmers have not yet received a penny while €100 million has been ring-fenced for the meat factories. These are important times that require important interventions.

Deputy Seán Haughey: The atrocities being committed by Russian forces are becoming more visible as each day of the war passes. What has been revealed in Bucha and around Kyiv, following the retreat of Russian troops, is totally shocking. It is clear that innocent civilians were targeted. Their bodies strewn across the streets are there for all to see. Rape, sexual violence, torture and summary executions are commonplace.

4 o'clock

President Zelenskyy has described the situation as genocide. These are war crimes. Human Rights Watch has said as much. All necessary investigations must be carried out to bring this case before the International Criminal Court. In light of the most recent revelations of Russian atrocities, a fifth package of sanctions from the EU has just been announced. I understand there will be a complete ban on the import of coal from Russia but that additional sanctions are still under consideration, according to the President of the European Commission, with particular

reference to Russian oil. Is the Taoiseach satisfied with the fifth round of sanctions just announced? Does he think we can go further? What other sanctions would Ireland contemplate in the context of the EU in the coming days and weeks?

Deputy Brendan Smith: Sadly, we continue to see the horrors inflicted on the people of Ukraine by a brutal Russian invasion. War crimes are being committed daily. The united European Union response, in its strongest possible format, needs to be continued, with additional measures as well. This military aggression has to be anathema to every right-thinking person. I welcome the withdrawal of more Irish companies from Russia. Those decisions should be commended and strongly encouraged in respect of any Irish businesses that remain in Russia. We all know that at the present time, the priority must be providing for the safety of the Ukrainian people and getting humanitarian aid to those most in need. I am glad to hear from the Taoiseach that there was a discussion at the European Council about deepening partnerships with the neighbours of the European Union to the east. I welcome the fact that there is a greater political awareness and acceptance of the need for the European Union to enlarge and have better relationships with those countries to its east. For far too long we have had too many apologists for Russian-style politics in this country. We must not lose sight of the longer-term project of having Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as EU members. Even though at the present time the priority must be the terrible conflict and getting humanitarian aid to people, the project of bringing those countries in as full EU members has to be progressed as much as possible within the present constraints.

Deputy Mick Barry: Why did the European Council not come out strongly in favour of the cancellation of the Ukrainian national debt? Its external debt stood at \$129 billion just before the invasion. God knows what it will be when the war ends and the country has to be reconstructed. Repayments of \$14 billion are due in 2022 alone. What does repayment of such a debt actually mean? Last year, when the IMF loaned \$5 billion to Ukraine, it said it would be repaid “mainly through a reduction in the real value of wages and social benefits”. There you have it. That is it in a nutshell. Debt repayment means the impoverishment by bankers and governments of a people who have already lost so much at the hands of Putin and his murderous crew. Why did the Council not come out in favour of debt cancellation? Will the Taoiseach come out with a clear call for cancellation here today, in this Dáil?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s brutal invasion of Ukraine this calendar year, European Union member states have expelled over 310 Russian diplomats from their embassies across the Union. That includes Lithuania, which very bravely and foresightedly expelled the Russian ambassador just this weekend. So far, the Irish Government has expelled four diplomats. While that is welcome, it is quite paltry considering the level and number of expulsions happening across the EU. My question is quite simple. Has the European Council discussed the co-ordination of diplomatic expulsions? This point was put to me by the Tánaiste when I first raised this issue a number of weeks ago. At the next opportunity, will the Taoiseach and his Ministers take the opportunity to finally expel the Russian ambassador and all the diplomats and, indeed, spies, who are resident in the embassy on Orwell Road?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is totally beyond doubt that Putin’s forces have been committing war crimes. We have seen the latest horrific scenes in Bucha but the targeting of civilians by Russia in a number of Ukrainian cities is very obvious and it should be prosecuted for those war crimes. Does the Taoiseach have any trust in the ability of the international community to pursue war crimes? The United Nations dropped the investigation of war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia after an intense lobbying campaign by Saudi Arabia and the United

Arab Emirates. Interestingly, that campaign was supported not only by the Americans who are arming Saudi Arabia but also by Russia. The United States and Russia found common cause in shutting down an investigation into war crimes in Yemen. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been appealing for the war crimes investigation in Yemen to be resumed but there has been no support from the western powers, Russia or Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International allege that war crimes have been committed by Israel because of its use of white phosphorous in Gaza, imposing a collective punishment on Gaza through an illegal siege and the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the occupied territories. Does the Taoiseach think there is any likelihood of these war crimes actually being pursued? We should have consistency and not double standards in the prosecution of war crimes.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Taoiseach respond to the calls from Ukrainian trade unions and socialist organisations to cancel Ukraine's debt? This is odious debt. It is a result of the total oligarchisation of Ukrainian society, the refusal to go after the wealthy and horrendous conditions imposed by the IMF. The IMF repayments this year alone are the equivalent of 16.5 million average pension payments in Ukraine. That is 12% of the total state expenditure. The debt needs to be cancelled. That is a concrete measure that can be taken now.

Second, did the Taoiseach raise with President Zelenskyy the recent decision to suspend 11 political parties, which between them got almost 20% of the vote at the most recent election? These are not parties we would agree with. They include the main opposition party, the right-wing Platform for Life, which won 44 seats in the Ukrainian Parliament. However, it is a worrying restriction on democratic rights and it will undermine the struggle against the Russian invasion if the Ukrainian Government is telling people the parties they voted for are beyond the pale.

Deputy Bríd Smith: On a related matter, but moving slightly sideways, has the European Union discussed the importation of liquefied natural gas, LNG, from the USA as a reaction to the Ukrainian crisis and in order to move away from the consumption of Russian gas and oil? Poor old António Guterres is getting quoted a lot in this House today. He warned European countries against this consumption of fossil fuels when he said, "Countries could become so consumed by the immediate fossil fuel supply gap that they neglect or knee-cap policies to cut fossil fuel use." He said we are putting the global economy and energy security at the mercy of geopolitical shocks and crises, and that "this is madness: addiction to fossil fuels is mutually assured destruction." When we built the anti-war movement in the early 2000s, we had a slogan: "No blood for oil". I hope we are not now seeing blood for gas. This geopolitical struggle and the attempt to flood US gas into Europe is something we will regret in the long run. As the Centre for International Law has said, there is no silver bullet for solving the climate crisis but there is a smoking gun, and that is fossil fuels. We have to focus. Did the European Union discussion focus on cutting our fossil fuel use, rather than shifting it?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Taoiseach discussed the wider implications for Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the areas of defence and energy and the significant impact of high energy prices being felt across the European Union. While I welcome the Government's measures to tackle the energy costs to date, the Taoiseach also said that if Ireland was to reduce its VAT rate, we would lose the EU derogation governing VAT and excise duty. However, he said the Government would seek flexibility around this. Does the Taoiseach have an update on whether this has been agreed and when does he expect a decision to be made on any downward adjustment on the VAT rate for fuel?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for the updates on the Council of Europe and the conversation with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy. We all look forward to President Zelenskyy's address to these Houses tomorrow. I also want to pay tribute to Larysa Gerasko, the Ukrainian ambassador, who has been to the fore in highlighting how we can do more to support the people of Ukraine. We have seen huge welcome and support for Ukrainian refugees coming here and notable efforts by volunteers and State employees to ensure refugees feel supported here. We have to escalate our response and our condemnation of Russia, particularly as we see evidence growing of atrocities being committed against civilians in Bucha and with the siege of Mariupol. Can we now move to expel the Russian ambassador? I am conscious that many others have asked for this and we have seen Lithuania move independently to do this. Although it was welcome to see our Government expelling four senior diplomats from the embassy last week there are still 27 diplomats on Orwell Road in Dublin in the Russian Embassy. We see Ciara Phelan reporting in today's *Irish Mirror* that many Irish people here are choosing to give those diplomats the cold shoulder but it is time for the Government to show its utter condemnation of these appalling atrocities being committed by Russia by expelling our ambassador. We should go further than that by also placing an embargo on Russian oil and gas.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We are all affected and appalled by the images we are seeing in Ukraine. On the sanctions that are already in place, almost half of the 33 Irish special purpose vehicles, SPVs, used by Russian banks and companies are subject to the current sanctions and about €35 billion is involved, a lot of which washes through. The professional firms that manage the SPVs are obliged to freeze the sanctioned assets but the Central Bank does not regulate them. What initiatives are being put in place to identify the true owners in order that the sanctions that have been put in place are applying and in order that people cannot circumvent them? We called for the Russian ambassador to be expelled and he is not immune to the images we are all seeing. Yet he is putting out statements denying what is patently obvious from independent sources. How can someone like that be relied on to be an intermediary or diplomat when he is denying what is happening? That is an affront to us and he needs to be expelled.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Carthy began the round of questions and referred to the pig industry. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, has been working intensively with the industry and we are conscious of the difficulties and challenges it has been going through on a number of fronts. It is normally a viable industry and we will do everything we can to support it. We will work with European Commission leeway and flexibilities to do so and we will see what can be done to underpin that with the application of the Brexit fund. I understand the Deputy's comments on diplomacy and I welcome what is essentially a handbrake turn on his party's behalf in respect of the expulsion of Russian diplomats because I recall that not so long ago, the Deputy described the expulsion of a diplomat in a serious situation as undermining our military neutrality. Nonetheless, I welcome the Deputy's support of our initiative last week to remove four senior officials from the embassy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That was at the behest of MI5. The difference with this is the call is from the Dáil.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Haughey raised the importance of making sure that evidence is gathered and that we bring the evidence of the appalling war crimes to the International Criminal Court, which I wholeheartedly support. Everybody condemns the appalling and indiscriminate murder of civilians in Bucha and in other towns in the environs of Kyiv. One is also conscious that in Mariupol and other cities, more horrendous situations may emerge, which unquestionably represent the worst of humanity.

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On sanctions, we support banning oil and coal imports from Russia and along with other EU member states we have been pushing for that although it has to be agreed by all 27 EU member states. I will assess the situation when I leave the Chamber but we want the strongest possible sanctions. We are mindful that we are not as dependent on Russian gas as other countries. Sometimes it can be easier for countries that will not be as impacted as others to start calling for measures. The overriding principle has to be that these measures punish the Russian Federation more than member states. So far, the sanctions have been unprecedented and severe and we will have to continue to do everything we can to keep the pressure on to stop this war. We must raise the prospect of international criminal trials to bring war criminals to justice as part of that.

Deputy Brendan Smith's points followed on from that and I strongly support his points about the EU perspective of many states in the neighbourhood of Russia.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not a word.

The Taoiseach: We should be accelerating their applications to join the European Union, particularly Ukraine but also the western Balkan countries, where quite a number of states are well advanced. The European Union has been somewhat too slow in accepting their applications and some member states have held back in agreeing to allowing those countries to join. From a geopolitical perspective, the strongest protection that many countries in the neighbourhood of Russia and the EU have is membership of the European Union. When the Cold War edifice and the Soviet empire collapsed, the people of countries like Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, for the first time ever, had a chance to get into a democratic framework and be part of a wider family of European Union nations. They grasped that opportunity with open arms and that is why many of them joined NATO as well. They did so because of their acute sense of insecurity, which we do not have to the same extent when it comes to Russia. We have no sense of the experience that Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles and Hungarians had at the hands-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yemen. Palestine.

The Taoiseach: I am dealing with the questions one by one. It is not all about the Deputy. There are other Deputies in the House and I am answering their questions. I wanted to make that point.

Deputy Barry raised the cancellation of debt. Again, the European Union has been and will continue to be the biggest donor to Ukraine. I have no doubt that in the aftermath of this war, it will be Europe and other like-minded states that will have to come to the rescue. Already we decided at the Council of Europe meeting to set up a Ukraine fund for current funding and capital reconstruction of Ukraine in the aftermath of the war. That is the *esprit de corps* of the Council of Europe and the European Union. I note the intention of the Deputy's questions is to create another negative assertion on the motivations of the European Union. It is quite frustrating to watch the trend and patterns of how the debate goes and how people endeavour to swing it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is the Taoiseach going to support the cancellation of debt?

The Taoiseach: This is the classic stuff that you guys go on with, the whole time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Just answer the question.

The Taoiseach: You never acknowledge that, for example, Germany is the biggest donor to

Ukraine on a humanitarian level. I have no doubt that the international response will be one of absolute support for Ukraine and there will be various mechanisms to facilitate that. I have no intention of reducing that to a mere slogan.

Deputy Richmond raised the issue of the expulsion of diplomats. Expelling four diplomats was not paltry at all; it was quite substantive and significant from a Russian Federation perspective and relative to the size of other missions in other countries. A number of Deputies have raised the prospect of expelling the Russian ambassador. There were discussion on this at the Council of Europe and a number of member states raised it. I raised the need for co-ordination regarding the diplomatic channel. Incidentally, that is not perceived to be the channel that would put the most pressure on Russia. The economic side and the deployment of the peace facility of over €1 billion from the European Union are seen as far more effective in protecting the people of Ukraine and providing for humanitarian matters. Nonetheless, messages have to be sent. We will work with other EU member states on this. I genuinely believe that the more collective actions are taken by EU member states, the better.

Deputy Boyd Barrett asked questions about war crimes. I trust the international system to bring Russian war criminals to justice. It has happened. People from the Balkans were brought to trial and convicted.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yemen, Palestine, Iraq. Forget it.

The Taoiseach: I do not forget it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are a different order of crimes.

The Taoiseach: I do not forget anything. I do not think we need to juxtapose one against the other all the time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are all war crimes.

The Taoiseach: I believe war crimes should be pursued in every context.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They have not been in Yemen.

The Taoiseach: I said every context.

Deputy Paul Murphy referred to the European Union. At the last European Council meeting, it decided to establish a fund to restore and reconstruct Ukraine in the aftermath of the war and to help with its current budgeting. Issues with debt will have to be worked out in the aftermath of the war. In the meantime, the focus is on trying to defend the people from Ukraine from a humanitarian perspective. Many members of the European Union are sending lethal weapons to help the Ukrainians to defend themselves. We sent non-lethal equipment to help Ukrainians in the war effort.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What about the suspension of the parties?

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Bríd Smith, we raised the issue of fossil fuels and renewables. President von der Leyen and the Commission put forward a strong narrative about energy for the future. The obvious future pathway is renewables. By the end of 2030, we have to eliminate any dependence on Russian gas, oil and coal.

Deputy Bríd Smith: But it is okay to depend on the US gas?

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The Taoiseach: Renewables are the most effective way to do it. In the context of the war, one cannot ignore that countries need gas and fuel now.

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

The Taoiseach: There will be LNG across Europe. We cannot tell them-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: By 2030, we will be dependent on US gas instead.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Dillon raised the issue of wider implications for diplomatic matters, which I have dealt with. I covered the issues raised by Deputy Paul Murphy too.

European Union Regulation: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a collaboration platform to support the functioning of Joint Investigation Teams and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1726,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 22nd December, 2021.

I thank the House for facilitating this motion this afternoon. The Government today approved my Department's request to seek the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas to opt in to this European Commission proposal. The proposal seeks to establish a collaboration platform to facilitate exchanges and co-operation within the joint investigation team, JIT, framework. As joint investigation teams have proven to be one of the most successful tools for cross-border investigations and prosecutions, I am delighted to have the opportunity to present this motion to the House today.

Joint investigation teams, JITs, are set up by two or more states for the purpose of specific criminal investigations with a cross-border impact and for a limited time. This framework allows the competent judicial and law enforcement authorities involved to organise and coordinate their actions jointly, and to investigate efficiently, even in very complex cases such as organised crime activities. An Garda Síochána currently participates in joint investigation teams and supports this initiative.

Although joint investigation teams have proven to be one of the most successful tools for cross-border investigations and prosecutions in the European Union, practice shows they have been facing several technical difficulties preventing them from gaining the highest possible efficiency. The joint investigation team collaboration platform proposed in this regulation aims to solve these problems and deliver the technical support that has been missing thus far.

The proposal will establish a highly secure collaboration platform, provide technological support to participants and ensure that information and evidence can more be shared more ef-

fectively and safely. The main objective of the proposal is to provide technological support to those involved in joint investigation teams to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their cross-border investigations and prosecutions. To meet these objectives and to tackle the underlying difficulties, a dedicated IT platform is proposed. The platform will be accessible to all actors involved in JIT proceedings, including specific member states' representatives, representatives of third countries invited to co-operate in the context of a given investigative team, and the competent Union bodies, offices and agencies such as Eurojust, Europol and the European Public Prosecutor's Office. The proposed collaboration platform will solve the technical problems and provide the technical support that has been missing from joint investigations to date.

The regulation itself is more technical than legal in nature and applies to the processing of information, including personal data, within the context of a joint investigation team. That includes the exchange and storage of operational information and evidence as well as non-operational information. This regulation applies to the operational and post-operational phases of a JIT, starting from the moment the relevant joint investigation agreement is signed by its members. The regulation does not amend or otherwise affect the existing legal provisions on the establishment, conduct or evaluation of joint investigation teams.

The legal basis for setting up a joint investigation team is Article 13 of the European Union Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters, and a Council framework decision of 13 June 2002 on joint investigation teams.

The Criminal Justice (Joint Investigation Teams) Act 2004 provides for the measures necessary to give effect to EU Council decision on joint investigation teams and provides for the terms under which joint investigation teams can be established. The Criminal Justice (International Cooperation) Act 2019 made further provision in this regard to better facilitate the participation of members of An Garda Síochána in joint investigation teams.

To provide broader context, this proposal is one of a package of measures announced by the Commission on the digitalisation of justice in the EU as part of a larger initiative to enable the secure electronic communication and exchange of information and documents between courts, national authorities, and justice and home affairs agencies. This is a stand-alone proposal, apart from the other measures in the digitisation package. Ireland intends to opt in at a later date to other such proposals when the preparatory work is undertaken.

For member states, no technical costs are considered because the platform will be developed and hosted by the EU centrally and accessed remotely using a browser-based system. There will be a one-off EU development cost of about €10 million incurred centrally. There will also be an EU central recurring cost for technical matters, maintenance and operation of the platform of approximately €3 million per annum. For member states, the platform will not require any adaptations of the national technical infrastructure and access will be web-based.

The joint investigation teams framework has been pivotal in recent years in tackling serious, organised and transnational crime. Ireland currently participates in joint investigation teams and we certainly see the value in continuing to do so and in supporting this proposal.

Following the discovery of 39 individuals in Essex in the United Kingdom in October 2019, authorities in the United Kingdom, as well as Irish, Belgian and French authorities carried out initial actions, and subsequently conducted investigations and searches in regard these tragic events, which led to the formation of a joint investigation team. The effective liaison by An

Garda Síochána with the other participating forces in this joint investigation team, with colleagues in the PSNI and various other police agencies, meant a number of suspects were apprehended and sentenced to significant periods of detention following conviction by various courts in several jurisdictions.

This is a practical example of a joint investigation team. The experience gained in respect of multi-jurisdictional operations and the available support from various European statutory agencies such as Eurojust and Europol cannot be underestimated from an operational and learning perspective and will be built on and utilised by An Garda Síochána.

Only yesterday, the EU announced that it is setting up a joint investigation team with Ukraine to collect evidence and to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine. In a statement following a phone call with President Zelenskyy regarding the atrocities in Bucha, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: “The EU is ready to reinforce this effort by sending investigation teams on the ground to support the Ukrainian Prosecution Services. Eurojust and Europol are ready to assist.” President von der Leyen proceeded to state: “A global response is necessary. There are ongoing talks between Eurojust and the International Criminal Court to join forces and for the Court to be part of the Joint Investigation Team.” This is a further demonstration of this framework in action.

Ireland, together with its EU partners, is committed to tackling serious, organised, cross-border and transnational crime. Our continued engagement and commitment to joint cross-border investigations is central to that. The current proposal will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of such investigations. As a result, the Government has no hesitation in commending the proposal that we opt in to the House. The Office of the Attorney General has advised that opting into the proposed decision will not create any constitutional or legal issues for the State. Doing so now under an Article 3 opt-in will ensure that we are at the table with our European partners and that we are involved fully in the detailed discussions on the negotiation of the regulation. It will also indicate our continuing commitment to tackling serious cross-border and transnational crime. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This proposal is worthy and worthwhile. It will move us in the right direction. Joint investigation teams have been working for many years on a multinational format to tackle organised crime, particularly the drug gangs, etc., that plague our communities. Every community in every part of Ireland can recognise the impact that they have on young people, who become addicted to drugs and who then fall into criminality and all that goes with it. All of this begins with these international tycoons of criminality who cross borders, not just across the EU but also in jurisdictions elsewhere. The Minister of State’s point in regard to the investigation into the tragic incident in Essex is well worth remembering. That happened when Britain was to some extent tied to the European Union. That is no longer the case following Brexit. Will the Minister of State elaborate on what impact that will have on this proposal? Will Britain still be involved in the joint investigation teams?

They have been very successful cross-border tools, as the Minister of State mentioned. It seems that we have had issues in the past with technical difficulties. This proposed measure is designed to deal with that and to try and resolve matters. The main objective, as has been stated, is to establish a collaboration platform under the regulation and to solve the problems so that they can deliver the technical support that has been missing thus far. That is necessary. We recognise that unless these things are done centrally, there is an issue. I was glad to hear the Minister of State indicate that it will be done centrally from within the European Union. Which

member state will be the source of that? Will it be coming from Brussels? Will it be France or Germany? In what member state will that happen? It would be good to know that information.

This is a collaboration on a digital platform. We heard this morning from the European Court of Justice, which has made it clear that there is an issue regarding how data has been collected from mobile phones in Ireland. This will have an impact. That is also a transnational issue. Every country in Europe will be looking at that. While all that is happening, we must also recognise that there has been a victim of a crime here in Ireland. I refer to Elaine O'Hara. There is also the family of the victim. The family will possibly have to cope with going back to court, sitting through another appeal and so on. We have to recognise the tragedy of all of that.

Since 2014, we have had an issue here in respect of this matter. I hope that the Government will be in a position to do something about it. In that context, it is crucial that the Government takes a lead on this. This particular case has been taken from the Irish jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice. It has exposed this issue, which will impact on law enforcement agencies across Europe. It is important that we lead in trying to correct the huge mess that will be created. It is important that we recognise people's privacy rights. We all recognise those rights, but they have to be balanced with the rights of people to be safe and with their rights to not be the victims of serious crime. This case was brought to the highest court in Europe. Certainly, it is the view of most rational people that the offender has been protected more than the people who are the victims. That needs to be acknowledged.

There is an issue with the indiscriminate long-term storage of data. That is the problem. We need to deal with it. In particular, the traffic that goes to mobile phones and the location data of the mobile phones has been collected indiscriminately. We may have a role to play here in Ireland in amending the Communications Regulation (Premium Rate Services and Electronic Communications Infrastructure) Act 2010 around that. However, I come back to the fact that the European Union has erred on the side of privacy, in this case, to the detriment of the victims of crime and of the common good. That needs to be acknowledged and recognised. There is much work to be done on that. It ties in, as it happens, with the regulation with which we are dealing today.

Joint investigation teams will require access to data, to information on people's movements and to data about who is in communication with whom in various jurisdictions across Europe and wider the world. It is necessary that these issues are resolved and that the case in respect of which this revelation emerged this morning is dealt with in an appropriate manner.

To go back to the joint investigation teams, this move was first supposed to be put in place in, I think, 2004. The Minister of State mentioned that Ireland will not be the first country to take these issues on and to move forward in respect of them. Unfortunately, in history, Ireland is usually last. That is another issue we need to deal with. Nearly every time we come in here to discuss the transposing of EU directives, we find that a deadline or issue is looming. That is bad policy, and it needs to be reviewed. In fairness, I think the Minister of State would acknowledge that. We have had a history of dealing with this in an inappropriate way up to now. We need to be much more effective and efficient around that.

The work we are doing here today is worthy and worthwhile. We must do anything that will get law enforcement agencies to work closer together to ensure that we can get prosecutions, convictions and deliver for the ordinary public and for the common good. In that context, I recognise that we need to make sure that the regulation to which the motion relates moves

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forward as quickly as possible. I hope that when the relevant legislation emerges, it will move speedily through the Houses and will be dealt with in the near term.

The reality is that many people look at this and they do not understand how it will make any difference. However, the case the Minister of State mentioned - the Essex case - is one example of where it would. There are many other examples of excellent work done in co-operation across Europe and the world by various law enforcement agencies. These have delivered arrests, as well as the seizures of large quantities of drugs and of arms of various kinds. These have been for the protection of people and of commerce. They have helped to ensure that we have a firm rule of law, which we need to have, across the entire European Union.

While this regulation, like many of them, is coming a little late to the House, it is welcome. Certainly, we will be supporting it and we will be moving the debate on it forward. However, we need to get answers in respect of the particular case which the European Court of Justice ruled on earlier today. It is necessary that the Minister of State and the Government step up to the mark and ensure that we take the actions that are required to correct that situation. It is inappropriate and wrong when offenders find that they have a loophole they can use to get out of things or to escape detection. That needs to be dealt with as quickly as possible.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Níl aon duine sa Dáil ó na páirtithe eile agus bogfaimid ar aghaidh, mar sin, go dtí an Rural Independent Group.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Competition (Amendment) Bill 2022 will give more powers to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Commission for Communications Regulation. These new powers could mean that rogue operators could face a fine of €10 million-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: That is the wrong business.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has mixed it up with the motion.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am sorry. Am I in the wrong?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is okay; you are.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am on the wrong track. I will withdraw my contribution.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does anybody else wish to speak on this?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am sorry; for clarity, which one is this?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is the motion regarding the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a collaboration platform to support the functioning of joint investigation teams.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Can I have one minute on that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has five minutes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I will just take a couple of minutes. I will share time. This is very important because it branches into, and this has already been very well spoken about in the Chamber, the case that has been going on today and the far-reaching implications of that. The fact is that law enforcement persons in Ireland, throughout Europe and across the world are

watching this situation very closely because the retention of data and how it is used in criminal investigations it is so important.

One thing we must be very careful about here is that we get what we wish for and the implications of that. While this is very important to protect people's information and all that, it is, of course, paramount and goes beyond everything else to be able to investigate a wrongdoing and get to the bottom of a crime, whether that is a financial or physical crime, and not shield wrongdoers by means of what I would call bureaucracy. We must be very careful. It is very hard to legislate for that. It is very hard to put measures in place that will protect society from people using them as a shield to carry out or get away with wrongdoing.

One thing I must touch on in discussing this is the whole issue of the general data protection regulation, GDPR. Sometimes, especially when one, as a politician, hears so much about the GDPR, one would have to say that it is probably one of the greatest excuses for people doing and answering nothing and getting away with everything. It seems to be case of people saying they cannot deal with something now because of the GDPR. Again, I do not want the protection of people's privacy to be used or put as an obstacle in the way of people getting work done or achieving things and completing jobs they are supposed to do. I also wanted to make that point.

It is definitely a case that we have to be very careful of how we proceed with this, however, especially in light of the very important review and referral of that court decision, which was being dealt with this morning. That is of paramount importance, not just for the family of a person whose life was taken, for which I have the nothing but the utmost respect, of course, but also in the context of the wrongdoing that could be covered up by using those types of situations.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The joint investigation teams are set up for specific criminal investigations between two or more countries within the EU but can also involve countries outside the Union. The joint investigation teams have technical difficulties that prevent them from doing their proper investigation work. They need to make the system secure, particularly for large files. They need to be able to have secure systems to work and share information with bodies like Europol, Eurojust and so on.

A joint investigation team is led by a member from the country in which the investigation team is based, and the law of that country governs the team's activities in showing the big picture, identifying links between related cases and investigations and supporting the secure exchange of information. It probably gives us the security that we can sleep in our beds at night knowing a bigger force is out there looking after us. As part of Europe, we can be comfortable in the knowledge that we will be protected within these proposals when enacted.

The bottom line is that we are protected. The bottom line here is the sharing of sensitive information to make sure this information can get from one system to another without impeding the information going to others. We need to tread carefully with this but I believe it is an important Bill to bring through the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. I will address a number of matters.

With regard to Deputy Martin Kenny's points on the UK, obviously, it is now a third country. Provision is made within the protocols and the regulations for third-country co-operation, however, so I expect that will continue, albeit in a slightly different format in the sense that it

will be a third country but nonetheless, it will be able to continue.

I note the Deputy's comments with regard to transposition. One of the reasons we have transposed so much legislation is that, obviously, there are deadlines, but I have also made it my business to make sure that legislation is cleared through the Houses. We have that backlog now almost completely dealt with. There are only two more items of legislation currently before the Houses to finish and a couple of regulations. We should have all those on top. I certainly aim to ensure that we do not have any issue around transposing legislation thereafter.

With regard to a number of other issues, the digitisation of existing data exchanges will not introduce any new personal categories compared with what is already exchanged today nor will it affect existing data processing arrangements. It is what is already there, if you like, and tidying up how we deal with the data that exists under current legislation. In terms of concerns raised, this new secure platform aims to mitigate the risk of security of individual data. It is an improvement compared to present exchanges, which at the moment actually use paper and email. A person's data will be protected to a greater extent under this new system whereby we will have the data centre and secure communications via digitisation rather than the current paper and email formats.

As regards the decision earlier today by the Court of Justice of the European Union, obviously, I cannot - and it would be totally inappropriate to - comment on any case that is currently before the courts. This matter will now revert to the Supreme Court. My Department and the Attorney General will consider the judgment of the Supreme Court when it is finalised, which will inform the legislation going forward.

The Government today approved my Department's request to seek the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas to opt into this European Commission proposal, which seeks to establish a collaboration platform to facilitate exchanges and co-operation within the joint investigation team framework. I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the debate. I welcome the support across the Houses in respect of the motion. It is very welcome and important. Ireland recognises the importance of international co-operation with our international partners, particularly in the context of combating cross-border crime. As Deputies will be aware, Ireland, through An Garda Síochána, already participates in joint investigation teams and sees the value in continuing to do so. Joint investigation teams have proven to be one of the most successful methods for cross-border investigations and prosecutions. As such, the collaborative platform proposed in this regulation will contribute to supporting and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of joint investigation teams.

The platform will be accessible to all actors involved in joint investigation teams' proceedings, including specific member states' representatives and representatives of third countries, who will be invited to co-operate in the context of a given investigation, as will competent European Union bodies, offices and agencies such as Eurojust, Europol and the European Public Prosecutor's Office.

The proposed collaboration platform will solve the technical problems and provide the technical support that has limited the potential of joint investigations to date. As outlined earlier, the regulation itself is more technical than legal in nature and applies to the processing of information, including personal data. It takes into consideration the exchange and storage of operational information and evidence as well as non-operational information. This regulation will apply to all phases of a joint investigation team starting from the time members sign up to

collaborate in this way. This regulation does not amend or otherwise affect the existing legal provisions on the establishment, conduct or valuation of joint investigation teams. Rather, it will simply enhance the capability of the teams to work more speedily and more effectively. Our experience of participating in and contributing to joint investigation teams, through An Garda Síochána, has shown how successful and effective they can be for cross-border investigations or prosecutions. The technical difficulties preventing them from gaining the highest possible efficiency that have arisen in practice can be overcome. The joint investigation teams collaboration platform proposed in this regulation will solve these problems and deliver the technical support that has been missing so far.

In case we needed any further evidence of the centrality and importance of joint investigation teams to tackle the most serious cross-border and transnational crime, we can see it in yesterday's news regarding the EU's setting up a joint investigation team with Ukraine to collect evidence and investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in respect of the atrocities in Bucha. We are committed to tackling serious organised, cross-border and transnational crime and our continued engagement in and commitment to joint investigation teams is central to that. By doing this now, under an Article 3 opt-in, we will ensure we are at the table with our European partners and can be fully involved in the detailed negotiations on the proposal.

I again commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Electoral Reform Bill 2022: Second Stage

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am glad to have the opportunity to outline the provisions of the Bill, which will deliver on the ambitious electoral reform agenda set out in A Programme for Government - Our Shared Future. The package of reforms set out in the Bill will address some of the most significant challenges our electoral system faces and, what is more, will create much-needed capacity within our system to anticipate and address new challenges into the future. At a time when democracy is under pressure throughout the globe, this is an opportunity to strengthen it in Ireland. Getting right the balance and legislative structure of the Bill has been a major undertaking, and I thank in particular my departmental officials and the Office of the Attorney General for the work they have done on it. It is founded on political consensus and public support built up over the years through reports and consultations.

The Bill contains detailed provisions in respect of four distinct areas. First, it will establish an electoral commission, that is, an independent, specialised body positioned at the centre of our electoral system, bringing a range of existing functions under one roof and taking responsibility for several new functions that will address emerging opportunities and challenges as our society and electoral environment evolve. Such a commission has long been promised and I am proud we are now delivering on it. The Bill will also provide a legislative basis for the modernisation of our electoral registration process, a modernisation that is long overdue. It will make registering to vote more accessible and streamlined and enable online registration in simplified forms, with a continuously updated, or rolling, register in order that people can update their details at any time.

In addition, the Bill will provide for the regulation of online political advertising. The spread of online disinformation in the run-up to electoral events is one of the most serious threats to our electoral system in Ireland. In response to this threat, the Bill will provide for greater transparency in respect of online political advertising during electoral periods. It will ensure transparency in political advertising and help protect our electoral processes from hidden interference. These provisions entail bringing the online electoral advertising space into line with our existing regulations for more traditional forms of advertising. Finally, the Bill includes measures to assist returning officers in running electoral events should public health restrictions be in place due to a pandemic, such as we have just experienced in the context of Covid-19.

I will now elaborate on the provisions of the Bill. Part 1, covering sections 1 to 4, inclusive, addresses preliminary and general matters. Part 2, which takes in sections 5 to 76, inclusive, will provide the legislative basis for the electoral commission. The commission will be assigned a broad range of functions and powers. In line with international best practice, it will be independent of the Government and will be directly accountable to the Oireachtas. The approach set out in the Bill to the commission's structure and functions is in keeping with the views of the Oireachtas, as outlined in the 2016 report of a Oireachtas joint committee regarding a proposed electoral commission, and with the views of the public, following a public consultation process carried out in 2019 on a regulatory impact analysis on the establishment of an electoral commission.

Chapter 3 of Part 2 sets out the governance arrangements for the commission. It provides for seven members, including a chairperson, who will be a serving or retired senior member of the Judiciary nominated by the Chief Justice. Two members, namely, the Ombudsman and the Clerk of the Dáil, will serve in an *ex officio* capacity. They currently have a prominent role in several functions that will be transferred to the commission. The four remaining, ordinary members will be selected by an independent Public Appointments Service, PAS, process, which has been set out in detail in section 9. They will be appointed by the President following a recommendation of both Houses of the Oireachtas. These ordinary members will have skills and expertise in a range of areas that will assist the commission in its work. The commission will be led by a chief executive appointed by the Government following a public, independent PAS selection process. He or she will be responsible for implementing the policies of the commission and managing its day-to-day administration and business. It is intended the commission will be funded by its own Vote and the chief executive will be the Accounting Officer in this regard.

Chapters 4 to 8, inclusive, of Part 2 will provide for the transfer of existing functions to the commission. Chapter 5 will see the commission taking on the work formerly carried out by referendum commissions, explaining the subject matter of referendums, promoting public awareness of referendums and encouraging people to vote. Chapter 6 will transfer responsibility to the commission for the registering of political parties, with the commission's chief executive taking on the role of registrar from the Clerk of the Dáil. Appeals against decisions of the registrar will be handled by the board of the commission. Chapter 7 will empower the electoral commission to carry out reviews of, and make reports on, Dáil and European Parliament constituencies. This work is currently carried out by constituency commissions and legislated for primarily in the Electoral Act 1997. The current provisions will be repealed and their provisions transferred to this chapter. Such boundary reviews will be commenced following the publication of preliminary census results.

Chapter 8 will assign responsibility to the commission for the review of local electoral area

boundaries, transferring the role from boundary committees, which are defined under the Local Government Act 1991. The terms of reference of such reviews will be subject to the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas. Chapter 9 of Part 2 will provide for the commission to take on a new policy research and advisory function. As part of its work, the commission will prepare research programmes, conduct research on electoral policy and procedure, and provide advice, as required, to the Minister and the Government on electoral issues. It can make recommendations to the Government regarding proposals for changes to electoral legislation. The commission will also promote public awareness of, and public participation in, the State's electoral and democratic processes through education and information programmes. This is an expansion of the work that referendum commissions carry out as part of their roles. The commission may also prepare and publish *ex post* reports on how electoral events were administered. Chapter 10 will provide that the commission will have an oversight role in respect of the register of electors, while Chapter 11 will make technical, consequential amendments to a range of other legislation.

5 o'clock

I turn to Part 3 of the Bill, covering sections 77 to 116, inclusive. This Part deals with the new modernised arrangements for the registration of electors. It makes amendments to those key electoral Acts which set out the legislative basis for our electoral registration process, principally the Electoral Act 1992, which is covered by Chapter 1. Chapters 2 and 3 replicate and reflect those changes in other enactments, including the Electoral Act 1997 and the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2006.

Given that this is amending legislation, many sections are lightly amended. In general these relate to updates, for example, by removing references to the draft register or supplement that will no longer be relevant in the context of rolling registration. References to the qualifying date are also removed throughout as the date of application will be the date of relevance in each case.

Sections 78 to 81, inclusive, update sections 7 to 12 of the Electoral Act 1992 in this way, along with other technical adjustments. Section 82 amends the 1992 Act to provide, among other technical changes, for a new process where a person has no fixed premises at which they are ordinarily resident. It enables the provision of a correspondence address and a place at which the person considers themselves resident and registration authorities are given power to consider such applications. Also included is a requirement to review this provision after three years of operation.

Section 84 amends section 13 of the 1992 Act, which provides for the electoral register. The amendment provides for the introduction of continuous registration, which is a central plank of this modernisation process and will ensure a single process all year round, enabling updates at any time. It provides that the register in force at the time of commencement of this section continues in force to be updated and maintained by the registration authority in line with the provisions of the Act. It specifies the point after which an application will have no effect in respect of an electoral event and sets the requirement on local authorities to publish the register in advance of such an event.

Section 85 provides that the Minister may, by regulation, designate a single registration authority to establish, manage and maintain a shared database for use by all registration authorities in the performance of their functions. This work is under way and will over time enable

a single high level of security and data protection to be applied to register data. Each local authority will remain responsible for its own register and will work within the shared system. This section also specifies the purpose and content of the database as well as providing for a cost-sharing agreement between authorities.

Section 87 provides the data-sharing framework that will enable and support the work of registration authorities in the new process. It provides for the sharing of information between local authorities in the performance of their functions and for the provision of confirmation of identifying particulars by the Minister for Social Protection for the purpose of maintaining and updating the register. These processes are further detailed in the Second Schedule to the 1992 Act which is amended by section 104. It also provides for the making of an order by the Minister for a periodic data-sharing exercise and sets the requirements for such an order. Data protection tests of necessity and proportionality are included throughout this section.

Sections 88 and 92 make changes to postal voting provisions and special voting provisions in the 1992 Act, including broadening the definition of illness and disability to those with mental health difficulties and, given the move to a rolling register, providing for a time-bound postal or special voting arrangement in line with medical certification.

Sections 100 and 101 make amendments to facilitate voting by special voters if their place of residence is temporarily inaccessible.

Section 90 provides for the new individual application process for entry to the register or for updating details. Such applications are to be made to the registration authority for decision in respect of eligibility criteria as well as the identity data checks provided for in amendments to the Second Schedule in section 104. A right of appeal in case of refusal is also provided for.

Section 91 introduces anonymous registration for those whose safety might be at risk if their name and address are published or made available. It sets out the evidentiary requirements, which can either be an order under specified legislation or a declaration by a qualified person. A postal vote is provided for in such cases.

Section 93 provides for the new pending elector list which will enable pre-registration by 16- and 17-year-olds. When they turn 18 they will be added to the register and removed from the pending elector list. The list will be separate to the register and will not be published or made available. Further detail on the application process, which mirrors that of the register itself, is set out in the Second Schedule as amended in section 104.

Section 95 updates and expands section 20 of the Electoral Act 1992 on the role of registration authorities in maintaining the register. Section 96 inserts a new section 20A into the 1992 Act, which requires annual reporting by each registration authority to the Electoral Commission.

Section 98 inserts a new section to set out a process of third party claims, ensuring that we retain the ability of any person to raise an issue in respect of possible inaccuracies or issues with the register.

Section 104 makes a series of changes to the Second Schedule to the 1992 Act. It further details provisions in the main body of the Act as outlined, including in respect of enabling the gathering of specified data such as Eircodes, PPSNs and date of birth, and sets out the processes for considering applications, including basic data checks, which will improve accuracy and in-

tegrity. These changes together will result in a more accessible, responsive registration process giving rise to a more accurate and secure register of electors.

I turn to Part 4 of the Bill, which runs from sections 117 to 139, inclusive. This Part provides for transparency in respect of online political advertisements which have been purchased to run during the period of an election or referendum campaign. This period has been defined in the Bill as that beginning on the day of the making of a polling day order and ending on polling day.

Section 119 requires the compulsory labelling of paid online political advertisements during electoral periods. In effect, each online political advertisement must be labelled as a political advert and must provide a link to specified information for voters, in a clear and conspicuous manner, on who is behind the advert, the total cost of the advert and why they are being targeted. This information must be displayed in a “transparency notice” which is clearly linked to the online political advertisement.

Sections 120 to 123, inclusive, set out the obligations on online platforms and the steps they must take to verify the identity of the buyers of online political advertisements and the information provided by them in connection with the purchase of online political advertisements.

Sections 125 to 128, inclusive, empower the Electoral Commission to appoint authorised officers to monitor compliance with the provisions of Part 4 and to investigate any suspected breaches by online platforms or by the buyers of online political advertising in order to determine if enforcement action is needed. Sections 129 and 130 provide for these compliance notices, and set out that appeals against them may be made to the District Court. Sections 131 and 132 provide for a streamlined enforcement procedure which will apply during the relatively narrow focus of an electoral period.

I flag that, in addition to the provisions in Part 4 and having specific regard to the dissemination of electoral information in the online sphere, I have asked the Attorney General to prepare proposals and options for inclusion in the Bill around the protection of the integrity of our electoral processes. This will include the Electoral Commission being assigned an appropriate function in this regard. Any necessary amendments to the Bill arising from this work will be brought forward as the Bill progresses through these Houses.

Lastly, Parts 3 and 5 of the Bill include legislative amendments to facilitate the holding of polls if public health restrictions are in place during a pandemic. Part 5 gives returning officers flexibility to allow polling to take place at electoral events over more than one day to facilitate social distancing at polling stations.

Sections 141 to 145, inclusive, apply this flexibility to each of the electoral codes, making the necessary amendment to the Referendum Act 1994, the Presidential Elections Act 1993, the European Parliament Elections Act 1997, the Local Government Act 2001 and the Local Elections Regulations 1995.

The Bill is a significant reform of our electoral legislation, processes and structures. It makes our system more accessible and inclusive. Its provisions harness the opportunities presented by technology while addressing the challenges that it also presents.

I wish to flag further amendments on electoral funding to protect our State from malicious interference in our democratic system. The issue of islands voting simultaneously with the

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mainland will also be addressed on Committee Stage. I will engage further with committee members on these key issues as drafting progresses. My Department is engaging with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, on population estimates and I will table amendments to satisfy the requirements under Article 16 of Bunreacht na hÉireann on Dáil representation.

I am thankful to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage for the detailed pre-legislative scrutiny that was afforded to the general scheme of the Bill. The perspectives of the committee and the wide range of expert witnesses it consulted with were invaluable in the course of the drafting of the Bill. I am glad to say that a significant majority of the recommendations set out in the committee's report are reflected in the Bill.

I look forward to Deputies' contributions as we progress through the parliamentary process.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister for his comments and for the significant work his officials did with our committee to facilitate pre-legislative scrutiny. Sometimes, our debates around this Department can be fractious, but there was broad consensus throughout the committee's proceedings, not only on supporting the Bill, but on trying to work on a collegial basis to ensure it was as strong as possible for reasons I will explain in a moment.

I welcome the publication and introduction of the final legislation last week and its Second Stage debate now. I look forward to us progressing it to Committee Stage. I see no reason that the Bill could not be passed and enacted by the summer recess. That would be a positive step and would come around a little faster than many of us believed it might. I thank the Minister and his officials for that.

This is important legislation. Across the House, the calls for the modernisation of our electoral system and the Register of Electors, the creation of an independent electoral commission, better regulation of online advertising and the use of online platforms during elections, and combining what is still a fragmented electoral system architecture into a much more efficient and streamlined body are positive developments. On this basis, Sinn Féin is happy to support the legislation.

It is not a cliché to say this is once-in-a-generation legislation and that it will set the framework for local, general and presidential elections and referendums into the future. Therefore, it is important we get it right. The comments I am going to make will be made out of a genuine desire for the Minister and his officials to consider some improvements to the Bill that we could discuss between now and Final Stage.

There was a desire throughout the pre-legislative scrutiny discussions, including among many of the expert witnesses whom we had attend, not only to see the electoral commission established, but also a framework created along which its powers, functions and role could evolve in an organic way. There is a lack of clarity in the Bill about how that will be possible. We are keen to have the matter discussed further in the concluding remarks of the Minister or one of his ministerial colleagues and when we reach Committee Stage. If we set the commission up right and put it in train, it could grow into a substantive body, not unlike some of the more significant electoral commissions in New Zealand and other jurisdictions. I would strongly recommend this approach to the Minister.

I am still unconvinced that the chair needs to be a former judge. That is too restrictive. Some consideration should be given to the key criteria that someone needs. They may include legal expertise, but not necessarily judicial expertise. There is a question over the rationale

behind this approach as opposed to an approach that would be just a little broader to ensure that we got the best person to lead this new organisation.

Much of what the Bill is doing will come down to funding. While the legislation precedes the funding, the Minister might give some indication in his concluding remarks or on Committee Stage as to what his plans and hopes for the future are. Some interesting comparisons were made between the amounts of money being spent in election years and non-election years in New Zealand. I am mentioning that example because it is a small country with a small commission and with a good track record. The gaps in funding between what the Minister and his colleagues were considering during pre-legislative scrutiny stage and what was seen in that jurisdiction were significant.

One of our main debates was on the need to ensure that those who were most excluded from our electoral process, whether by virtue of social class, ethnicity, language, disability or other factors, were brought in from the beginning - not as peripheral considerations, but mainstreamed throughout. The committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report made specific recommendations in this respect. I cannot see them reflected explicitly in the Bill, though. It could be that we have missed something, but it is an issue to which we will return. I wished to bring it to the Minister's attention.

Our party has a long-standing commitment to lowering the voting age to 16 years. It has been tried in other jurisdictions. It would not only be positive for the political system, but also encourage young people to get active and get voting as early as possible. This could have been a matter for the commission's consideration at a later stage. It is a missed opportunity and I urge the Minister to consider it.

There is considerable disquiet among NGOs involved in policy advocacy, which are still concerned that the definition of "political purposes" might be too restrictive. We should have very robust rules - I am with the Minister and the legislation in this regard - to ensure there are no external influences on our electoral processes, including referendums, but we must also ensure that, in making that protection robust, we do not limit the ability of NGOs and others to be involved in legitimate policy advocacy work, which is essential to the functioning of our democracy. I know the Minister agrees with that. Some of the language around "political purposes" could be too restrictive. We would like to work with the Minister and his officials to tease this out and see if some further tweaks - they are more likely to come from the Government side on Report Stage - are in order.

I have made the case that our postal and proxy voting system is too restrictive. There are people who are denied the right to vote despite the fact that they are unable to do so or are not present in the jurisdiction for legitimate reasons. Other jurisdictions have good, robust systems for postal and proxy voting. We could improve our system. I wish to flag this issue.

Notwithstanding the criticisms from some social media platforms that presented to the committee, we must have the most robust controls and protections, not only where online advertising is concerned, but for any use of online platforms, so as to ensure that the kinds of negative activity we have seen in other jurisdictions - thankfully, there is no evidence that they exist in this jurisdiction - never come to play a part in our elections. While I welcome the moves in the Bill, and I recognise that it can only deal with the election period and the wider regulation of social media is work for another Minister and another committee, its provisions in this respect could be strengthened. I hope the Minister will be open to discussing this matter with us on

Committee Stage.

Regarding pre-legislative scrutiny, I am conscious that the Minister's officials are already overloaded with a great deal of work, but it would be useful if they were able to give the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage a short memo setting out how the departmental officials believe that the spirit, if not the actual letter of the pre-legislative scrutiny recommendations, is reflected in the Bill. Sometimes, the Minister works something in that he believes reflects such recommendations but we do not necessarily see it. Rather than wasting his time with amendments that are unnecessary or have already been dealt with in the Bill, it would be useful if we had access to that information.

I thank the Minister for his letter, which he issued to members of the committee on 1 April. He referred to it at the end of his comments. Some of the amendments will be technical, so I urge the Minister to make his officials available for a private briefing, for example, with the committee's members. We will not have put any of them through pre-legislative scrutiny and are not asking to do so. Rather than giving us less than a week's notice when we get the white list of amendments, however, we should have a briefing. The Minister will remember, when he was on this side of the Chamber, his predecessor often brought in officials to meet with me and him, even when the amendments were not finally crafted. It would be very useful to give us a sense of some of that. We would support the Minister in that.

I again acknowledge this is a very significant piece of legislative work by officials. There has been very significant public consultation. A very significant piece of work has also been done by colleagues on the Oireachtas committee. I commend all of that. All I urge the Minister to do is to take the same collegiate approach on Committee Stage, and on Report and Final Stages, as we have taken to date. We could see some improvements to the Bill by doing so. We are supporting it anyway. We want to see this over the line but let us make sure that when it is passed, it is the strongest, most robust and most effective piece of electoral reform that will stand not only to the Minister's reputation and legacy but to that of this House. That would be a very good day's work indeed. I look forward to working with the Minister and his officials on Committee Stage.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. The establishment of a permanent electoral commission has been discussed in this Chamber for years. It comes up every time there is an election so I am glad we are finally getting around to putting something in place.

In this Bill, a number of new powers are set out for the commission as well as better oversight of our electoral process, which will bring us in line with best international practice. It is important that funding for the commission remains independent and there is flexibility within its budget. During pre-legislative scrutiny, it was recommended that subcommittees be established to represent the voices of marginalised communities in respect of engagement in elections. This is a very positive step. The role of the commission in promoting public awareness around the roles of different bodies and elected representatives is welcome. I hope it will lead to better engagement with our democratic process.

The modernisation of the electoral register is something for which everybody has been asking for years. I welcome this. It is about time. Before now, people had to go out of their way to get on the register so it is to be hoped a simpler process will result in more people turning out to vote on election day. We hope that the electoral commission will have an oversight role

around the upkeep of registers. This is very important because it will ensure nobody will miss out on a vote due to a clerical error.

We might have missed an opportunity in not extending the postal or proxy voting arrangements in line with what is the norm across Europe. I hope this can be addressed on Committee Stage. The provision in the Bill that allows for pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds is a positive step, but the Government has been found wanting in this area and has walked away from extending voting rights to young people. My colleague, Senator Fintan Warfield, has been a strong advocate for granting the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds, but the Government has still to act on this call. Many 16- and 17-year-olds today are much more engaged in current affairs and politics than would have previously been the case.

The regulation of political advertising online is an issue that politicians worldwide have been trying to tackle. We have seen an increase in political advertising that seeks to mislead and misinform. There are very real concerns around the transparency and motivations of those taking out these advertisements. The Bill seems to fall short in that regard, with concerns being raised about the lack of clear definitions around what is classified as political advertising. I hope this Bill results in greater transparency and clarity for voters when it comes to online campaigning at election time.

All in all, this Bill is a step in the right direction in reforming our electoral process, but I still believe it needs some more improvement.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Like my colleagues, I welcome this Bill. Much work has been done at committee level - the Minister was present for it - because we truly believe this is a chance to create much fairer, more honest and accessible elections for the future and to have a register that is truly reflective of the electorate.

One of the key issues we need to address is opening voting up to younger people. In recent years, we have seen that more and more young people are much more engaged with politics and the political system than would have been the case in the past. This is welcome, as is the inclusion of politics as a subject up to leaving certificate level in schools. There is a need, however, for an electoral commission to look at making the process of voting much easier. I have to wonder about this because I remember a man said to me during the last general election that his son's child benefit was cut off when he reached the age of 18 but he was not automatically registered to vote. One arm of the State was able to recognise when a person reached 18 years and cut off a benefit, but that same individual could not vote in the election. We need to work on those kinds of things. We need more integrated thinking and more working together to prevent things like this from happening.

As I said, we see more young people engaged in politics and more determined to be so. I see it with my two daughters. They are much more engaged when it comes to the climate change movement, Black Lives Matter, the repeal the eighth campaign and marriage equality. Young people these days are educating themselves more. They are listening to and watching social media and what their friends are saying. They are having discussions and debates. Young people need to be respected; that is something we all agree on in this House. We should take them seriously and take real steps to include them. That is why we believe the voting age should be 16 in order to reach out to younger people and to listen to them. These young people are our future. Let us give them a say in decision-making.

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Alongside making voting more accessible to young people, we need to look at expanding voting in areas that traditionally have low turnouts. We know that less affluent areas have a lower turnout and people in them are less likely to vote. We need to work on this because when people in those communities who need a voice do not vote, they lose that voice. In my constituency of Cork North-Central, there was a very good turnout in the last general election. I was delighted to top the poll. It was one of the proudest days of my life but it also sent out a clear message. I was the first person from Knocknaheeny to be elected to the Dáil. One of the things I think about all the time, when I am in St. Vincent's field or walking around the area, is that if I can get elected, anyone from Knocknaheeny, Farranree, Mayfield, The Glen or any working-class area can. Unfortunately, when we look at previous local elections, there were very poor turnouts. We lost many good councillors, not just Sinn Féin councillors but others, who were very strong voices for their communities. That is why we need to encourage more and more people to ensure they are registered to vote and ensure they come out to vote.

Some areas in my constituency have a voter turnout of 24%, 25% or 26%. That is what this Bill needs to address and that is what we need to work together on to ensure it addresses that. It is important people come out to vote so that they have a voice. While Deputies take on a role at national level, we also need politicians, such as councillors on the ground, at local level. You need a strong political team, whether it is councillors, Senators, Deputies or MEPs, to have people's voices heard. We are currently talking about climate and the consequences for Earth. That is why we need everyone to have their voices heard so that people have their say on big issues such as this.

This is a real opportunity to deliver real electoral reform. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity. That is why we want to make sure it works. At the last general election, Cork Votes did voter registration. One place it did this was outside the Cork City Library on the Grand Parade. The queues down the Grand Parade, of mostly young people but not all, showed the interest that is there. It should be commended on that but we need more work on that. That is why the electoral commission is so vital to get so many more people lined up.

Deputy Ged Nash: I very much welcome the Bill. As the Minister knows, it has been a very long time coming. Many of us in the Chamber are around politics a long number of years. I would be interested to see how many times the electoral commission has been mentioned in the Official Report. I remember in 2008 and also in 2012 my colleague and a fellow Cork man, former Deputy Ciarán Lynch, developed two Private Members Bills to establish an independent electoral commission but it has been part of the political folklore in this country for many years, just like the Kenny Report and many other mythical, almost legendary, proposals. I am pleased that finally we are getting around to legislating for an independent electoral commission.

A lot of work was done in this space by officials in the Department and Ministers in the 2011-2016 Government and I was very disappointed to see the Government from 2016-20 was effectively a reform-free zone. It decided not to proceed with the idea of an electoral commission. Nevertheless, we are here now. It is to the Minister's credit that we are now debating Second Stage of this very important legislation.

There are several parts to the lengthy Bill with four overarching themes, the first of which is the establishment of the electoral commission itself. It also covers changes to the way the electoral register is to be compiled and managed and the crucial area of the regulation of online political advertising, something which interests us all, will finally be addressed in some way. The protection of the integrity of elections, which is critically important, is also covered by the

Bill.

The creation of the independent electoral commission is a long time coming. It will be an independent body and will subsume all the functions of the Referendum Commission and the Constituency Commission. That is a very good thing indeed. I am also pleased that the commission will have a research and, dare I say it, an advocacy function. It is important that a commission of this nature has that kind of function. It can only be a good thing for the health of our democracy and to provide an evidential basis for ongoing debate and informed policy development on elections in this country.

I know that time limits are being placed on membership of the commission. That is important but there must also be a balanced approach and the Minister is providing for a degree of overlap allowed for members. An important commission like this must retain experience and consistency of membership as far as it can, particularly in the early years when it is bedding down.

I would be interested to hear from the Minister how the electoral commission and the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, will overlap. These are key institutional arrangements which, taken together, form a very important bulwark and a framework in the regulation and oversight of politics and the conduct of politics and public life more generally in this country. However, it is strange that the commission is not being given any function in the actual running of elections and referendums. That is not best practice and requires explanation. It is a little bizarre that the function for the actual running of the elections will still remain with the Minister and the Department. It is odd that the new commission is being set up yet a candidate in the elections, that is the Minister himself, still gets to manage the overall process. I am not suggesting for one minute that there would be any interference in the process - no one would ever say that - but it is unusual that we are setting up a commission but the franchise section of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will ultimately have responsibility for aspects of the election. Why not give all that function to the electoral commission? It is not either being given SIPO's functions around regulating political funding or electoral expenditure except for a new function around online political advertising. Apart from creating an administrative overlap between the new commission and SIPO, it means that an opportunity to really overhaul and reform the rules on political funding and expenditure is being lost.

That said, much of what is in the Bill is very welcome. It represents a combination of some of the positions taken by many, if not all, of the parties in this House over the last couple of decades. Overall, however, it is a cautious, toe-in-the-water proposal that seems to be designed to have as little impact as possible on many of the existing structures and badly needed reform such as that of SIPO and the franchise section of the Minister's Department. The problem there probably arises from the fact that SIPO is seen to be a creature of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and not of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. A more radical and efficient proposal would be to strip the Minister of election management functions, merge all the new functions with those of SIPO, perhaps with a stripped down membership, and then staff the body with civil servants transferred out of the franchise section. The opportunity could be taken to update and reform the ethics and standards side of SIPO's remit at the same time. All that work has been done and was presented in the Public Sector Standards Bill 2015 by Deputy Howlin when he was Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. That Bill was brought to Second Stage but was allowed to lapse by the 2016-20 Government. Its ambitions are still relevant now, if not more so. Many of the features of that Bill can be read in the recommendations made every year in SIPO's annual reports. Labour also believes the

commission should be given the power to regulate or at least provide a framework for election debates. The composition of TV debates at election time always gives rise to concern. If you are excluded, as Sinn Féin was at the early stages of the last general election, it can be used to a party's advantage and create some momentum behind its campaign. That is understandable. Every party in that position would do the same. We have seen that in the recent past.

Debates are regulated in the US by the debates commission. If we are now regulating paid-for online material it would be no extra burden to take on the part function, at least, of managing the TV party leaders debates with, for example, the input of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. The electoral commission should examine this area. I ask the Minister to consider an enabling provision for the regulation of electoral debates where the commission could make recommendations or at least that national broadcasters' plans be submitted to the commission for review on the grounds of fairness and equity.

The commission might also be well minded to look at the thorny question of the impact of opinion polling during an election period on the outcome of an election and whether they should be regulated. Opinion polls are a very important feature of election coverage in Ireland and inform our public debate to a degree. Arguably they should be subject to some form of regulation. Many polling companies are public about their methodology and carry out their work to European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, ESOMAR, and Association of Irish Market Research Organisation, AIMRO, guidelines but there is no statutory regulation of any description in this country. At a minimum they should be obliged to employ a trained statistician on staff. The reality is that the publication of national and individual constituency polls can influence the outcome of elections. Polls are also used to influence policy and they help to shape political narratives. I am not for one minute advocating a ban on publication of polls during an election period, but there should be some level of regulation as misleading polls can shift public opinion in the very same way that unregulated online material can. We are trying to achieve that objective and I ask that the commission look at the prospect of developing a framework for the regulation and management of opinion polling during an election period. We have all seen in our constituencies where constituency polls say one candidate is safe and another is not and to vote for that candidate. Old research by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service from 2009 indicated 16 of the 27 EU countries ban reporting of polls, though timeframes range from a full month to just 24 hours before election day. Only three countries, namely, Italy, Slovakia and Luxembourg, have bans of more than seven days. The commission should give this matter some thought when it is up and running and at least carry out some research, as part of its new research function, to inform the debate.

It is self-evident we need to reform how we compile and manage the register. It has been unsatisfactory, to say the least, for a long time. We are finally entering the modern world when we allow people to register online and I am pleased to see a preregistration opportunity will be provided to 16- and 17-year-olds. We also have to make it much easier to enable all of those who want to vote to do so. Increasing opportunities to vote by post by proxy are important and that has been referenced by Deputies who have spoken previously. Of course, we do not want to see the postal or proxy voting system open to abuse in any way but we all know situations, and the Minister will know himself from his own constituency and day-to-day work, that some people may be out of the State for short periods and are then not able to vote. They may be out for work or for a caring reason. They may be out for a whole host of reasons across the whole gamut of the human experience and this is really frustrating for them and is very frustrating for all of us as candidates. Will some more changes be considered here to enable more cir-

cumstances to be covered by postal voting? If we are in the business of maximising participation, we should give this greater consideration. The opportunity to register anonymously, with certain controls, is enlightened. It genuinely is. Some lessons have been learned from what happens in other jurisdictions. In our work, I would say we have all encountered situations where there are risks to someone's safety and security in terms of public knowledge in respect of where they live and so on and this is a really welcome measure, as are the arrangements for those of no fixed address.

We cannot have this debate without looking at whether we should and how we ought to extend the franchise. Should we look at lowering the voting age to 16 years? It is a very live debate. There is a lack of ambition, quite frankly, in this Chamber and within the Government about the idea of lowering the voting age to 16 years. The Bill solely provides for preregistration for 16- and 17-year-olds. We should be looking at reducing the voting age and this is a great opportunity to do something and maybe it is a missed opportunity in the context of this Bill. We are looking at modernising how we register and enroll 16- and 17-year-olds when they get to 18 years but we are not talking at all about extending the franchise to them. I think 16- and 17-year-olds are in a much better position to assess political candidates, political parties and make decisions than I may have been at that age, quite frankly. They should be given the opportunity to do that or at least we need to have a serious informed debate on that proposition. Perhaps the electoral commission can help to facilitate that debate in an informed way.

On online advertising, it has been abundantly clear for many years that the electoral process and campaigning and decision-making more generally is vulnerable to the completely unregulated wild west that is the online world. Online platforms simply have no conscience whatsoever. They have no morality and no ethics; they are there to make profit and the truth comes all too often in last place. We have seen how nefarious influences have thrown money at targeted social media campaigns to deliver earth-shattering, disruptive epoch-making events such as Brexit and the election of far-right nationalists across the world. We have all seen the impact of misinformation, disinformation and targeted, paid-for campaigns that set out to not just tackle ideas and policies, which one might argue is fair enough, but often to discredit public figures, political parties and candidates themselves. We did a good thing many years ago by restricting political advertising in the broadcast media. It ensures a somewhat level playing pitch for parties, candidates and other actors in civil society. While this Bill has decided not to place an all-out ban on political advertising online for the election periods, it proposes to at least regulate and insist on transparency from both the platforms and the candidates, political parties, third parties and others. At least in the future we will know who is paying for a campaign, what it costs and who is being targeted with the message. The relevant provisions of the Bill set out in detail how this will work, who is responsible and the responsibilities of candidates, parties and the platforms themselves.

Key to the success of this new system will be a credible enforcement and compliance system. The Minister might elaborate on how he envisages the commission taking a proactive oversight role rather than it being merely reactive to complaints of non-compliance during an election period. In other words, does he see the commission being in position to initiate actions itself or is it restricted to doing so only when a formal complaint is made to it? Speed and taking initial action is also the essence, especially during an election period. Will the Minister reassure us that if a party, candidate or platform is non-compliant, it will not take a months-long investigation to take down online ads? This has to happen quickly, as we all know the dynamic of an election or referendum campaign and how that could take on life of its own and how disruptive

something like this can be to transparency and fairness in the electoral process.

In addition, is the Minister satisfied the forms of fines and sanctions available to him in this Bill will be enough to ensure the Facebooks and the Twitters of this world will fear the sanctions if they are found to be non-compliant with the legislation? There has also been a general discussion on the fact these measures will only be in place for the duration of a formal election period. That concerns me, quite frankly. These measures will not apply at any time outside of an election period. We all use social media platforms to engage and keep our constituents informed. Most of us in this House and elsewhere, if not all, do this honestly and with integrity. We do it transparently and we all use platforms occasionally for paid targeted campaigns to get the message to those who may need to understand that message and see that message. We do that to assist our constituents. To be fair to the platforms, some of them have made some improvements and additions to their processes to make them more transparent but more can be done. It would be a good idea that a general obligation be placed on all those taking out paid campaigns that all political advertising be required to comply with conditions that this Bill will attach only to election communication. This is something the system should not rule out and I ask the Minister to signal his intention in this regard.

Strong legal frameworks governing standards and ethics in public life, transparency in lobbying and decision-making, freedom of information laws, anti-corruption measures and taking money out of politics are all measures delivered by my own party over the decades and integrity and clean politics is absolutely everything, but there were still gaps that need to be closed. We are only too aware gaps can be exploited and this has happened in the case, for example, of Sinn Féin's acceptance of a bequest worth €4 million from the late William Hampton. The Minister will remember that bequest was explicitly meant for Sinn Féin in this jurisdiction. It could not be accepted here under our strict donation laws where a limit of €2,500 is placed on a corporate donation. Instead, this donation was funnelled to other side of the Border where there are no such limits on donations once the person in question is on the UK register. Nothing unlawful was done in that regard. I want to make that clear. It certainly was not within the spirit of the legislation that governs the conduct of politics and political financing in this jurisdiction and it took advantage of the lax laws in the UK. My party examined this. We took it very seriously and corresponded with the Standards in Public Office Commission and indeed with the UK regulator. Any party registered in both jurisdictions on this island could handle that donation totalling €4 million in the same way Sinn Féin did. As I said, there was nothing unlawful about that and I am not claiming it is unlawful. Fianna Fáil is also registered in the North, to the best of my recollection, so the Minister's party could do this too if it were to decide it wanted to accept a donation up there rather than down here to circumvent the laws we have in place. I ask the Minister if this is an issue he examined in this Bill. Is it something he is considering tackling with, for example, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform? The Minister's remarks mentioned flagging further amendments on electoral funding to protect our State from malicious interference in our democratic system. It would be useful if he could elaborate on that when he has the opportunity to respond because these are the kinds of issues we need to take very seriously in this jurisdiction if we are to be true to the principles and philosophy of ethics in public life and the fair financing of politics in this country. The Labour Party will work with the Minister to strengthen this Bill. I also agree with the remarks made by Deputy Ó Broin earlier that it would be useful to have an engagement with departmental officials before Committee Stage when we could possibly address some of the concerns we have in order that the legislative process can be completed swiftly. We are all anxious to get this long-awaited legislation over the line.

I congratulate the Minister on this legislation, notwithstanding the concerns we have about it in some respects. I especially want to congratulate the officials on producing this very important body of work which can be revolutionary in terms of how elections are conducted in this country.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I will pick up where Deputy Nash left off and congratulate the Minister on this Bill, which is a significant and overdue piece of work. I want to dwell briefly on something we take for granted, which is just how lucky we are to live in a parliamentary democracy. If one reckons across the whole of human history or even geographically, statistically one is very unlikely to have lived within a democracy of any kind and certainly not within a democracy as strong and as flourishing as this one. It is worth mentioning that democracy comes from the Greek terms *demos*, meaning people and *cratia*, meaning power. It literally means power to the people but even within accepted forms of democracy, there has often been a distinction made around which people are allowed to exercise the franchise. Even if one thinks back to Athens, which is considered the cradle of democracy, it was only adult male Athenian citizens who had completed military training who had the right to vote. The vote was limited to between 10% and 20% of the total number of inhabitants.

One of the strengths of this Bill is that not only does it preserve and strengthen the form of democracy that we have, the powerful form which is proportional representation through the single, transferable vote, but seeks to extend it. Here in Ireland women only gained a partial vote in 1918. They had to be 30 years of age and university qualified to vote at that time. It was only with the foundation of the State in 1922 that women gained equal voting rights to men. Many of the provisions in this Bill are aimed at extending the franchise to more women, to make it more possible for women to vote and for minority women and for young people, in particular, to vote, which is extremely welcome.

Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an tAire tiomanta don Ghaeilge agus go bhfuil suim faoi leith aige inti. Táim buartha nach bhfuil tagairt ar bith don Ghaeilge sa Bhille mar a sheasann sé, agus ba chóir go mbeadh. Ba chóir go mbeadh na soláthairtí atá san Acht teanga, go háirithe ó thaobh earcaíochta de, curtha san áireamh agus curtha i bhfeidhm sa Bhille. While there are several important provisions mentioned in the Acht teanga, the 20% recruitment target is of particular interest. I know the Leas-Cheann Comhairle spent a lot of time in committee discussing this as well and we need to see it brought through into other Bills. I may put forward some amendments on Committee Stage, particularly relating to sections 8 to 10, when we set out the commission's membership. There should be specific reference to language competencies within the commission. Also, section 16 which deals with issues of staffing should be amended to reflect the targets set out in the Acht teanga. There should be a 20% target for the recruitment of staff who are competent in the use of Irish. What competence in the use of Irish might be has been discussed in some detail previously. There are a number of other possible amendments but I know that the Minister has good relations with the Irish-language community and I encourage him to engage with them before the Bill reaches Committee Stage and to consider bringing forward amendments in his own right.

I want to draw attention to some of the provisions laid out in Chapter 7, which deal with Dáil and European Parliament constituencies. One interesting area that the electoral commission might consider is new proposals recently considered by the European Parliament as part of its contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, specifically those relating to the creation of transnational, EU-wide electoral lists for use in the next elections to the European Parliament in 2024, which would have clear implications for this Bill. The proposals as out-

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lined at the moment would see 28 seats to the Parliament elected on EU-wide basis by all 450 million Europeans as one polity, for the first time. It would be a true European election and those elected would be European representatives, as opposed to Members of the European Parliament, MEPs, from any given country. These proposals are supported by all of the main groups in the Parliament, from Greens to Liberals, Social Democrats to Christian Democrats but implementing such a system poses a particular challenge here in Ireland because we do not use list systems. How our electoral system would integrate and interface with this should be considered in the context of this Bill.

One of my Green Party predecessors in the Oireachtas, then Senator and now MEP, Ms Grace O'Sullivan, started this debate previously in the Upper House with a proposal for a single Irish constituency in future European elections, which is an interesting proposal. I am not sure I fully agree with it but it is certainly something that should be considered. We would all acknowledge that the current European Parliament constituencies do not naturally align. I do not know that I necessarily identify with what Ireland South means as an electoral constituency but whatever system we are using, it is likely that it will have to integrate a transnational element of some sort into it. A well resourced electoral commission could have an integral role to play in such efforts.

I want to spend a little bit of time looking at specific provisions in the Bill that I very much welcome. Sections 88 through 92 deal with disability and are very much about extending the franchise and in cases where it is needed, bringing the vote to the people. That is really important and reflects the character of this democracy and how seriously we view the franchise and how we want to see it extended. I take slight exception to what Deputy Nash said about this Government having no ambition to extend the franchise to younger people. The preregistration of 16- to 17-year-olds is a really important and proactive step that will help people of that age to really engage with the democracy and take seriously the franchise that others have fought and died for. I really welcome the provisions around the anonymous voter and people who may not, for various reasons including domestic violence and domestic abuse, be safely identified on the electoral register.

My time is almost up but I want to refer to the regulation of online political advertising, which is extremely important. Also, in section 52, the obligation on parties to give information regarding the register is important. We know that there are people who fundraise outside of the State and spend money outside of the State to try to influence electoral results within the State. That information is important and people deserve to know it. Also, the transparency in terms of micro-targeting is important. Of course, we should all speak to people where they are, in a language they understand, about the issues that they care about but they also should have the right to know why they were selected for that particular message in order that they are fully informed.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill, as such reform is long overdue. We have been talking about electoral reform in these Houses for decades and I welcome the progress made here, however belated it may be. Anybody who has run or taken part in an election will know the frustration caused by an inaccurate register, the chase to get on the register, to get those who are not registered to register, and the conversations with constituents who do not vote in their local area because they never updated their address information.

I will focus my comments on the electoral register. The Bill is welcome, as the electoral

register can be pretty shambolic in some constituencies. There are people on electoral register who are long dead and others who have emigrated. As it stands, it is an inaccurate and incomplete register, which leads to inaccurate turnout figures. We are all in this Chamber because the people of the State voted for us to be here. It is the greatest privilege to be trusted in such a way by our peers but not everybody votes and not all members of the public are as interested in electoral processes as we are. People do not vote for lots of reasons and I welcome any steps taken to ensure that more people can engage more easily in the electoral process. While appreciating that there are questions around privacy and data protection, we need to ensure that a person's personal public service, PPS, number is linked to any reform of the electoral register. This is the best way to make sure the register is accurate going forward.

6 o'clock

The simplification of the registration process and the inclusion of a preregistration facility for those under the age of 18 are very good proposals, and we support them. Research from the United States suggests that the availability of a preregistration process can lead to an 80% increase in voter turnout. When canvassing and visiting local areas, we hear from some people that they are put off voting because the registration process is time-consuming and complex. We need to demonstrate that it is not complex. A simple process of filling in one's name, date of birth, address and personal public service, PPS, number without the need for a Garda signature, if promoted correctly by the new electoral commission, should lead to increased registration. The removal of the draft register and supplementary register should free up vital time and resources within local authorities. This should hopefully allow for a greater focus on the maintenance of the register in general. We need a proper rolling register, provided we get the original register correct. We need to get this right as changes in this area are decades delayed.

People get disgruntled with the political process, some to the point where they opt not to vote. For numerous reasons and over many years voter turnout in several estates in Limerick was traditionally extremely low. These areas were neglected for many years because politicians focused their efforts on areas where there was greater voter turnout. Turnout in the areas to which I refer has greatly improved in recent years, but more needs to be done to encourage all sections of society to engage in the electoral process. In the past, there has not been any proper attempt to get working class communities registered to vote. I know from experience that local authority efforts to get people registered to vote have been mostly confined to more affluent areas.

The establishment of an electoral commission, albeit with limited powers, is long overdue. The establishment of a body with an oversight and policy role is an important positive step for our electoral process. I am particularly keen to see how this body goes about the education aspects of its remit. We need to ensure that any proposed changes to the electoral register make it easier for people to register to vote and, if they wish, to check they are registered to vote.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Any electoral reform is welcome. This reform is long overdue. We are all aware of issues around voter registration, the inaccuracies of the register of electors and poor voter education. Our republic is founded on the sovereignty of the Irish people, but this can be only realised through an electoral system that proactively enables participation, fostering understanding of elections and facilitating as many people as possible to vote.

It is disappointing that such a long-awaited Bill is lacking the necessary ambition to reform our electoral system. It reinforces the *status quo*, with a few entirely necessary changes

in establishing a commission. There are three areas I want to highlight as needing particular attention. First, in establishing the electoral commission, there is an opportunity to facilitate disabled people to vote and stand for election. The Joint Committee on Disability Matters recent report, *Ensuring Independent Living and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, noted that the voice of people with disabilities in Ireland is often excluded from decision-making, through low representation of disabled people in the Dáil and the Seanad and low uptake in voting as a result of the inaccessibility of voting procedures. Currently, there are a range of systematic barriers, from inaccessible polling stations and election materials not being available in easy-to-read format to poor infrastructure which limits disabled candidates and politicians from canvassing and building up their profiles.

The Bill mainly refers to disability as a limitation, with one reference to improving communications on referendums for people with visual and hearing impairments. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that all appropriate measures be adopted to ensure that people with disabilities have the right to vote and to be elected. These rights are not being realised currently and this Bill does very little to change that.

In essence, this Bill was developed without any consideration for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Departments still have worrying ignorance of the State's obligations and how they are manifest in practice. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the National Disability Authority made very clear recommendations during pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. These need to be incorporated into the Bill. The electoral commission must be mandated to promote more equal political participation for groups, including people with disabilities and to set and monitor accessibility standards for the use of polling stations. Voter registration and election and referendum materials and forms all need to be accessible. Most significantly, all of these need to be developed in conjunction with disabled people and Disabled Persons Organisations. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obliges the State to closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, and their representative organisations, in matters affecting them. This has not happened in the context of this Bill.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report makes reference to the Department engaging with the National Disability Authority. This needs to happen, but the Department must also work directly with disabled people's organisations, DPOs. This is a key point the Joint Committee on Disability Matters has emphasised to other Oireachtas committees. On this point, the Bill should also require the commission to engage with disabled people and DPOs on matters impacting their capacity to participate in voting and standing for election.

Second, the commission should be empowered and directed to address other structural inequalities. The housing committee made a clear recommendation on this matter, which is not reflected in the Bill. There needs to be a strong legal commitment for the commission to engage with communities historically under-represented in electoral matters. We need systematic and cultural changes if we are to ensure greater diversity in decision-making. Submissions on the Bill highlight this. The Irish Council for Civil Liberties recommends that the commission have a role in candidacy support, while the National Women's Council of Ireland urges that the commission develop standards in political discourse that are free from discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech. This is an area in respect of which the Bill could have considerable transformative potential. Unfortunately, the ambition is lacking. To provide that the commission could or might do something is very different from it being mandated to act on these issues. Discrimination, sexism, racism and ableist thinking all need to be actively confronted. The commission, as

envisaged by the Government, will not confront any of these issues.

Third, the commission must be empowered to work on extending the franchise to as many residents as possible. Ensuring that more people are eligible to vote enhances our representative democracy and strengthens integration. The commission should work towards extending general election voting rights to non-citizen residents. Currently, all residents can vote in local elections. This principle should be extended to general elections. There is considerable support in political theory and academic research to show that permitting resident non-citizens to vote strengthens democracy. There are people living in Ireland for decades, paying taxes and contributing to their communities who cannot vote in general elections.

As was noted in the pre-legislative scrutiny, we have a needlessly complex and expensive naturalisation process, which is a barrier to accessing citizenship, leaving people without a right to vote. This is an obvious area the commission could address. Related to this is voting for 16- and 17-year-olds. In 2013, the Constitutional Convention recommended that the voting age be lowered to 16. No action has been taken on this in almost a decade. The only thing this Bill has to offer is preregistration for voting at 18. Scotland, Norway and other countries have demonstrated the positive impact of extending the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds. While this Government and those which preceded it have ignored the convention's recommendations, along with many other issues, I must acknowledge Senator Fintan Warfield's work in progressing the Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016. I encourage the Government to support this Bill and empower the commission to help young people realise this right.

This Bill is necessary but to label it a reform Bill when it largely reinforces the *status quo* is wrong. It needs to have greater direction and ambition in creating a more proactively inclusive system to enable all eligible people to vote and stand for election. It is also an opportunity to extend the franchise and strengthen our democracy. I hope these sentiments are ones the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, agrees with. I encourage the Minister to improve the Bill to make it truly reforming legislation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: With no disrespect to the Minister of State, I am disappointed not only that the Minister has left the Chamber but also that we do not have present a Minister of State from the Department that is handling this legislation. I question how, at a political level, the comments I propose to make will feed into the process. I very much welcome the Bill and the establishment of a permanent electoral commission, which was a long time coming. I acknowledge the very hard work done on this Bill, but I want to focus on a few key areas that I believe need to be strengthened. There are a number of missed opportunities in this Bill, in respect of which I propose to bring forward amendments to strengthen it. At this stage, I will not be joining in the almost chorus of welcome for the Bill by different groups and parties because there are key and important gaps in it that need to be addressed.

I will start with voter education. I will talk in a moment about why it is important. In the 132 pages of the Bill, voter education is only mentioned twice and the substantive section to deal with the issue, section 66, which deals with the educational functions of the commission, could not be weaker. There are only three lines in that section dealing with the issue in the 132-page Bill. That does not mean that good work on voter education will not be done. I accept that. However, it does mean that there is nothing in the legislation to give me, as a legislator, confidence that great work will be done on voter education. It could be done and the Bill will not stop it happening but there is certainly not enough detail in the legislation to give us any assurance that it will be done.

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A considerable amount of work needs to be done in the area of voter education. The provisions of the Bill should be fleshed out to ensure that voter education is a core and central function of the electoral commission. I want the electoral commission to roll-out ongoing and thorough voter education initiatives aimed at mobilising citizens, increasing participation and educating voters on how the system works so they can maximise their electoral choices. That is important. We cannot tolerate a situation in a democracy where some voters understand how to maximise the use of their votes and others do not. That is exactly the situation we have at the moment. Some voters understand the proportional representation, single transferable vote system and how to use their votes to their maximum influence while others do not. The commission should be running outreach events and producing materials in multiple languages. It should be proactively engaging with communities that feel excluded from politics and political discussions.

In New Zealand, for example, the electoral commission has youth advocates who drive up voter registration levels among young people. They reach out specifically to people who are homeless. They have an accessible social media page and easy-to-follow videos. They have put in measures to enable deaf people and people who are hard of hearing to use sign language when voting. They have also facilitated people with visual impairments to vote, including through the use of telephone dictation voting services. That has all been done in New Zealand. Early voting has also been allowed to increase voter turnout. There is nothing in this Bill to suggest that serious work is going to be done in any of these areas. The electoral commission should be empowered to do that work. Perhaps that will happen but we simply do not know that on the basis of this Bill.

Why is voter education important in terms of our democracy? Almost every Deputy in the Dáil is aware of this issue because we have all spent time at election counts and have seen what happens when ballot boxes are opened. We are all aware that areas with more economic deprivation have lower voter turnouts. In areas with more economic deprivation and reduced literacy levels, there are a higher number of spoiled votes and more people who do not necessarily know that the best way for them to maximise their influence through the electoral system is to vote down the ballot paper. Voters do not need to vote all the way down the paper if they do want to but they should use their preferences. We know the situation. We know there is not an equal level of participation or an equal understanding of our electoral system. To ensure we avoid a situation whereby all voters are equal but some are more equal than other, we should be driving home voter education. That alone will not address all these issues but it is important, if we believe in our democracy, which we do, that we address this inequality through strong voter education. That does not come across as a strong intention of this Bill. It does not give us the sense that the political system is going to do everything it can to increase participation and voter education through this Bill. That is important.

I appreciate that some people may fear the consequences of voter education and might ask will outcomes be affected if more marginalised communities are more activated. However, the consequences of not doing this will be more costly for the political establishment in the long run. The view is cynical and self-defeating. We should all be very supportive of a much more engaged and participative electorate because it is better for everyone.

We should not only be looking at how the Bill addresses voter education but we should also be considering how it addresses increasing voter participation. My colleague, Deputy Cairns, has already addressed some of those points, including improving participation from under-represented groups, such as young people, migrants, Travellers, marginalised communities, people

who are homeless and people who are fleeing domestic violence. We should also be looking at how this Bill treats civil society organisations.

This Bill is a missed opportunity for political reform. The first citizens' assembly in 2013 and 2014, the Convention on the Constitution, made a number of recommendations for political reform, many of which have been overlooked or largely ignored in this Bill. The convention recommended that the voting age be reduced to 16. It is important to make the point that if the voting age is reduced to 16, that does not mean that every 16-year-old will get to vote. It means that in general elections, which happen every five years, one fifth of people, as they turn 16, will be eligible to vote. Some people will cast their first vote when they are 17. One fifth will cast their first vote when they are 18, another one fifth when they are 19 and another one fifth when they are 20. Even if the voting age were reduced to 16, some people would not be able to vote in a general election for the first time until they are 20. Under the current system, some people's first opportunity to vote in a general election is at the age of 22. That is far too late in terms of giving younger people full participation in the electoral process.

Another recommendation of the Convention on the Constitution was for all constituencies to comprise five seats or more. That is ignored in the Bill. It is an important stipulation if we are serious about improving diversity and making sure this Dáil is more diverse and representative of the population as a whole. This Dáil does not look like, and is not properly representative of, the Irish population. That is not the fault of anyone who has been elected to the Dáil but we need to make sure the structures enable more diversity and allow people from under-represented backgrounds to come through.

The Convention on the Constitution also recommended removing the alphabetical order of candidates on the ballot paper. There is no reason why people who are higher up the alphabet should have been over-represented in the Dáil historically. That does not make sense. The convention also recommended increasing polling hours and extending elections so they happen over a number of days. Those extensions should not be introduced only to allow for public health measures but should happen to increase participation. We must recognise that some people in shift work and lower paid jobs have much less flexibility to get out and vote. More people in lower paid and minimum wage jobs work on Saturdays, which is an issue if an election happens on a Saturday. Spreading an election over a few days would make it easier for shift workers and people in those kinds of jobs to vote. This Bill copperfastens the *status quo* and misses an opportunity in the areas I have outlined.

I will turn to voter registration. Section 82(e), which deals with the facilitation of homeless people with no fixed address, is a welcome measure but the criteria concerned are too tight. The section states that "an elector registered in a registration area in accordance with this subsection shall renew his or her registration annually". That is putting an obligation on a homeless person without a fixed address that is not being put on other members of the electorate. It is discriminatory to do that to people who are without a fixed address but it also puts a particular additional burden on people who often have a multitude of challenges. They may well have some mental health or addiction challenges. They also face the challenge of wondering where they will sleep or how secure their accommodation will be, and everything that goes with homelessness. Putting an additional burden on them and requiring that they renew their registration annually is unfair. In practical terms, it will not be doable for people who have so much going on in their lives. I ask for that section to be looked at.

Section 91, which deals with anonymous electors, is very welcome, especially for the pro-

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vision it offers to people fleeing domestic violence or other threats to their personal safety. It needs to be considered further because I would have some concern that the bar of eligibility in that regard may be too high. We will bring amendments to deal with that on Committee Stage.

It is very important in any healthy democracy to have strong NGOs and civil society organisations. They can act as a counterbalance to strong corporate and business interests. In housing, for example, there is constant lobbying from the property industry and an insufficiently resourced counterbalance from civil society organisations. The concerns those organisations and NGOs have raised about the definition of political purpose and the impact it is having on their work must be addressed. It is a pity that the recommendation on this issue from the committee's pre-legislative report was not taken up. I ask that this be looked at.

Comments have been made about the wider matter of democracy. We should be very proud that we are one of very few countries in the world that have had 100 years of continuous universal suffrage. There are very few countries in the world which can say that. However, we should be in no way complacent about it. Democracy takes effort and work and that is why this Bill is very important, because it seeks to strengthen our democracy and the processes around it. That means we need to do everything we can to ensure maximum participation and voter education and so everybody in this country can participate as much as possible in the democratic process. Currently, not everybody understands how it works. Some people understand it better than others and some communities participate more or are represented more. That is a fundamental challenge we need to address because we want to strengthen and improve democracy and make sure everybody is participating equally. Democracies can go forward or backwards. When they are going forward, people take the view that they will never go backwards. It can happen, however. That is why it is important that we strengthen this Bill and get it right.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I join others in welcoming the Bill. This is fundamental. It is the basis on which we are here as Members of this House. The same can be said of those in the Upper House and local authority members across the country. Like so many things in Ireland, aspects of our public life that work well often go unremarked upon. I remember my first visit to the franchise section during my time in the Custom House, and discovering that our entire democratic process was dependent on ten or 12 people in a cramped office. Those people do a remarkably good job. Because they do their job so well, their work often goes unnoticed. It is an unusual balancing act and position they hold within the Civil Service in the sense that once an electoral event is called, they have to step outside the Department to be the oversight body for that electoral process. I want to place on record my regard for what they do and the importance of the job they do, as well as their work in bringing forward this legislation. It looks very familiar and contains many things I would have dealt with during my time in charge of the franchise section.

I agree with some of the points the previous speaker made about the possibilities an electoral commission presents, particularly in the area of research and education. My experience of studying legislation over the years is that the number of lines contained in a section of a Bill or dealing with a particular matter does not necessarily relate to the significance of that section or that matter. Most of this Bill, like much of the legislation that comes before the Houses, deals in its text with amendments to existing legislation but it also opens up a new understanding - I will not say a new direction - and potential for how we view our own democratic system and process of elections.

I acknowledge that the legislation, like so much else over the past few years, has been de-

layed owing to the crisis the country has been through. I welcome that it has been introduced today. This is not a criticism of the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, but there are three Ministers in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and it would have been better if one of them was present for this debate.

On section 68 and the issue of voter registration, the previous speaker touched on voter turnout in some areas of the country versus others. He referred to them as deprived areas. Voter turnout is a product of how well our local authorities keep the register. Some local authorities and some specific areas are very good at keeping the register up to date. I ask the Minister of State to give some examples and explain whether a carrot or a stick will be used in respect of registration authorities with regard to how well they keep their registers in the future. The Bill proposes a rolling registration process and having the facility for online registration. The situation that exists at present is ridiculous. There are about 18 different forms, or that was the figure given to me at the time, allowing for either initial registration or a change in a voter's status to a special voter or some other category under the current system. I ask the Minister of State to give us more information on the process of online registration and how she and the Department view that operating in reality.

I also raise the process of switching our registration system to one based on the use of an identifier. A Government decision was made a number of years ago on the use of PPS numbers. Obviously, those PPS numbers would never be published on electoral registers because that would be a breach of several rules and laws. However, the use of PPS numbers will ensure that we will not continue to have the situation that currently exists right across the country whereby people have multiple registrations. Just because they change their address, it does not mean they are not removed from the register in one area. That gives a completely skewed view of voter turnout at election time, particularly in urban areas. There may be people who are renting and who change their address or seven or eight people registered at an address where only two voters actually live.

Notwithstanding my earlier praise, the Minister of State might also outline the future direction for the franchise section within the Department post the establishment of the electoral commission. In recent years, we have rightly looked at what has happened in other jurisdictions. Principally, in an Irish context, that usually means the UK or the US, and influences of an external nature on elections and referendums, which are online for the most part. I will not beat around the bush. We are talking about Brexit and the US presidential election and influences that were brought to bear from outside jurisdictions. There is much more public awareness in Ireland as to whether those influences are happening here.

One issue this legislation does not deal with is the influence of money that is not given directly to political parties on electoral campaigns. I refer to money given to NGOs and lobby groups and the registration and declaration of that money. It does not matter whether the money exists. We should know and the voting public should know. Democracy should not be a battle of bank accounts. It should be a battle about ideas. I welcome the legislation and I hope the Minister of State can provide some of those clarifications.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Beimid ag tacú leis an mBille seo. An independent electoral commission is incredibly important. It is important that it is properly resourced and that its membership is reflective of a diverse population from all backgrounds. I hope the Government will take on board the recommendations from pre-legislative scrutiny and mandate that the electoral commission ensures those voices are heard. Either the commission itself

or a subcommittee should hear the voices of the various minority groups in our society. It is also vitally important that young people are involved in the electoral process. I welcome that this Bill allows for pre-registration onto the electoral register for 16 and 17 year-olds but it is disappointing that yet again the Government did not see fit to use this Bill as an opportunity finally to lower the voting age in the State. The Taoiseach said on a number of occasions that he supports it and many Government Members have said they support it but we do not see any movement on it. Votes at 16 is the change that young people deserve. It is supported by youth organisations across Ireland and it is only by lowering the voting age that we can guarantee that the rights of young people stay firmly on the political agenda. Young people will live with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and with the climate crisis and it is only right that we can give them the opportunity to participate fully in the political process. I urge them to act quickly so their voices can be heard in time for the local and European elections.

I welcome the commitment from the Government that a referendum on extending presidential voting rights to those outside the State will take place before 2024 but we need to see a definitive timeline for this because it has been talked about for some time. Citizens outside the State, including our neighbours in the North, should not be left behind when it comes to electing our President and the Government must hold a referendum on this as soon as possible.

Some of the most far-reaching electoral reforms are some of the most basic ones. It is too difficult to register to vote. The window is open too infrequently and there are unnecessary obstacles that people can find intimidating, including presenting to a Garda station for a stamp for the supplementary register and so on. We need to transform radically how we deal with that issue and Deputy Phelan has already raised the issues around multiple registrations and the difficulty in transferring. It should be much more dynamic and it should be relatively easy for the vote to follow the person who is voting, which is essential. That would make a huge difference.

On electoral reform and governmental reform more generally, I will raise an issue I have raised previously, namely devolving more powers to local government. We have an incredibly centralised system and there are many functions that local authorities could do far better than can be done at a central Government level. Even within the local government system a lot more could be done by councillors rather than being done by the executive. I was sceptical of the municipal district model but it is a good model. There should be scope to look at a similar model within city councils so that local areas could have a budget they could spend themselves and have certain powers in that regard. That needs to be considered.

Deputy Brian Leddin: Last week I went on a walkabout around my home city of Limerick in the South Circular Road area, a beautiful part of Limerick city. I spoke with a diverse group of people, including students, retired people, renters, homeowners, parents, grandparents, toddlers and teenagers. Many of these people can vote in elections and many of them are not able to do so but would like to if they knew how to register. I was explaining the long process of registering to vote to a worker from Lebanon and to a student from Japan. There were looks of confusion when I tried to explain that process of registration. As we were talking, two things became clear. First, a large number of people are not aware that they can vote in some elections in Ireland. Second, they do not know how to exercise that right.

This is not a new challenge. Many groups in Ireland are disenfranchised and under-represented in the political system because of our archaic electoral register and that point has been made clearly by most of the speakers during this debate so far. Many groups are not included on the register, in no small part due to the challenging registration process, which can prevent

some people from voting. Young people and minority groups are especially affected by this and in 2018 an estimated 150,000 young people aged 18 to 29 years-of-age were not registered to vote. Conversely, a study in 2016 suggested that there could be as many as 500,000 names on the register that should not be there.

Election experts from an independent academic body, the Electoral Integrity Project, evaluated electoral processes in 164 individual countries against international standards and global norms for the appropriate conduct of elections. The 2018 report shows that Ireland rates well for its electoral laws and procedures, its party registration candidate access and the dissemination of results. The counting of votes under the single transferable vote system is recognised as fair and impartial, as are our electoral boundaries and the process of districting. However, Ireland is ranked 137th in the world for its voter registration processes. We are grouped with Tanzania, Honduras, Ethiopia and Kenya and we are way down towards the bottom of the class in the accuracy of our electoral register. We are the worst performing country in the OECD in this regard. The good news is that the core of Irish elections is strong but more can be done to bring the process into the digital age.

I welcome the work that has been done on modernising the registration system. We need a system that will both make it easier for voters to register and improve the accuracy and reliability of the information contained in it. We need a single and continually updated register, to which electors can be added at any point. It must be simplified online with paper registrations and there should be a central national electoral registered database with the use of PPS numbers for data verification processes and provision for anonymous registrations for people whose safety may be at risk if their name and address were to be published. We also need pre-registration for 16 and 17 year-olds. These will all make the process of registering to vote more accessible and efficient and the information contained on the register will be more accurate as a result.

I would like to acknowledge the establishment of the statutory and independent electoral commission for Ireland. There have been several attempts in the past to establish an electoral commission and this is the first time we have moved past a report or a consultation, which is welcome. Many groups in Ireland are under-represented in all levels of governance. It is important that both local and national government chambers are more representative of the people who live in this country. The electoral commission will play a central role in strengthening administrative processes and in addressing the issue of under-representation and low turnouts through its advisory, research and voter education function. There is room for further reform and I understand this will be the task of the commission. I would like to see work done on automatic registration, lowering the voting age and postal voting among other issues.

I welcome this Bill and commend the hard work undertaken by the Minister and Ministers of State involved and by the Department officials to get it this far. The provisions in this Bill, namely the establishment of the electoral commission, the modernisation of the electoral register, the regulation of online political advertising and a provision for pandemic elections will contribute greatly to improving transparency, participation and representation of the diverse groups living in Ireland. They are much needed reforms that will allow more citizens to have their say, improve public trust in our elections and strengthen Irish elections and democracy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will ask Deputy Tóibín to start his contribution but I will have to interrupt him then.

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Deputy Martin Browne: I am due to speak.

An Ceann Comhairle: No. You are not. According to this list Deputy Ó Snodaigh is next but níl sé anseo.

Deputy Martin Browne: I was to swap with Deputy Ó Snodaigh. His office was to contact the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Fair enough; on you go then but I will still have to interrupt you in a minute.

Deputy Martin Browne: For too many years the electoral register has been based on an outdated method of being compiled while also falling short in inclusivity for sectors of society that are traditionally under-represented in electoral matters. This Bill seeks to address some of those concerns, which is welcome, but there are areas in which it could be improved further. The modernisation of the register is welcome. We are all aware of the issue of the names of deceased persons being on the register, while at the same time, names that have been added in the recent past seem to fall off for some reason. I hope that the establishment of the new commission, along with the introduction of rolling registration, the use of PPS numbers as part of the data verification process and the pre-registration of 16 and 17-year-olds will assist in resolving that matter, which has been problematic for many voters in the past. I hope, in promoting this legislation, to increase voter participation. This legislation and the commission will attend to that.

One of the key failures of this Bill is to ignore the possibility that it could lower the voting age to 16 for local and European elections, as Sinn Féin proposed. The time will come where the process has to catch up with the advances in modern Ireland. News is now available at a touch on a screen, meaning the ability of younger people to become politically involved is much better. The current global situation is something about which there is much more awareness. Our role at European level has consequences for current and future generations. I believe this is also the case when we look at measures being taken to address climate change, which future generations will inherit, and should therefore be able to make a contribution to.

On the same theme as voter participation, I refer to those who I said are under-represented in electoral matters, such as members of the Traveller and Roma communities, as well as migrants. This Bill falls short in addressing this. There was a recommendation from the committee following pre-legislative scrutiny that the electoral commission would have to engage with representatives from under-represented communities or establish a sub-committee which would include those representatives.

I believe the postal voting arrangements could have been expanded further, as is the case in many other European countries. If we are talking about increasing voter participation, then we need to have realistic and practical measures to give rise to this.

Debate adjourned.

Childcare Fees: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that the cost of childcare fees, which now range from an average of €800 to highs of €1,350 per month per child are causing a generation to put their lives on hold, impacting decisions to start or expand their families, to return to work and putting household finances under immense pressure;

notes:

— the inadequacy of the new Core Funding Stream for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare which will be extended to childcare providers on condition that they freeze fees at these unaffordable levels; and

— the precarious nature of the Joint Labour Committee for the Early Years' Service Sector established to address low wages and improve the conditions of those working in the sector; and

calls on the Government to:

— further increase public investment in order to enable providers to reduce fees for parents by two-thirds, commencing with a reduction of fees by one third this year; and

— guarantee the commitment to increase wages and improve conditions for staff, regardless of the outcome of the Joint Labour Committee.

The motion relates to the early years and childcare sector, with an emphasis on the cost of childcare. The cost for parents is crippling. Families are put off having children or sometimes they have one child. I have seen situations where people try to predict when a child might be born, since one would be in school when the other needs childcare, along with other strange situations, as well as the cost. In the past weeks in this Chamber, we have had debates about the increase in the cost of living and how that is impacting on families. The cost of childcare is one of those issues. Sinn Féin has made proposals over the past number of years that would relieve the pressure on families by cutting the costs by two thirds over two budgets, with one third in the first year and another third in the second year.

This would not only benefit families, but would be a game changer for women in accessing employment and progressing in the workforce. Many women end up working part-time or try to have parental leave days. I remember what that was like. I had an issue with childcare myself, today. It is a constant issue. Having access to quality, affordable childcare is a game changer. I know and I am sure every Deputy knows people who have left work due to the cost. It often becomes too much pressure after a second child is born, or people feel like they are racing out the door in the morning just to pay the cost of childcare.

I will give two examples of people I know. Both women were highly educated and had degrees. One lived in Dublin and the other in Carlow. When they had their second children, close to when they had their first children, they both decided they had no option but to give up employment. The fees for two children in Dublin were about €1,800 monthly. If our proposal was introduced, that would reduce by €600 and €1,200 in the second year, which would be a game changer for that woman. The second person was in a more rural area in Carlow, where the fees were €1,400 monthly for two children. That would reduce by €466 in the first year and €932 in the second year. Those two women would remain in the workforce. There would be

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many benefits for children. I am always amazed at what they can learn in the crèche environment. They listen to it much more than they do to parents.

Cost is a key issue. I also want to address wages and conditions, as I do whenever I get the opportunity to speak about the early years sector. Early years educators are undervalued. It is an issue. We all know that there is a staffing crisis. I am sure nearly every Deputy has been contacted about that. The Big Start is the SIPTU campaign about terms and conditions. Is there an update on the joint labour committee process? I have serious concerns that September is a tight timeframe. What happens if there is not an agreement by September? Will the Minister update us about that?

We feel that our proposals over the last budgets tackle the issues that face the early years and childcare sectors. I want to mention the serious concerns of smaller providers. I am not talking about the big providers, which we all know make a serious profit. The smaller providers are struggling and are concerned about the new funding model. I know they would appreciate an update on how exactly that would work for them and having details about that. I will listen to the debate with interest and will pass over to my colleagues now.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was the first person in my family to go to college. I cannot say that loudly or often enough and I am very proud of it. I would not have been able to do it without access to affordable childcare. At the time, the crèche in UCD was subsidised from the student hardship fund. One had to make an application but getting it was pretty much a foregone conclusion. There was recognition that people like me who were young and had children would need extra help to get through college. Without that access to affordable childcare, I would not have been able to go to college or to work. At the time, I was making £3.06 an hour. I worked in catering. I am, in fact, that old. I was able to work because I had subsidised childcare. My wages would not have been able to keep pace even then. I would have ended up working catering on the night shift so that my husband could work during the day. Access to affordable childcare changed our lives. As a family, it meant that we could gain qualifications, get experience, have careers and build a life for ourselves as a family. If we had not had that start, that would not have happened for us.

Sometimes there is a bit of a disconnect between people on the Government benches and real life. Freezing the fees at the rate that they are at the moment will not help families. There are far too many women who have been forced out of the workforce because of the current rate of fees. Those women would love to go back into the workforce but they cannot do so. Therefore, stopping the fees where they are at the moment is not good enough. Far too many people in the State, far too many families and couples, are putting off having kids. They are limiting their family size, simply because of the unaffordable level of childcare.

I am urging all of the Deputies here to engage with the proposal put forward by Deputy Funcheon and to acknowledge the leadership she has provided for the last number of years in this area. In recent weeks, I heard some talk and some chatter about the provision of childcare from people who I would class as very recent converts to it, although they might not like to admit that themselves. We need to seize the moment and act now. We need to listen to what workers and families are saying to us now.

If you live in my constituency, you are probably paying €2,000 per month in rent and added to that you have the crippling cost of heating and lighting your home and the cost of transport because the metro has been delayed again, so you will probably have to run a car. Families are

getting squeezed. This proposal put forward Deputy Funchion and Sinn Féin will alleviate that burden. I would encourage Deputies to engage with the proposal and to support the motion.

Deputy Pauline Tully: First, I would like to commend my colleague, Deputy Funchion, on bringing this motion forward and, indeed, on all the work she does on raising awareness around the issue of the exorbitant childcare costs. Childcare fees are far too high. They average at €200 a week per child. That is €800 a month, or even up to about €1,300 a month in some areas. It is like a second mortgage for families. People cannot afford to continue to pay such exorbitant fees.

The proposals in the Government's budget 2022 simply do not go far enough. They will lock in fees that are at a completely unaffordable level as it is. Fees need to be reduced. Deputy Funchion and Sinn Féin's proposal would see fees reduced by two thirds - by one third in the first year and by one third in the second year. It would see the Government taking on the cost of staff wages for childcare services in exchange for the services cutting fees for parents. That is a sensible policy response to deal with the spiralling cost of childcare. As it is, some of the professionals who work in the childcare sector have level 7 or level 8 degrees and they are being paid the minimum wage. They are leaving the jobs and going to other jobs. Childcare providers tell me they cannot retain staff and that it is a huge issue and a huge problem.

Controlling childcare fees is not rare and is not uncommon. In fact, the vast majority of countries in Europe do so, according to the European Commission. The failure of the Government to introduce fee control mechanisms as part of its national childcare scheme was a fundamental policy flaw. Without fee controls, there is no guarantee that increasing public investment will translate into a fee reduction for parents.

Many families are under huge financial pressure with the rising cost of living and they cannot afford to pay these childcare costs. This means that many people cannot take up employment. Many mothers are telling me that they cannot go back to work after their maternity leave because they cannot afford the childcare or they cannot find a childcare provider to look after their child. They are, therefore, extending their maternity leave by taking unpaid leave. Some of them choose not to go back to work at all especially, as Deputy Funchion said, when a second child is born.

I again commend my colleague on bringing forward this motion and I urge Members to support it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The childcare system is simply not fit for purpose. Fees are far too high and wages are too low. The system is not working for parents, for staff or for providers. Rising childcare costs are like a second mortgage for families. They cannot catch a break. People are absolutely broken. It is keeping people from going back to work. In Cork, families are easily paying on average €800 per month per child. Many families are paying over €1,000. That is even before you get to families with two or more children, who are paying well above €1,000. That is crazy money altogether.

I listened to the Taoiseach earlier and to listen to him you would imagine that, first, the cost of living crisis only happened in the last couple of weeks and, second, that it only happens at the petrol pump, although that is a huge issue and an enormous component to this. However, childcare costs are the part of the cost of living crisis as well, as is rent. If you are in the situation where you are renting and you have to pay for childcare, even though many people who

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are renting cannot realistically afford to have children at the minute, between rent and childcare, two thirds of your income is gone before you do anything else. That is the reality the Minister and his predecessor have failed to confront.

For families trying to find a place in crèche in Cork is like trying to find a needle in haystack. Many childcare facilities are being forced to close due to staff shortages. The Government was warned about this. A few years ago, the Cork Early Years Alliance identified that a number of services would close unless action was taken. Many of the services closed. While not an entire service closed, many of the rooms and places were reduced. That is the reality. Childcare workers are often on little more than minimum wage. It is not sustainable.

Families across the State are sick of limp promises from the Government on this. As my colleagues outlined, a freeze is not going to cut it, because these costs are already completely unsustainable. They are keeping people back from working and putting people through immense hardship. The funding stream announced will not make any real impact on reducing sky-high childcare fees. It will freeze them at unsustainable and unaffordable levels. In the context of a cost of living crisis, where families are already seeing their energy bills, fuel costs, rent and groceries prices soar, the Government plans for childcare are completely out of sync with the reality of what is affordable for families in Cork and across the State. It is not as if the Minister and this Government have not been warned. This issue has been there for years and has been getting worse. It has not been confronted.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank Deputy Funchion and the Sinn Féin team for bringing forward this motion. This motion will be welcomed by any young family facing the prospects of having to choose that one parent not to work and having to try to live on one wage due to cost of childcare. With the rising cost of heating, electricity, gas and fuel, people are already way overstretched.

We had Senan 17 years ago. He is nearly 18. We were paying the guts of €1,000 at that time. It still has not changed. In fact, it has gotten much worse. It is horrific to think that nearly 18 years later, families are in exactly the same position as we were. They have to pay the equivalent of another mortgage or one person does not go back to work. Those are choices people should not have to make.

A genuine cut in childcare costs will cost an additional €267 million in public investment for the childcare sector. This is an important investment into our children's future. Along with this, it would give working families a genuine break and take the pressure and stress off couples who genuinely just want to live, work, pay their taxes and care for their families. These are people who Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have let down now for many years. Unfortunately, this Government is continuing to let them down.

I am incredulous when I hear the Government coming out with lines like, "We can only do so much about the cost of living". Yes, there is only so much that can be done, but the Government does not have the political will to do the right thing. Instead, this Government tends to look after investors and big businesses while family struggle day in, day out to make ends meet. We need only look at the massive profits made particularly by the energy companies over the last couple of years to see that those companies are not being challenged, but ordinary people are.

Here is a perfect example of where the Government can do the right thing. It can back this

motion and not stop it. It should commit to seeing it through. The Government must also guarantee its commitment to increasing wages and to improving conditions for staff. It is time to step up and to help all those who are involved in this sector, including parents, carers, workers and children.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: At the outset, I want to thank my colleague, Deputy Funchion, for all the work she has done on childcare, and for tabling these solid proposals. The Minister will know that we are often accused of not having the solutions or the answers. Yet, time and again the solutions are put forward to the Minister around what we need to do in childcare. The Minister needs to listen to parents and the childcare providers, particularly those in rural areas.

I am very concerned about the core funding model the Minister put forward. I am concerned particularly for the smaller providers and for those operating the early childhood care and education, ECCE, services. Some of them are in danger of closing down, particularly in the more rural areas. I would ask the Minister to look at that again and to consult those providers to get that right.

We have put forward substantial proposals time and again and we do not do it just for the sake of it.

7 o'clock

The Minister has a key role now when we are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. In terms of escalating inflation, we see the costs of childcare for parents. Even looking at it from an economic point of view, however, the Minister knows all the studies that have been done right across the globe in terms of why we need to invest in childcare. One of the ways we can protect or insulate ourselves somewhat from the recession that may follow this and the cost-of-living crisis is by investing properly, once and for all, in childcare in order that we get that model right.

We also need to look after the childcare providers, particularly the smaller ones in rural areas that served us during the pandemic and otherwise. I spoke to one provider in my local area who has not increased prices for seven years and now faces the costs of food bills, water rates, energy bills and all of that. We need to ensure that they stay open in communities and can provide for childcare into the future.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have a conflict in this area because I am a director of a community crèche and have been for many years, long before I even had children. It was one of the most rewarding but challenging committees to be on because on a weekly basis, we had to deal with parents who were making tremendously difficult choices. Those choices continue to be made by families to this very day. They must make decisions about whether to have a child at all or as to whether one parent stays at home or another cuts his or her hours to balance the childcare costs.

The staff within the childcare facilities, who are predominantly women, it has to be said, consistently go to training and education in order to better themselves and make themselves more qualified to care for children, and do so on minimum wage, essentially, to get very little reward for what, in many cases, are extensive qualifications. Right across the western world, childcare is considered a service. If a person provides a service and he or she works in that service, he or she deserves to be remunerated. In recognition that it is a service, however, it should

not be the burden that it is on too many families.

This motion puts forward the roadmap to cut childcare costs by two thirds to give those families a break and allow them to actually decide on the size of their families or the jobs they take up on the basis of the merits of those decisions, rather than on the burden childcare costs will be for them. Too often, the Government has failed to recognise the importance of this. We have the worst of both worlds because childcare providers, whether they are community, private or voluntary, are expected to adhere to the rules and regulations that are set down by numerous statutory bodies such as the Minister's Department, Tusla, the HSE and the Department of Education. Yet, when the providers meet a challenge in respect of soaring insurance costs or the increase in fees that are, in many ways, being put on hold for several years, the Minister and his Department say it is none of their business and that it is up to the childcare providers. That is not good enough. Our childcare providers need to be treated as a service and that means they need have the direct financial input that allows them to charge a fair set of fees. Those fees must be reduced by two thirds, as Deputy Funchion's motion before the Minister tonight has set out. I hope the Minister hears that call.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the important issue of early learning and childcare. We will not be opposing this motion this evening. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of early learning and childcare to society and the economy, but most importantly, to children. The pandemic served to shine a light on the contribution made by childcare professionals, who kept the doors open and our children safe. I know Deputies from all sides of the House want to join me in paying tribute to that work.

At the outset, I want to be clear and honest because significant challenges remain within the sector. Those challenges are something on which many of us will agree. Fees are unaffordable for many parents, particularly those who are availing of long hours or have more than one child using services.

The level of pay and working conditions in the sector do not reflect the value of the work that early-years educators and school-age childcare practitioners do. Poor pay and conditions undermine the quality and lead to a high staff turnover, which negatively impacts on children. Despite the unprecedented levels of State investment in recent years, the level of State investment still remains low by international standards. I believe the staff working these services and the parents paying those fees deserve more than sound bites and lip service in the face of those challenges.

This is why the Government has set out an ambitious programme of reform for early learning and childcare. We have backed up that reform with significant new investment and core funding representing €221 million in the full year. This reform agenda encompasses all of funding including pay and conditions, professional development, sustainability and administration. I genuinely believe that reforming early learning and childcare actually deserves more than the five-line motion we have before us today. I listened carefully to colleagues from Sinn Féin, seven of whom have spoken, and I have not heard how much Sinn Féin will invest in childcare to deliver its proposal.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: It is an extra €267 million.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I have not heard that. It is not in the motion before us today.

I know from Sinn Féin's budget proposals this year that a figure of €168 million was used. That is €53 million less than the Government is delivering.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I am sorry, a Cheann Comhairle. On a brief point of clarity, it is an additional €267 million on top of what the Government is spending.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I look forward to examining that proposal because it is not the motion before us today. It is really valuable to have that figure. Deputies from Sinn Féin have today highlighted both the problems of pay and fees. In its pre-budget submission, Sinn Féin kind of conflated those and suggested that one figure can contribute to addressing both of those problems. Those are two separate problems that require two separate sets of investment, however. We are bringing forward core funding to address the issue of pay for childcare professionals. We have committed to addressing the issue of fees in next year's budget through enhanced investment through the national childcare scheme, NCS.

Reforming early learning and childcare needs real substantive and sustained change to deliver reduced fees, improved pay and conditions and to ensure sustainability. It is clear to me that relying on the market to deliver early learning and childcare in the absence of strong State investment and public management will not work. That is why we have set out a new model of how funding will work, which clearly states that early learning and childcare is a public good. That requires more investment by the State and a closer working partnership with providers. That is the central ambition of core funding. Core funding will provide substantial additional funding to the sector related to the cost of the delivery. That will support improved quality through better pay and conditions for the workforce by supporting the agreement of an employment regulation order, ERO, through the joint labour committee, JLC, the employment of graduate staff and improved sustainability and stability for services.

A new fee management scheme attached to core funding will also maintain fee levels this September at the same level they were in September 2021. This is just the beginning. We intend to and will go further. That is why all three parties in the Government are committed to further investment through the national childcare scheme in budget 2023 to substantially bring down the cost of early learning and childcare for parents. The new funding model will offer supply-side funding to providers in addition to the NCS, the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme and the income that childcare providers receive from parental fees. This a step change in how we resource this sector.

We have shown our readiness and willingness to invest. The equivalent of €221 million in full-year funding has already been secured. With significantly increased investment of such substantial amounts of public money, there are, of course, additional requirements on providers. The funding is intended and designed to address the most challenging issues that face the sector, that is, staff pay and conditions and affordability, and to offer providers who want to provide a service for the public good to come into partnership to do so. The investment is to enable improvements in pay and conditions and ensure that fees to parents do not increase, and adequately compensate providers to ensure that point.

Core funding will largely be distributed based on the amount of provision offered, which is the primary driver of costs. This is a fair, balanced and reasonable way of distributing funding. The overwhelming majority of services will benefit substantially from core funding. Most services, regardless of size or model of operation, will see significant increases in public income. A very small number of services, 1% in total, will have the same level of public income as

before. These are the services that, proportionately, have benefited the most from the existing public funding. To be clear, however, funding for these services will continue to be paid at the same rate. No service will be left out of pocket and the vast majority will see significant increases in funding.

The Opposition's motion refers to the precarious nature of the joint labour committee, but I do not accept that framing. The JLC was set up under statute and is intended to negotiate an employment regulation order. If an ERO is agreed, it will have a legislative underpinning. The motion seeks a guarantee in respect of a commitment to increase wages and improve conditions of staff, regardless of the outcome of the joint labour committee. That request misses the essential feature of the JLC, namely, that both the employer and employee representatives jointly negotiate pay and conditions. I have made available funding of €138 million of the full-year costs of core funding, 62% of which is for staff funding. That is to ensure staff who educate and care for children will be paid a sum that reflects the work they do. It is deliberate and intentional that this funding will be contingent on the JLC agreeing that ERO. Importantly, without an ERO, there is no guarantee the additional State investment will go towards achieving that key goal of delivering additional pay for childcare professionals. Without the ERO, that will not be delivered, and I have not heard any better mechanism for delivering increased pay for staff. That is why the ERO process is being engaged with by the SIPTU Big Start campaign and others who represent childcare professionals.

In line with the recommendation in Partnership for the Public Good, core funding will be made available to providers to support the drawing-up of the ERO. Given part of the objective of core funding is to support an ERO, if an ERO is not agreed, that element of core funding announced in budget 2022 cannot proceed. I understand the parties involved in the JLC are working intensively to agree an ERO. Officials in my Department have been supporting them and I am very hopeful of the outcome of that process. I was recently informed by the chairperson of the committee that she has made a referral to the Labour Court under section 42B(4) of the Industrial Relations Act 1946, as amended, and it is understood a hearing has been scheduled for 7 April. This constitutes a key moment for the workforce and has the potential to improve substantially rates of pay in the sector as a whole. It is major progress and something the Government, and I as Minister, have supported.

I reiterate the sector needs significant and sustained reform, and the Government is working to reshape early learning and childcare, changing the relationship between the State and the provider to one of partnership that will work together to deliver the public good. We delivered additional funding in this year's budget of €221 million in a full year but we have also committed to doing more and delivering more funding to increase affordability as well. Like every Deputy, I want Ireland to have a world-class early learning and childcare sector. We have a roadmap to get there and we have put the funding on the table to achieve it. Working with the sector, we can and will achieve this.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am sharing time with my party colleagues Deputies Cronin, Seán Crowe and Mythen.

It is essential to have proper childcare services available because of the beneficial impacts they have throughout society. Childcare benefits everyone, even those who do not directly use or have a need for such services. In light of the negative impact a lack of childcare can have on parents, employers, communities and children themselves, we can see how important it is to society as a whole. Childcare services come in many forms and include childminders, preschools,

after-school clubs, crèches and so on. They are a part of parents' and children's lives from early on, when the child is a baby, until he or she is old enough to attend school. It has been shown high-quality childcare increases the opportunities each child will have to improve his or her quality of life. This is especially important with regard to disadvantaged children who come from poorer homes with fewer opportunities. Childcare provides young children with a great foundation in life, and it has been shown that high-quality childcare can have a positive impact on both the learning and the emotional and social development of the child, enabling him or her to build healthy relationships.

Families have many reasons for using childcare. It is essential for those families where, for example, both parents work outside of the home. Some parents might need to place their child in childcare because they would like to continue their studies. Childcare is important for the local and national economy, given it allows more parents, and in particular mothers, to work. Investment in good-quality childcare, therefore, will benefit children, parents and the wider community. The value and benefits of childcare are clear, yet a UNICEF report of last year showed Ireland is among the most expensive countries for childcare in the world. The report found a couple with an average income will have to spend between one third and one half of one salary to pay for two children in childcare. Childcare in Ireland is just not affordable for many people. In fact, the high cost is forcing many women out of paid employment. Childcare was expensive before the latest rise in the cost of living, given the rapid escalation in the cost of fuel, rents and energy, but for many it is now a debilitating cost on an income that, as each week passes, has less and less purchasing power. For many of those on low incomes, the costs have put childcare beyond reach.

The motion seeks to cut childcare fees for parents by two thirds and help all those families facing high childcare costs. I hope all parties will support it and help give struggling families the break they deserve.

Deputy Seán Crowe: As my party colleague said, childcare fees for parents in this State are among the highest in the world, yet early years workers, who are highly qualified professionals, many with degrees, are paid some of the lowest wages of any sector, with far too many working on or just above the minimum wage. Sinn Féin's plan would reduce childcare fees for parents by at least one third for this year and next year and by two thirds the following year, but the Government saw fit to oppose that idea. Just like its response to the housing crisis, this approach is nothing new.

Parents have to struggle for basic supports and services and childcare is no different. Many of them struggled even to find places for their children when they were returning to work as society reopened after the Covid-19 lockdowns. The Government had a two-year window for reform of the sector but could not even put an emergency system in place for front-line workers. It also failed to take on the insurance industry, whose cynical exploitation of Irish people only puts business under further pressure and drives up costs for consumers. Fine Gael has been in office for 11 years. Homes and a childcare system cannot be built overnight, but a lot can be done in 11 years. Living in a bubble, the Government just does not get the cost of living crisis that faces families and individuals. Its Deputies maintain here and in the media that we cannot rush things and have to be responsible. Based on its poor advice for householders so far, the Government's plan to reduce childcare costs will probably involve telling people to stop having children.

My party, Sinn Féin, has long advocated for a publicly funded childcare sector that works

for families, early years professionals and providers. In government we will ensure all children and their families have access to good-quality and affordable childcare.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I commend Deputy Funchion on the motion. It is difficult to believe that mothers in north County Kildare are being forced to give up work not because of the marriage bar but because they cannot afford, or sometimes cannot secure, proper childcare for their children. Even their own mothers say they cannot believe this is the case in 2022. This issue affects mainly women given that, while we are nowadays allowed to continue working after getting married and having children, we have to earn enough to pay two women because it is mainly women who work in the childcare sector. In reality, therefore, this is an equality issue. We need a mandatory national fee structure for childcare, led by the Department, that will immediately reduce fees on a compulsory and incremental basis. We need this because, as every Deputy knows, parents are up the wall trying to manage rent or a mortgage, on top of which they have this baby mortgage.

The Minister asked what we would do if we were in government. We will increase Government funding by €267 million to allow providers to slash their fees to parents by two thirds, starting with one third in the first year. We will enter into a contractual agreement with the providers and they can opt in. Then we will bring in, to start with, a living wage for staff and payscales for the well-qualified people working in the most important job in the State, namely, looking after our children and educating the next generation. This is all costed, practical, achievable and necessary and derives from the idea that childcare is a service to the public, our workers and our children.

We have serious concerns about core funding and how those proposals will impact on the small and excellent local providers who went into childcare to offer a service to their community and make a reasonable income. None of them expected to become a millionaire. My comrade, Deputy Funchion, has raised core funding with the Minister and we need the details because small local preschools across Kildare are worried about core funding and need the details too. Without the information on core funding available to us and them, they are worried this could be the death knell for the local and often family-run provider. I take this opportunity to tell them we hear them and will continue to push the Minister on this.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. We have seen the empirical evidence in recent years that Ireland has among the highest childcare costs in the OECD. Full childcare fees for children under three were estimated at €771 per month in 2019. Today it is nearer €800 per month, reaching almost €1,300 in some cities. Therefore, we in Sinn Féin want to increase public investment to allow childcare providers to reduce these by two thirds, including a reduction of one third in the first year.

Public investment is key to helping struggling parents, single parents and guardians. This should be backed up by legislation and contractual agreements with the relevant providers on condition providers reduce fees by two thirds over two years. The investment of an extra €267 million will allow children to be educated in a safe and friendly environment, reduce substantially out-of-pocket costs for hard-working families, give the early childcare learners the recognition the profession and the high level of skills involved deserve and guarantee an increase to at least the minimum wage and *pro rata* payscales based on the Mercer report scales. Money invested in this way will benefit working families, especially working mothers, and create a better society based on a more inclusive and affordable childcare package. The financial relief and taking away the pressure of modern-day living is worth the price and is unquantifiable in

family terms.

Childcare fees are far too high. Families are spending over €400 million on such fees. Something must be done. Workers in the sector need decent wages. We ask the Government parties to adopt our strategies in this motion and to act to protect struggling parents and guardians who face the highest cost of living and inflation increases in decades.

I thank Deputy Funchion for her work and dedication on this motion and hope it will be supported by as many Deputies as possible.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “regardless of the outcome of the Joint Labour Committee”:

“— guarantee a pre-school place for every child; and

— begin the rollout of a universal public childcare system.”

I welcome this motion and commend Deputy Funchion on her work on it. I acknowledge the Minister’s breakthrough in securing such an increase in funding and his vision in setting out some necessary reforms of the early years education and care system. Labour believes neither the motion nor the core funding stream proposed go far enough and more could be done. In that spirit, we have put forward the addendum to the motion agreeing with what is in the motion but calling further on the Government to guarantee a preschool place for every child and begin the roll-out of a universal public childcare system. That addendum, which I hope will not be opposed, seeks to strengthen the commitments made by the Minister and by Deputy Funchion and her colleagues in putting forward the motion.

The current system of early years education and care provision in Ireland is failing parents, staff in the sector, providers and, most of all, children who are not getting an equal start in life. We in Labour want to see a total restructuring of the sector to provide for the creation of a system of universal and public childcare. We think the core funding stream provides an important and long overdue building block and starting point for the sector but more needs to be done. Like all of us, I hear daily from parents who are deeply concerned about the cost of childcare and crèches and about the lack of certainty as to whether or not fees will be frozen or, preferably, reduced. It is acknowledged in the motion that if they were to be frozen it would be at an unsustainably high level for many parents.

I commend the Minister for delivering on the €221 million core funding stream and acknowledge the commitment to ensuring €138 million of that will go towards improving pay and conditions for early years educators. I commend SIPTU’s Big Start campaign that has been actively engaged in seeking to strengthen the pay and conditions of educators.

While we want to see more ambition for the early years sector, we appreciate that, pending the success of the joint labour committee, the new core funding stream can offer a base upon which to build a better system with better outcomes. We believe, as the motion says, that the Minister should commit to increasing wages and addressing the fees issue, regardless of the outcome of the process. As per our amendment, we believe a meaningful process should be initiated and committed to to guarantee a place for every child and introduce the system of universal public childcare that we badly need.

The spiralling fees we hear about daily from parents would be unsustainable in any case

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but, given the cost of living crisis with serious rises in inflation, increases in housing and rental costs and, for many people, unaffordable prices in fuel, energy and food, it is a particularly difficult time to be looking at such high childcare costs. Ireland has the second highest OECD household spend on childcare. Couples spend an average of 24% of their income, and single parents 29%, on fees. Parents in Dublin pay around €1,000 per month per child. Any of us who have had children in childcare in Dublin, including in my constituency, are aware of that cost of €1,000 or more. That is if we can get a place. I am hearing of many parents who have to book childcare places in anticipation of a child's birth and women and parents who cannot get a childcare place and are worried about whether or not they can return to work. They wish to do so but are being stifled in their career progression. With approximately 300,000 children in the preschool age group and around two thirds of them using some form of childcare service, this is a major crisis. As a minimum, a fee freeze is necessary but we agree with the motion that a reduction would be preferable.

On wages and pay and conditions, I have already paid tribute to SIPTU's Big Start campaign. We saw this year's report on pay, conditions and job satisfaction of early years professionals showing again that those tasked with educating our children at this key developmental stage are among the most undervalued workers in society. The Minister acknowledged that and we are all well aware of it. Pay is well below a living wage for many educators, who often also lack basic rights like sick pay and maternity pay. This came to the fore in the Government's sick pay proposal, for which we have called for some time. My colleague, Senator Sherlock, has been to the fore on that.

We are concerned that those working in the early childhood care and education sector, because many of them are seasonal and employed for part of the year, will not be covered by the Government scheme because it envisages a 13-week entitlement period before workers can access it. That is one example of the poor conditions faced by many educators. We know from SIPTU that 67% of early years educators report work-related stress and burnout and an overwhelming 90% say they struggle to make ends meet.

This is a basic issue of women's rights and gender equality because 98% of early years professionals are women who bear the brunt of an underfunded system. We have an area representative in Ratoath, County Meath, Eilish Balfe, who has been to the fore in highlighting the crisis in the sector and who tells me there will be closures and serious shortfalls in service if things do not improve for professionals working in the service.

Labour's addendum to the motion seeks to build on and strengthen the intent behind the motion, which we support. It is based on our policy and the Equal Early Years campaign that is being led by Labour women calling for a universal public childcare system and seeing this as a matter of women's equality. We know that women in Ireland spend about 20 hours more per week on care and housework than men. We also know that providing a place for every child will ease the burden significantly, particularly on women who are working outside the home.

I am grateful to colleagues in the arts for telling me of how a recent survey of parents in the screen industry showed that there were particular issues with access to childcare supports for those working on freelance contracts and those working long and unsociable hours or irregular hours. This characterises the situation for people working not just in the arts, but many other sectors. Moving to a universal public system would support them.

This is a matter of children's rights as well as women's rights. Inequality in Ireland starts

the day a baby is born. That should not be how it is in a real republic. I have called for a Donogh O'Malley moment in respect of early years education and care. Just as the then Minister guaranteed a State-funded secondary school place for everyone 50 years ago, we need to guarantee a publicly funded preschool place for every child so as to guarantee him or her an equal start. This is the change we have been seeking with our Equal Early Years campaign – to develop a universal public system, starting with a €96 million investment in the first year targeted at the needs of parents who wish to work outside the home but cannot do so because of the prohibitive cost of childcare. We believe that the over-reliance on the for-profit market-driven model should be replaced by one that is State led and universal and relies on community childcare settings in particular.

Like many of us, I have received a significant number of emails in recent days from providers – many of them very small – of childcare services and early years education outlining concerns about funding. Many of us appreciate their concerns, but we hope that they will engage with the process of reforming the system. We are all conscious that the system is not working for them as providers in many cases or for parents who are facing considerable childcare fees. Clearly, it is not working for staff and professionals in the sector either. Nor is it working for children. If we do not have an effective and adequate service and many parents cannot access places for their children, then we know the system is not working for children.

I urge the House to support our amendment – our addendum, I should say – to the motion because we have so much to gain from moving to a genuinely radical reform of our early years and school age childcare services. It is right to mention the latter as an important component of any equal early years and childcare service. An enviable system is achievable. We have seen it achieved in other jurisdictions. We can have a system that guarantees flexible drop-off and collection times to reflect modern work practices and commutes. We can have a system that is based on best practice in education, play and early learning and strengthens and supports every child's development. We can support smaller private providers who face the high costs associated with running a smaller setting but who are fearful of change. We can place an emphasis on community-based, affordable care where professionals are well paid and provide the highest standard of care. We can alleviate the administrative load on services through a new funding model. All of this is possible.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to debate this matter and I ask for the House's support for our addendum, just as we will support the motion.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome the opportunity to discuss the key issue of the childcare sector and I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion for debate.

For years, parents, children and early years and childcare staff have been let down by successive Governments, which closed their eyes and ears to the significant investments the sector required. It will be difficult for our system to catch up. Covid was an eye opener in terms of exactly how important this sector was to the economy. It had often just been seen as an issue for young families, one that had nothing to do with anyone else in society. Without a strong and affordable childcare sector, however, it was made clear that the economy would crumble. It was primarily women who were unable to take part in the workforce.

We need to value childcare and create a society where choice is available. Each family is different, each family's requirements are different and each child is different, in that what suits one child might not suit another. Therefore, there needs to be significant choice for parents in

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the provision of early years and childcare services. It needs to be a decision for a mother or a mother and a father as to what services they want. When they make that choice, the State needs to support them in it through the provision of quality, affordable and accessible services. We have not seen that happen to date, though. There is a large gap.

I acknowledge the efforts that the Government is taking to address the problems of high costs and low pay in the sector. These efforts include the transition fund from the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the JLC's announcement on the employment regulation order for the sector and the full roll-out of the core funding model, which I hope will occur this September. I acknowledge that the Government has invested €221 million under the budget. Compared with what previous Governments have done, it is a significant amount, but the bar was low.

There are two key points to the Sinn Féin motion. The first relates to whether that amount is enough money. While we can agree on the destination, what is in question is how quickly we can reach that destination. If we are asking ourselves whether the €221 million is enough, the Social Democrats would have to say "No". Parents in Ireland pay some of the highest fees in Europe, childcare staff are some of the lowest paid workers in the State and quality within the sector does not adequately reflect the high fees paid by families. Ireland spends the second lowest amount on early childhood education and care in the OECD. The Minister views his capping of fees at 2021 levels as a positive because fees are being capped for the first time, but he is actually capping them at the highest level in the OECD.

I understand the Minister's two-phased approach of dealing with staffing and dealing with pay. Although that needs to be done, childcare is a partnership between the provider, the parents and the State. In that jigsaw, the parents have not had a fair shake. When we discuss increases in the cost of living, we talk about fuel and food, but childcare costs place major stress on families. We have heard about how some families stall having children or do not have children. The cost of childcare impacts on every element of people's lives. Speaking as the parent of four children and whose youngest is six years of age, I know the relief when you get to the point where you are not paying out that money anymore. It is a constant stress on any family, particularly those on low wages.

Sufficient investment has not been made. In crisis situations like Covid, we have seen what the State can do and how much money can be provided when there is the political will. We have seen that in the energy and fuel crises, where €400 million has been provided for the electricity rebate and €320 million has been provided to cover cuts in fuel excises. While these measures were necessary, why was the same level of investment and strength of political will not shown in the childcare crisis, an issue that has been placing great burdens on families, particularly women? Women have been prevented from reaching their full potential in their careers and parents have had to decide to have one child instead of two. Where was the political will when it came to this matter and where was the money behind that will? It is difficult to understand. The Minister is providing money as part of the budget, but the EU has been telling us this for years and the OECD has raised the issue of affordable childcare with us because of the low levels of labour participation. External pressures have indicated to us that we need to get this sorted, but we still have not done so.

The other issue raised by this Sinn Féin motion relates to the JLC process. We have the matter of fees and whether there should be more investment to assist parents with the costs of childcare. The other element is the process itself, in addition to the timeframe and the timeline. I am hearing from providers that they are concerned. There is a lot of uncertainty at present. I un-

derstand that the JLC process is statutory in nature. It has to be confidential and it has its structures and phases to go through, but that is not helping the providers on the ground, especially the small providers who are very worried about what this will mean for them. The difficulty, and I have raised this with the Minister, is if there is not an agreement that will become clear around July or August. People have to plan. What does it mean and what will happen if there is no agreement? How do people plan for September when providers are meant to be reopening? There is all this uncertainty. Businesses need certainty to survive and it is an uncertain process. The Minister does not have any control over that process but the level of uncertainty providers are going through is making it very difficult for them. What is plan B? What happens if there is no agreement? If the Minister could communicate regarding what plan B is for providers, that would ease some of the concerns I am hearing. It is not good enough to say it has gone into this confidential process and we will tell providers whether that process has worked a month before we expect them to reopen. That is not good enough for people.

The other issue I ask the Minister to be cognisant of is the need to avoid having a two-tier early years and childcare sector. We have the big providers that because of the function of their size, and the fact they have more capacity, can get more funding, but we must not disadvantage smaller providers. This comes back to the choices made by families. While one family may want to place their child with a big provider, many families do not. Many want that smaller setting because it is more family oriented and provides a different caring environment for children. I ask that the Minister is cognisant of making sure that does not happen and supports those smaller settings as we transition. It is a necessary transition and was always going to be challenging, but there are measures he can take to make sure there is not too much concern, stress or pressure put on those smaller providers in particular.

This is a crucial process. I ask the Minister to review it to see whether there is something he can do in the event the JLC process does not come to an agreement because that is a major risk. I ask the Minister to look into that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. The starting point for a discussion on childcare in this country is acknowledging that the system we have is thoroughly broken from almost every point of view. It is broken from the point of view of parents, who are struggling and scrambling to try to find places for their children, and then trying to afford another mortgage, in effect, to get their children the care they need. This is a crisis for women in particular, on whom the burden of caring falls if they cannot find or afford childcare, which restricts their ability to go back to work in many cases. It is a crisis for children who are not getting the care they need and deserve. It is a crisis for the small providers who find themselves squeezed in a very difficult situation and it is a crisis for workers, who are doing vital and essential work that sets people up for life and, in the majority of cases, are paid poverty wages that are much less than they deserve for the vital work they do. It is a system that is broken and that causes crises for so many people.

The only winners out of the current system are the big providers. They are happy to get State money, happy to charge parents significant amounts of money and happy to pay out small amounts in wages and pocket very significant profits. At its base, the problem comes down to the whole childcare sector model, which is about a reliance on private, for-profit operation, with the mix of State money given to fund the majority of the income the childcare sector gets. It is up to almost 60% at this stage, with just over 40% coming from parental fees. That went even higher in the course of the pandemic as private childcare providers were bailed out with large amounts of public money, which was necessary to keep the whole thing going. The root

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problem is the for-profit model of childcare, for which the State tries to paper over the cracks with public money, as opposed to saying we need a fundamentally different model that is about free public provision of quality childcare as part of a national childcare service, which could be done. At root, that is what we will come back to again and again in respect of resolving or fixing the broken system and building a very different type of system that prioritises children, parents, workers and so on.

I will read part of an email from a constituent that is very typical of people's experiences and the many stories I hear from friends and so on who are struggling to get childcare and struggling to afford it. The email is from a woman who lives in Hunters Wood in Firhouse. She highlights that there is no childcare local to her but she is also aware there is a serious lack of childcare in Dublin as a whole. She says she cannot return to work until she can find a place. She is on the list for the five local crèches in her area since she was three months pregnant in October 2020. She states that when parents ring crèches asking if there is any update, all they are told is that their child is on the crèche's list. When she asks what the chances are of a place at some stage this year, all the crèche operators say there is zero chance of a place in 2022. One of the crèche operators informed her all along that her daughter is next on its list. When she asked why that operator cannot promise her a place come September, due to children naturally leaving and starting school, the operator explained something to her that should have been explained back in October 2020; her daughter is not next on the list, as had been confirmed all along, she is, rather next on a cancellation list to move onto the actual waiting list. She goes on to say that it is a complete mess. She is aware that she lives in an area whose population is nearly fully of young families, hence the demand for childcare, but she asks why local Deputies and Departments are ignoring this issue. She also states that there seems to be no correlation between establishing crèches in areas highly populated with young families. She is aware her scenario is no different than thousands of parents in Dublin. She goes on to make a point about the colossal cost of childcare, but she is not even at the point of being able to pay that colossal cost because she cannot get access. Again, it comes down to an absence of planning and this reliance on a for-profit market.

Let us consider the colossal cost. There is a discussion in society about the cost-of-living crisis, which is good. A major part of that crisis for families with young children is the cost of childcare. If we had free, publicly provided childcare, that would have a big impact on how people are experiencing the cost-of-living crisis. It is vital we put forward the free public provision of public goods as part of the answer to the cost-of-living crisis. We have the third most expensive childcare in Europe, with parents paying an average of €800 a month. You hear many stories of people paying more than that. Most of those parents will be aware that the workers minding their children are some of the lowest paid in Europe, with 60% on less than a living wage and many lacking basic rights like sick pay. It comes back to the point that Ireland has the greatest reliance on private, for-profit childcare in the OECD. The large chains are increasing their grip on the so-called market of childcare and are squeezing large profits out of parents and staff. Instead of this, we need a national childcare service that is free at the point of use and publicly provided, and a public education system.

There are also important issues with the Government's new core funding proposals for the sector. The small providers are telling us that the new approach is skewed in favour of the large chains, which will pocket the lion's share of the funding while the smaller operators will see very little, if any, of it. These are massive chains making millions in profits every year. The Government policy is essentially lining their pockets while many smaller providers are in

trouble. They are also very worried that they will not be able to meet the Government's 22 April deadline for applying because they have not yet heard back from the Minister about important questions they have asked and they do not know if they will get a response before the deadline.

The issue of childcare has been put on the agenda because of parents but also because of workers organising, campaigning and getting on the streets together with small providers. Because childcare workers have organised, they have put pressure on the State by fighting for an ERO in order to increase their remuneration to the level of a living wage. However, their perception is that the State is dragging its heels on this. The joint labour committee to look into wages in the sector was established more than nine months ago yet the workers are still left waiting. A recent survey showed that 41% of childcare workers are actively looking for employment in another sector, with low pay being the single biggest factor in encouraging them to do so. The Government cannot and must not delay any longer. We need an ERO to increase the wages of workers in this sector to the level of a living wage. We should really say that the minimum wage for people in this sector and the vital, life-shaping work that they are doing is €15 an hour.

Fundamentally, childcare has been left to the market. That is why we have all these crises that we are in. If we want to see early years education as an integral part of education that is not some sort of add-on that happens prior to school but that is part of education and that should be publicly provided as part of the education system. Just as we made primary education free, secondary education free and, in theory, third level education free, we need to make childcare provision free and bring it into the public system where we guarantee workers decent wages. It would be for the best of all of society. We need a fundamentally remodelled system and a national childcare system as a crucial part of that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank Sinn Féin for presenting this motion on childcare fees. The motion mentions that the cost of childcare per child ranges from €800 to €1,350 per month. Looking at the headline figure, it is easy to see why there is a problem with the cost when one considers the average income. A number of problems have affected the childcare sector in recent years. In 2019, it was headline news that childcare providers were struggling to get insurance for 2020. It also emerged that those who did succeed in getting quotes were quoted almost double the amount they had been charged the previous year. This was exacerbated by the fact that there were only two insurance companies in the market and one had decided to leave. That left no competition in the market and meant that the remaining company was the only option. If it was unwilling to provide a quote or quoted a vastly increased rate, there were two possible outcomes. One was that some childcare providers had to close. The other was that childcare fees were increased by the provider. This is all particularly relevant because it meant a double whammy for parents; less supply of childcare places meant that the prices went up and the increase in insurance costs also causes prices to go up. This presents two significant issues. First, why are only two insurance companies willing to quote in the market? Is there an issue with claims and the court system that has kept providers away? It remains to be seen if the new personal injury guidelines will help on this.

The second and most recent issue is the way the sector is being funded by the Government. Funding plans have been announced from September. The Federation of Early Childhood Providers has been clear about the funding problems facing the sector under the new plan. The Government funding model will reward large providers with excess funding and leave the small providers balancing on the edge between viability and non-viability. The funding received by the large companies per child is far above what small providers receive. This reminds me of a

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speech made by Deputy Fitzmaurice on a different issue some months ago when he made the point that Government policies and regulations are far too focused on the big monopolies and the big providers to the detriment of small and medium providers, which are all too often left on the back foot or unable to satisfy onerous qualifying criteria. This funding issue is another example of where the big companies are getting the support and the small companies are facing ruin. The Government may choose to hide behind a headline figure to show that more money than ever is being invested in childcare. That may well be true but it is necessarily about the amount of total funding but about the breakdown of that funding.

It seems from the Government's funding plan that it wants a small number of big operators and it is happy to let the small and medium providers leave the market. We need the small providers in the local villages, however. They are a central part of our communities and provide vital services to support families and allow parents to work. These small providers are being asked to cap their fees but they are not being sufficiently remunerated in return and they are being overwhelmed by paperwork. In other words, Government policy is causing major problems for many of the 2,000 small and medium operators. Government policy can be, and should be changed, because it is obvious that there will be major problems from September if this situation is allowed to develop without the problems being addressed. To quote from a report in the *Irish Examiner* this morning, 80% of childcare providers surveyed stated that "despite the Government introducing new sick pay legislation this week, they would be unable to meet any demand for sick pay, while at the same time providing the necessary relief staff to meet required ratios of carers to children." It is just another example of where Government regulations are imposing burden after burden on employers between paperwork, regulations and generally cumbersome systems. Successive Governments have destroyed businesses and disincentivising entrepreneurship. The burdens only further drive up the cost of living which is something this Government seems prepared to do little about.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome Ms Elaine Dunne of the Federation of Early Childhood providers to the Visitors' Gallery. She has done Trojan work over the years to strengthen providers' ability to function within the sector and strengthening the services that are delivered to children and workers as well.

The day the Minister was nominated to his role, I congratulated him and welcomed him to the post. I did warn him then that it was important for him to drive the Department rather than be a passenger there. Departments are notorious for running Ministers rather than Ministers running Departments. No doubt it is more difficult for a first-time Deputy.

What is happening here raises massive questions. There are several key stakeholders in the sector. First and most important are the children themselves. The system needs to be built around the child. The fact this is not in the bailiwick of the Department of Education shows that the child is not at the heart of this process as they should be. The next most important stakeholders are the parents. Parents in this country are getting hammered. That is because Irish Governments are outliers in terms of the level of support they provide to this sector.

8 o'clock

Parents are getting squeezed by the equivalent of new mortgages just so they can get care for their child. This has enormous consequences. One such consequence is many people not having children because they feel they cannot do so. Another is that many parents, mostly mothers, not entering the workforce when they want to. That is happening simply because the Govern-

ment will not fund the system properly. That is the bottom line. That is the fact of the situation. Parents are not the only group being squeezed right now. Workers are being squeezed, as are providers.

The funding proposal the Department and the Minister have come up with is a monster. It is a Frankenstein. It is a system that makes no logical sense. It tries to mash together the public and the private in the most cumbersome fashion. It tries to put controls on the income providers can achieve but does not do anything about the cost base providers must deal with. Of course, if the cost base changes, providers have no option but to change their income base to allow for that. It also has the effect of putting downward pressure on wages. That means well-educated, hard-working childcare staff are simply not being paid to do the work they are doing in this State. It never ceases to amaze me that the people we pay to care for our children and our older people get paid buttons. It shows what kind of country we are when the people we are in charge of and who we are meant to be protecting and caring for are not on proper salaries for the work they do.

The Government has created a ticking time bomb for the providers in the childcare sector. Parliamentary questions I have put to the Minister's Department show 789 childcare providers have closed their doors since 2017. These were predominantly ECCE services and small providers. Parents and providers are at the end of their tethers trying to get proper funding for this sector. The new core funding proposals were meant to build upon the limited stability the EWSS brought about during the pandemic. We were waiting months for these new proposals and when they finally came they brought nothing but despair to many in the sector. Since the new proposals were announced 21 providers have announced they will close their doors. In the last two weeks, two providers in Waterford closed their doors. This system is closing childcare. How is that the objective of the State? When you have closed childcare, parents and children must go further to seek the service they need. They need to wait longer on waiting lists for places. They need to drive longer first thing in the morning to and from the childcare provider and work so they can manage to get their child in. This is obviously bad for providers but it is bad for parents and children as well. It is the opposite of what we should be achieving. It is amazing to me that a much simpler system the Government could have come up with was to simply increase the level of funding to the system. It could have done that through an increased childcare payment or through a tax break. More money could be given to parents to pay for the system they are getting, thus leaving the choice with parents and allowing the system function as it should.

The other problem I have is this whole system is weighted towards the bigger chains. It suits the bigger chains and is better for them financially. It makes the smaller providers unviable and that is the big problem. I, therefore, ask the Minister to go back to the drawing board. He should bring in all the stakeholders, including representatives of the providers, children and parents and ensure we have a functioning sector that does right by the children but also pays a decent wage and ensures providers can earn a decent profit. If that does not happen more will close.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too ask the Minister to go back to the drawing board. Cuirim fíor-fháilte roimh Elaine freisin to the Gallery. I salute the champions of childcare, especially the small providers. I was proud and privileged to be a founder member of Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua with Helen McGrath and a couple of others. That institution is flourishing now. It is of the people, by the people and for the people. We are told, and studies state, that the most important years of our lives are the formative childhood years. I have two little grandchildren ins an

naíonra anois and it is wonderful.

However, this Government is squeezing all the small people. This Government, the last one and the one before that all had some personal gripe against ordinary small businesses. Government wants all the big businesses to flourish and to hell with the small people. These small providers provide very dedicated nurturing - as I hope all people involved in the sector do - but they are beautiful, they help people and they instill all the values that are best in them. There are costs like insurance, gas, electricity - you name it. We have been saying this for years and the subventions the Government throws to providers are crumbs. Why does the Government have to wait, just as with the farm contractors that are disappearing now like snow off a ditch? As Deputy Tóibín said, two providers are imithe as Contae Phort Láirge. How many more will be gone while it waits? Think of the work the voluntary boards of management put in. People gave and give countless hours of their time freely. It is all that is best about the meitheal and the sense of support in rural and urban Ireland. Those people cannot sleep at night wondering where their next pay cheques are going to come from and whether they are going to have money to pay for the heat and light. The Government is squeezing them and squeezing them and squeezing them. We are denying mothers and fathers and parents their right to go out to work because they cannot get childcare. As the places close, they must travel farther and it is not viable. There are huge issues here. If the Minister does not grasp it and get his hands around it, then it will all have been in vain. I beg him to do something about it.

Deputy Michael Collins: In the past few weeks I have had numerous phone calls from constituents expressing their grave concern about the new core funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare providers. On 7 March the Minister announced this €221 million core funding scheme. This announcement was welcomed by parents and providers alike. Among its benefits will be improved affordability for parents supporting the employment of graduate staff and improved sustainability and stability for services. However, for many of the smaller ECCE providers this new core funding scheme will militate against their very survival. It will mean in most cases that smaller preschools will receive even less funding than they had been heretofore and their businesses will no longer be viable. In Bandon, for example, there are seven early childhood education providers and four of these are likely to close by September due to this new funding model. This is replicated throughout the country and will affect every village and town. While the new core funding scheme will benefit the larger provider, it will strip the ECCE providers of vital funding such as the higher capitation they had been receiving for employing level 7 and 8 graduates. It will also remove the programme support payments for non-contact hours. The new core funding contracts are calculated over a 52-week period instead of the existing 38-week model. This will mean small and medium business providers that are creating employment within their communities will be unable to sign on over the summer months while they are out of work. The very high insurance premiums and rising electricity and heating costs will further impact on the smaller providers.

Let me put this in context for the Minister. In my own county alone, there are 440 ECCE providers. Of these, more than half are ECCE-only services. This figure is replicated in every county in Ireland so more than half of our preschools will be forced to close as a result of this new core funding model. Hundreds of workers will lose their jobs and many hundreds of preschool children will be without places. Working parents will be faced with either having to stay at home or travelling outside their own community to find a preschool for their children.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Irish parents pay the highest childcare costs in Europe, according to IBEC. In fact, they pay three times more than those in any other European country.

Fair play to the Government. The Minister can make a difference today. Outside in the rural areas people must now travel further to get childcare spots. What does his Government do? It takes the extra tax on the fuel increase. People are paying exorbitant ESB costs for their childcare. What does the Government do? It gets 13.5% VAT plus a levy and standing charges on ESB costs. As the price goes up, the Government's margin goes up. That is what it does. It is not giving anything back to anyone. It is actually taking it from them and giving them back a portion of what they are giving it. The tax regime in this country is completely wrong. The Government loves inflation. Inflation causes more pressure on small providers that are looking after our children and grandchildren and the Government cannot see this. It is taking everything from the people. Regardless of whether people live in a city or the countryside the Government is taking tax off every service. It is creaming off the top. Government takes and takes and takes. It gives back a portion of what it is taking and yet it is trying to create a feel-good factor. The next generation will not forgive this Government and this generation will not forgive its members for their lack of understanding of how to support the people who put them in their seats. Nobody will forget it. Neither our children nor our grandchildren will forget what this Government has put this country through.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin sincerely for bringing this very important motion before the House. I think of all of the excellent childcare providers in County Kerry, including the excellent management and staff of Little Acorns in the village of Kilgarvan. I think of all of the people I have worked with over many years in different parts of Kerry, trying to help them to set up businesses which are so important in our localities. For parents, particularly young parents starting out, to have affordable, nearby, accessible and safe childcare facilities is so important. In terms of the workings of our country and to allow parents to have the opportunity to go to work, it is so important that people are able to provide the service, run their business, pay their staff, pay for the accommodation and insurance. As Deputy Mattie McGrath said, small business is so important. I will not call childcare a business because of the professionalism and care that is involved. The most important function that any person could ever have is minding somebody else's child. It is everyone's nightmare that something would go wrong when one is minding somebody else's child which is why those people are so important in our communities.

Again, I thank the people in Kerry but they have been coming to me with concerns. Small providers in particular are worried that the core funding system will not help their businesses. Instead, it will be detrimental to them. We want to ensure that the businesses, whether they are large, medium or small scale providers of childcare, are enhanced, allowed to grow and exist and can continue to do that terribly important job of minding other people's children and ensuring they are safe and protected, thus allowing the parents to go to work, at an affordable cost.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for giving us the opportunity to discuss this very important matter. There is so much involved in this area but I will start by thanking all of the childcare providers in Kerry for the great work they are doing. I think of places like Little Acorns in Kilgarvan where my two grandsons, small John and Dan, go. I also think of places like Raheen and the Two Mile School which do so much work in very rural areas. These are the types of crèches and childcare facilities that are under savage pressure. They are worried. Listening to the Minister earlier, one would think that the whole lot was sorted but it is far from sorted. There is an awful lot of work to do and money to be provided to ensure that they can continue to do the great work they are doing. This is very important for couples when they have children because both parents have to work to keep a roof over their heads, to pay mortgages or

rent and to pay for everything else, including insurance and getting to work. Everything is so expensive now and couples need to work. Both parents need to work and they have to be able to put their children into a crèche or early childcare facility.

The crèche operators have to answer to at least four different agencies, including Tusla, Pobal, the Department of Education and their local authorities. They have so much to do. They are highly qualified and they mind our children well. They must be looked after or we will lose them. Many of the smaller providers are indicating that they will not be able to survive and only the bigger facilities will continue to operate but parents can only travel so far. Childcare facilities have to be within their own catchment area. We must ensure that the smaller providers continue to operate. Otherwise, we are doomed and they are doomed. Our future is in our children and we must ensure they are looked after properly. It is vital that early childhood care and education is given to youngsters. It is vital that they start early and get an early education.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Deputy Funchion for bringing this motion on childcare fees to the Dáil tonight. I support the call for a further increase in public investment in order to enable providers to reduce fees for parents by two thirds, commencing with a one-third reduction in fees this year. I also support the commitment to increase wages and improve working conditions for staff. These are stepping stones. The Minister had a slip of the tongue earlier when he said “muddle” rather than model but childcare in this State is a muddle. What we need is a publicly-run and publicly-funded childcare system because childcare is not a business, although many crèches are being forced to run as businesses.

I received an email from a childcare provider called Muire regarding the new core funding package that has been announced by the Government and which is due to be implemented this September, in line with the new school year. She wrote that many providers like herself are upset and dismayed by this new funding model which will force a lot of services like hers to close their doors as they will just not be sustainable any longer. She runs a Montessori pre-school, sessional only under the ECCE scheme in Dublin 12. The school opened in 1993 and is very well established. Muire herself has lots of experience in early education. She trained in the Montessori method of education after completing her leaving certificate. The course was full-time over three years and Muire qualified with a primary diploma in Montessori education. She also completed a two year course and gained a qualification in neuro-development therapy to help her to understand how children learn and how to help children with specific learning difficulties.

Muire went on to say that in 2010 her facility was receiving Government funding of €64.50 per child per week but two years later this was reduced down to €62.50 per child per week. Then a higher capitation grant of €75 per child was introduced for services whose staff had higher qualifications and with her advanced qualifications, her service was awarded the higher capitation fee. Levels of capitation funding have changed somewhat over the years, with the last change introduced in 2018 with the rate set at €69 for standard qualifications and €80 for higher qualifications. This is the current rate, representing only a 7% increase over 12 years.

There was an overhaul of qualifications gained from different colleges which saw Muire’s professional level 7 Montessori qualification reduced to a level 6 award, which in turn saw a reduction in capitation from €80 down to €69. The money has been reduced but the workload in the service has increased dramatically. She says that the paperwork is unending and all of it is done on the provider’s own time, out of hours, for no fee. She asks if I know of any other professionals who would be able to do that.

Muire and other sessional providers around the country are upset to learn that this year's new core funding package brings nothing to the table to help to keep small services afloat. The capitation stays the same, at just €69 per child per week, with a paltry 65 cent per hour, per child for administration costs. At the moment, Muire receives the programme support payment which equates to €110.40 per child as a one-off payment to support the extra administration and out-of-hours work required to run the ECCE scheme. This will now stop under the new core funding model. She asks how she is to make her business viable and that is the essential point. These are businesses rather than schools to be run for children, to provide care and to educate them.

Muire's staff are contracted to work 20 hours per week, so that is five hours extra pay per staff member per week, multiplied by 38 weeks, which is 190 hours. Muire argues that providers need to see an increase in the standard rate of capitation in the ECCE scheme for every child and that it needs to be paid for more than three hours per day per child. The rate must also take into consideration the administrative duties involved. The Minister must intervene here. He must meet childcare providers.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion and giving us the opportunity to debate it. The provision of a quality, universal, public childcare system is essential for families, not just for parents who want to go to work, but for all families because quality childcare has a significant positive impact on the development of young children. In Ireland, historically, we have had significant underinvestment in childcare and while the Minister's proposals are an improvement, they are starting from a very low base. The Minister recognised this himself when he said that significant challenges still remain, including poor pay and conditions, high staff turnover and the fact that childcare is unaffordable for many families. I am concerned that the Minister's proposals will not address those issues he recognised. One of my reasons for saying this is the recent survey carried out by Early Childhood Ireland on the proposed core funding contract. Of those who responded, 94% had engaged with the ready reckoner which is designed to allow service providers to calculate their allocation under the Minister's proposal. One of the shocking statistics is that six out of ten of those who responded said they would not be able to continue to provide a high level of quality to the children in their setting. Crucially, a similar number said that they would not be able to continue employing the same number of staff as they currently employ. Some of the other findings are also pretty shocking, although not as bad. I consider these findings bleak. The Minister issued a press release today with further information. Nonetheless, I find the outcome of this unacceptable. Surely, the Minister must be concerned that 25% of those who were surveyed said they are either unlikely or very unlikely to apply for the new funding, while 44% said they have not yet decided.

I have received a number of emails from small providers, in particular small sessional pre-schools and other providers in my constituency. Many of these people had high hopes that the core funding of which the Minister speaks would allow them to increase the wages they pay to their small teams. However, this seems not to be the case and they are really concerned that they are going to be squeezed out. Can the Minister offer any reassurance to these small providers? I will send him the details. I sincerely hope there is no possibility that this new funding stream and proposals would in any way disadvantage these or other small providers.

Deputy Michael McNamara: What do Barnardos and IBEC have in common? The answer is very little, usually. One thing they have in common is an emphasis on the necessity for childcare, which they both emphasised in the run-in to the last budget and previous budgets.

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Previous speakers have outlined the impact that childcare is having on the ability of parents to go out to work. There are many parents across the country, male and female but particularly female, who cannot join the workforce. We know that our economy is rebounding well notwithstanding the huge pressures that inflation is putting on it, but there is a labour shortage across much of the country. I would advocate that the Minister really look at childcare and that we have a Donogh O'Malley moment whereby we introduce the fundamental right to childcare in Ireland which is free at source. One of the reasons I do so is the impact the lack of childcare is having on our economy. Another very fundamental reason is it is a way to target childhood poverty and to be absolutely certain that children have a place to go where they are not disadvantaged. Unfortunately, no matter what State interventions we put in place, children from certain backgrounds incur huge disadvantage in their homes.

As men who are fighting cannot leave the Ukraine, a high proportion of those who are coming here at women. The lack of childcare facilities in Ireland will come as a huge surprise to them, I expect. Across the Soviet Union, one of the things that they did get right - they got an awful lot wrong - was an emphasis on childcare in every town, village and community. I would urge that this country move in that direction. We need to really look at the feasibility of doing that. It will cost a lot of money, but the returns are equally great.

Like many previous speakers I too have been contacted by childcare providers from across my constituency. I was contacted by a provider from my home town of Scarriff, who pointed out that in 2011 the Government effectively took over the sector in which she had worked for almost 20 years prior to 2011 and paid €64 per child per week to her. Eleven years later, the rate is €67 per child per week. We talk a lot about inflation. The rising costs involved are not reflected in that increase. That is something that needs to be reflected on.

We also talk a lot in this House about trying to encourage more representation from women, in particular young women. Childcare provision in the Houses of the Oireachtas is utterly inadequate. One has to book a child in years in advance. That is fine if one is a civil servant in the Houses, and they too need to be looked after, but as a Deputy cannot know when he or she is likely to be elected or re-elected how can that Deputy book in a child in advance? There is an Oireachtas crèche but there are no children of Oireachtas Members in it. If there are, they are very few in number. There are bigger issues for society than Deputies-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): It certainly is an important issue, but the clock is against us.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It is. I would urge the Minister to reflect on that issue as well. Were I not paired tomorrow night, I would be supporting this motion.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We all need affordable childcare. We all acknowledge the burden that high fees for early learning and childcare places on families. It is vital that providers, parents, staff and all other stakeholders work together to ensure that the welcome increased investment in the sector of €221 million does not fall at the first hurdle and that similar funding is also provided in 2023.

We know there are legacy issues and that the Minister is working on them. He is as committed as I am to reducing the burden for parents who pay high fees, to ensure better pay for staff and to provide those who operate businesses with the supports to do so. The intention in terms of linking of the new funding model with a potential employment regulation order is to direct

public investment into improving quality for children. We must all support that.

Earlier today, I spoke with childcare professionals, childcare providers and parents. There is a sense that everyone is adopting a “wait and see” with regard to the core funding model. Many providers with whom I have spoken will wait until the contract is published in June. I would ask that the ERO be published as soon as possible. I call on everyone to work together to achieve this. It is important that we do not pit parents against providers or *vice versa*. It is important that this be published so that we can all make informed decisions.

I am concerned about the core funding model being unfair to small providers such that they might have to close and the impact this could have on families and children. These are concerns I am hearing from providers, parents and staff. We have to strike a balance. I know the Minister is aware of this. I welcome the recent OECD country policy review of early childhood education and care which states: “We are currently pursuing a strong policy agenda and adopted a long-term whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families up to 2028.” We are committed to improving access to affordable and quality early childhood education and care provision. I support all of us working together. While we all welcome motions and amendments, all of us need to be working together. We have a great committee in the children’s committee, where we work well with the Minister. All of us can work together to do what needs to be done. We have to make sure that childcare is affordable. As the Minister said, we now have a roadmap. A lot of funding is being allocated to this area. We need to make sure there is delivery. We need to work together to deliver for everybody in the childcare sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, I welcome the opportunity to close the debate on this motion. This is a sector I have a huge interest in. I have been a volunteer at a direct level with community childcare for some 20 years now, as Deputy Funchion would know. It is a sector I truly value, as we all do.

I commend the Minister on the work he has been doing since his appointment as Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. I thank Deputy Funchion for tabling the motion. There is a constructive working relationship between the main Opposition spokespersons and the Minister on this matter. The Government accepts that there are long-standing challenges in the early learning and childcare sector. The cost of early learning and childcare remains high for some parents. There is evidence of barriers to accessing early learning and childcare for some cohorts of children. The level of pay and working conditions in the sector does not reflect the value of the work that early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners do for children, families, society and the economy. One consequence of this, namely, high staff turnover, negatively impacts on children. The level of State investment, although increasing at an unprecedented rate, remains low by international standards. We do believe, however, that the commitments we have made in the programme for Government and the progress we have made on those commitments, backed by our promise to increase State spending on early learning and childcare to at least €1 billion by 2028, are the best ways to bring real and lasting development and reform to the benefit of children and families, the early learning and childcare workforce and providers, and the State.

Recent achievements of this Government include the substantial State supports, totalling in excess of €1 billion, that have been provided to the early learning and childcare sector throughout the pandemic that enabled services to operate safely and ensured that increased costs associated with public health requirements and lower demand were not passed on to parents. As

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a direct consequence of these supports, fees charged have not increased for most families since the onset of Covid-19 and the number of service closures throughout the pandemic was lower than in previous years. A national childcare scheme was introduced and rolled out to provide subsidies to more than 80,000 children and reduce fees to families. Findings from a recent review of the scheme revealed that 38% of families reported that half or more of the early learning and childcare costs were covered by the scheme. Some 56% reported that the scheme meant they had more money to spend, with 11% of respondents reporting that they had much more money to spend. Some 26% reported that they were using more early learning and childcare. Some 28% reported that they were working more, with 8% reporting that they would not be in work without the scheme.

The national action plan for childminding has been published and initially implemented. It sets out a phased approach to bringing childminders within the scope of State-funded supports and regulation over the period 2021 to 2028, with an extension of regulation to childminders expected to happen within the first two to three years of the national action plan. That will allow families who use childminders to access subsidies under the national childcare scheme.

The Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare report has been published. It makes 25 recommendations for a new funding model, all of which were adopted by Government, with funding secured in budget 2022 to commence implementation to include the introduction of a new core funding scheme.

A joint labour committee has been established in the early learning and childcare sector to draw up an employment regulation order, which will determine minimum rates of pay for early learning and childcare professionals, as well as terms and conditions of employment, with a new core funding scheme intended, among other objectives, to enable employers to meet additional costs that may arise from an employment regulation order, thus preventing an employment regulation order putting upward pressure on fees.

There has also been the publication and initial implementation of Nurturing Skills, the workforce plan for the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector. That plan contains commitments to develop career pathways, promote careers in the sector and support staff recruitment, complementing efforts under way to improve pay and conditions of employment in the sector. The recent publication of an independent review of the operating model for early learning and care and school-age childcare sector recommends the establishment of a dedicated State agency to support delivery of accessible, affordable and high-quality early learning and childcare services for children and their families. The Government has committed to a significant reform agenda.

The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, in his opening statement, described the wider transformative package of measures that is being introduced this year, including a one-off transition fund that will be put in place between May and August 2022 to ensure fee levels do not rise as the Covid-19 supports are unwound in the period running up to the introduction of a new core funding scheme at a cost of up to €6.4 million per month.

There will be an extension of the national childcare service, NCS, universal subsidy to all children under 15, worth up to €1,170 per annum, and benefiting up to 40,000 children. We will end the practice of deducting hours spent in preschool or school from the entitlement to NCS subsidised hours, benefiting an estimated 5,000 children from low-income families, which I am pleased to announce will take effect from 2 May.

A new core funding scheme worth €221 million in a full year was described by the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, in his opening statement. This progress is acknowledged in the OECD country policy review of early childhood education and care in Ireland, which concluded that, “Ireland is currently pursuing a strong policy agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with the adoption of a long-term Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families covering the period 2019 to 2028”.

That early learning and childcare are public goods, with benefits across society, became more evident throughout the pandemic. While the Government accepts the challenges and acknowledges that further development and investment is required, the work committed to and progressed by the Government and the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, will deliver much-needed and long-lasting reform to this essential sector.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank Deputy Funchion for bringing forward this important motion. I acknowledge her work, along with others, in the childcare sector. It is important that we get this right. Many families are struggling to meet the cost of childcare. Parents in my constituency of Laois-Offaly tell me about the costs they are paying per month, which are often well in excess of €800 and in some cases over €1,000. We have one of the most expensive childcare systems in the European Union.

I was involved in establishing and running Treo Nua in Portlaoise, where there is an excellent childcare facility. I have also dealt with some of the smaller providers in the constituency and heard about the struggles they are trying to manage in running their facilities. I urge the Government to be more cognisant of how to structure the fees and so on.

Childcare fees have become so expensive that they are basically equal to a second mortgage or second rent payment every month. We know the pressure that families are under. Sinn Féin has a plan to cut childcare costs and to give families the support they badly need.

Fees and wages are the issues. We are hearing from parents that the standards of childcare are good. The fees and wages are the issue. Our motion proposes to cut childcare fees by 66% over two years. It would also ensure that staff in the sector are paid at least a living wage. We are talking about staff who have level 5 and level 6 qualifications. They are entitled to a living wage.

Wages in the sector need to be increased urgently. We understand that cannot be done by waving a magic wand but these are highly qualified staff and that needs to be recognised. Staff are leaving the sector. There is a drain from the sector and we are losing important learning and qualified staff we should not be losing. People are leaving the sector because of the issue of wages. That is what workers are telling me.

We have put forward a detailed and fully costed policy to invest in childcare services, to support staff and providers, and to provide a good service at a much reduced cost to families. The Sinn Féin plan would see the Government take on part of the cost of the wages of childcare services and subsidise the fees for parents. That would be done on a phased basis, meaning that fees would be cut by 33% in each of the first two years of the scheme. It is a voluntary, opt-in system. Nobody would be forced to do anything.

Delivering such a significant change to the childcare system would result in an initial spend of €276 million. The Government will ask where that money will come from. We provided a fully costed alternative budget for this year, into which a lot of thought and research went. This

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investment can be made and we have shown how. It is important to invest in children's future.

We need to give families a much-needed break. They are already struggling with enormous cost of living issues, including sky-high energy bills, fuel costs, transport costs and the price of rent and groceries. The cost of everything is going sky high. In some cases, that state of affairs is being exploited. Some businesses do not waste a good crisis. Capitalism never wastes an opportunity such as this one, unfortunately, or some capitalists do not. Sinn Féin wants to deliver real change to society and to help families. Childcare is in urgent need of reform and we are calling on all other parties to support this costed policy.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I thank everybody who has contributed. I welcome that fact that the motion is not being opposed by the Government and I have no difficulty supporting the Labour Party amendment.

I was struck by the amount of unity in the House, on all sides, including the Government side and across the Opposition side. The same key issues keep coming up, which include the worry and concern that the small providers have, particularly those that are only running facilities under the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme. Wages are obviously a major issue, as are the fees involved. Those are the three main issues.

The issues are not only for small or rural services. All providers face issues relating to rising costs now and the various inspections required. While there are many issues, the three distinct issues I have mentioned have always existed in the early years and childcare sector, and they still remain. It is good that we have had the opportunity to debate these issues and acknowledge them. The people in that sector will understand that they are being acknowledged and recognised and that these issues are being brought to the floor of the Dáil. We want fees to be decreased but we also want the issues of wages, core funding and the small providers to be addressed. Maybe the Department can look at them now that they have been raised by so many Deputies. Many people from all parties have said they have received emails and been lobbied about them. This could be an opportunity to get in contact with some of those providers to talk through the issues.

I welcome the fact that the JLC will report this week. I think 7 April is the date that has been given. I support the JLC process. I used to work for a union so I know that process. However, that is where my concern comes from because I know it can drag on and can often take up to 18 months. As others have asked, what will happen if agreement is not reached? Will there be an extension? What is the plan after that? Is it just a case of time being up in September or what is going to happen? That is where some of the issues and concerns come from. That sums up the issues. Sometimes the word "crisis" is overused, particularly in this Chamber, but it is a crisis for childcare services trying to find staff and for the staff trying to keep a roof over their own heads. That is especially true for those who have to sign on during the summer or who are working for the minimum wage, having studied hard in college. It is also true for parents trying to access childcare, trying to find a place and trying to afford it. All these things can potentially lead to a crisis situation and we have an opportunity to address those issues. I welcome that the motion is not being opposed.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): 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 Emer Higgins - to discuss expanding school capacity to accommodate Ukrainian children and providing access to a centralised register; (2) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the threat to the continuation of the Spancilhill Fair after four centuries; (3) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss the ongoing water quality issues in Dublin Bay with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; (4) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss ensuring that every prospective student in east Cork has a secondary school place for the 2022-23 school year; (5) Deputy Sean Sherlock - to discuss the need to retain court services and domestic violence support services in Youghal, County Cork; (6) Deputy Paul McAuliffe - to discuss the issue of delays in autopsies in the Dublin coroner region; (7) Deputy Colm Burke - to discuss Department and interagency engagement to register Ukrainian doctors and nurses now residing in Ireland; (8) Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - to discuss the number of people waiting on trolleys in March in Mayo University Hospital; (9) Deputy Pa Daly - to discuss the exclusion of ceiling hoists from housing adaptation grants; (10) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss possible Government intervention to prevent the closure of post offices on the Mizen Peninsula with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications; (11) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to ask the Minister for Health what steps will be taken to address the findings of the independent review of unplanned care regarding overcrowding at emergency departments in hospitals across the State; (12) Deputies Paul Murphy and Richard Boyd Barrett - to discuss the planned mass eviction of up to 60 families at Shannon Arms apartments; (13) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss when a planning application will be submitted to deliver a new site and building for Cork Educate Together Secondary School; (14) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to urgently discuss the disadvantages ECCE-only early years facilities and Montessori schools will encounter under the proposed new core funding model; (15) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss with the Minister for Health the lack of dental services for children and the current difficulties with the dental treatment service scheme in Laois and Offaly; (16) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to ask the Minister for Health if there are any plans in his Department to supply greater resources for the regional ambulance service in the south east to address the historical lack of funding for station upgrades and recruitment; (17) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss the status of the proposed wastewater treatment plant in An Cheathrú Rua, given that the identified site has secured planning permission from An Bord Pleanála for a different building project; (18) Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss the impact of the rising cost of living on family carers; and (19) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the need to urgently expedite water infrastructure works in Ratoath, County Meath following multiple outages in recent weeks.

The matters raised by Deputies Daly, Connolly, McAuliffe and Higgins have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Departmental Policies

68. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update on the development of a rural-proofing mechanism, as outlined in Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, considering she previously advised that consultants would provide their recommendations by the end of March 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17896/22]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I raise the rural-proofing mechanism or model that was committed to in Our Rural Future, which is a very important and practical tool that is needed to ensure our rural communities are considered when it comes to policies across government. Can the Minister give us an update on that?

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank Deputy Kerrane for raising this matter. Our Rural Future is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades. The policy contains more than 150 measures for delivery across the whole of government, with the underlying theme of economic, environmental and societal sustainability. The policy has a vision of ensuring vibrant and thriving rural towns and villages, with a key objective of maximising opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas. It recognises that rural areas play an integral role in the economic, social and cultural recovery and well-being of the country.

The policy commits to developing an effective rural-proofing model. This will aim to ensure all Departments fully consider the effects of new proposals on rural communities and the need to better target the particular challenges and opportunities facing rural areas. Following a competitive tender process, my Department has engaged independent consultants to fully examine the issue of rural-proofing in Ireland in order to provide a strong evidence base for further action. Their work includes consideration of rural-proofing initiatives internationally, so as to inform our approach based on the experiences of others. Following the recent receipt of an initial draft of the report, the consultants are expected to provide their final report imminently. This will present a series of recommendations on approaches to rural-proofing to my Department. Once received, the report will be given full consideration to determine the next steps.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister for that update. Did she receive an initial draft of that report? If so, has she gone through it? She said the final draft that will follow is imminent. What does she expect the next steps will be? This will be an important piece of Our Rural Future and an important mechanism going forward when it comes to policies right across government as, before they are introduced, they will be looked at through that rural lens. It will also be important in order to avoid any unintended consequences or any possible negative impacts of policies that may impact on rural communities. If that report is imminent, what are the next steps? The Minister will be aware that there is a rural-proofing mechanism in place in the North of Ireland. That may well have been looked at in the work that has been done. I ask for a timeline with regard to what will happen next after this report is finalised. Has the Minister looked at the draft that was issued to her?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I said, the development of rural-proofing is a key com-

mitment in Our Rural Future. We expect the consultants' report in the coming weeks. I have not seen the draft but when I get the final report I will consider it carefully. I want to make sure we put an effective model in place. We do not want it to be a box-ticking exercise. We have looked at the practice in other jurisdictions and I am aware that there is legislation in Northern Ireland in this regard. It is about how we collect the metrics and how we can make sure they have a real impact on the ground. I want to make sure what we are doing is the right thing. I want Departments to engage seriously with this so we have to do it in the right way. On receipt of this report, I will fully consider the options presented in consultation with my officials and I will weigh up the merits and challenges of each option. My objective is to ensure an effective rural-proofing model that will support rural policy development and will consider and capitalise on the opportunities for rural areas where possible.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is welcome that things are moving with the rural-proofing model. It will be important moving forward as many people are now moving back to rural communities. In my area, there is an increase in the population that I have not seen in my lifetime. We need to make sure everything that can be done is done in order that people moving back to rural areas, or moving into rural communities, are supported. We must back up that increase in population with the services and supports that are needed. Key to that will be that rural-proofing mechanism. That will be considered for all policies across Government and it will be particularly important for the climate measures. That will be of concern to rural communities and we need to bring them with us. That is an important mechanism and I thank the Minister for that update.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy. When I was appointed Minister in this Government I made the decision that the Department of Rural and Community Development would be kept as a stand-alone Department. That is a strong signal of this Government's commitment to rural development. It is a great Department and I am proud to be part of it. On rural-proofing, we need to find the formula that works for rural Ireland. There are many schemes that support rural Ireland that do not provide the same benefit in urban areas. There are a number of different ways of looking at this. Some other countries put it on an advisory footing, some put it on a legislative footing, like in Northern Ireland, and some have it on a parliamentary scrutiny footing. There are a number of different approaches and I want to try to find the one that is most impactful. I will get the draft report when it is finalised and then we will publish it and we will see what metrics are the best ones to use.

Question No. 69 replied to with Written Answers.

Ukraine War

70. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update on the engagement by her Department regarding the arrival of Ukrainian refugees; the role her Department will play in responding to the crisis at Governmental level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17897/22]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I ask the Minister of State about the engagement his Department has had on the arrival of the Ukrainian refugees. I ask him to outline the engagement he has had to date and the role his Department will play in supporting the refugees who have come here and who will come here in the coming weeks.

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Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): As the Deputy is probably aware, Government is working to ensure that local capacity, resources and knowledge are brought to bear on the overall humanitarian response to people fleeing Ukraine and seeking protection in Ireland. My Department's key focus is to ensure the resources, skills and capacity of the local development, community development and charity sectors are utilised to maximum effect to help address the challenges arising.

Building on structures developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, community response forums are being repurposed in each local authority area. The role of each forum will be to co-ordinate the community-led response in the provision of assistance and support to Ukrainian refugees as they are accommodated around the country. My Department has worked with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the County and City Management Association, CCMA, to agree a framework for the community response to guide that work. The framework sets out a national template for arrangements to be put in place in each area to enable all involved at a local level, including the community and voluntary sector, to work together to support the integration of Ukrainian refugees into our communities under the stewardship of the local authorities.

At national level, my Department, together with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, will work with the CCMA and the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, to provide guidance and ensure consistent communication. The senior officials' group on the humanitarian impact of the Ukraine crisis, on which my Department is represented, will also play a role in this regard. With regard to its programme of work, my Department has committed to enabling flexibility in programme delivery to maximise the effectiveness of our response. This has been communicated to our business delivery partners, including local development companies, LCDCs, volunteer centres, community volunteers and public participation networks. I want to express my thanks and acknowledge the fast, flexible and human response of the community and voluntary sector on the ground in every community across the country over the last five to six weeks. It has been exceptional and these community response forums will help to bridge that gap between the public goodwill and central Government's response over the coming months.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is important that we recognise the effort that has been made by the community and voluntary sector and by ordinary people in communities across the State who have come together to prepare buildings and welcome the Ukrainian refugees. I have seen it in my constituency. Roscommon Lions Club, along with Roscommon County Council and other volunteers, came together to work on what was formerly the Cuisle Accessible Holiday Resort in Donamon, which has welcomed refugees in recent weeks. A huge effort was put in by the local community to welcome them there. That is important and it is nice to see the community coming together to make that happen. They have done a great job across the State and I had an engagement with the Roscommon Lions Club, which played a big role in Donamon. It is saying that the local authority, the Irish Red Cross and the local agencies need additional funding to support the Ukrainian refugees who are there. Unfortunately, they are in a slightly isolated area in the Cuisle Accessible Holiday Resort so transport, links and practical supports will be needed in the weeks ahead.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I am aware of the project the Deputy mentioned and I hope to visit it at some stage. I am in the process of getting out and about as much as I can, so I can see the level of response and see if there are gaps. We will be working closely with the CCMA, as I said, which will be getting the feedback from the ground up. Now that we have the structures

in place we will be getting more consistent feedback from the ground up and that will come through the CCMA to us and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. As a result, we will be in a better position to identify areas where there may be strong cases for additional resources. We will look at the situation directly and we will talk to community response forums via the CCMA. We are also making a point of engaging with the national NGOs. We had a webinar a couple of weeks ago with the bones of 200 community and voluntary groups around the country that fed back on some of the issues on the ground. I hope that over the coming weeks, with the community response forums set up, greater shape will come around the situation.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I also want to ask about vacant properties. This is something that has been raised and been in the ether in recent weeks and the idea of people doing up homes and opening them up for the refugees has been touted. Homes will be needed if buildings like those in Donamon fill up. There are a great number of vacant properties across the State and I wonder if there has been engagement between the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this? I am thinking of Office of Public Works-owned buildings as well. Has there been any engagement on the use of those buildings? Is the Government looking at bringing those vacant properties back into use for the Ukrainian refugees? That would be a win-win situation when things hopefully get better and those vacant properties are up to a standard as they could potentially be used again.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The search for vacant properties is largely being led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It could well be that the community response forums are taking it to another level in looking at what is happening at a local level as well. I want to say to representatives of community groups who may be listening to the debate that I would appreciate it if they made contact with their local community response forum. We are trying to maximise the available resources, goodwill and effort to make sure everyone is being reached, that we minimise overlap and that we make our collective resources as effective as possible. In that light, it is important that Ukrainian refugees are also directly involved in every community response forum around the country. They are already taking leadership in some areas that I know of. They will add a lot to it and they will make it true and effective if they are included in every forum.

Island Communities

71. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps that have been taken to address action 136 of Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 to, progress vital infrastructure development for island communities. [18305/22]

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Government's rural development policy for 2021 to 2025 commits to progressing vital infrastructure development for island communities. However, the Dursey Island situation tells a different story. Only after weeks of sustained pressure did the Department commit to provide a public replacement to the cable car during its temporary closure. The people of west Cork are rightly worried that this is a further indication of the Government's lack of commitment to support our offshore islands. What assurances can the Minister give them?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Government's objective is that sustainable and vibrant communities can continue to live on the country's off-

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shore islands. For this to be achieved, it is essential that investment is made in the maintenance and upgrading of island infrastructure. To this end, I have increased the allocation available for capital works on the islands from €2.64 million in 2021 to €4.64 million for 2022. The additional funding will ensure an expanded works programme this year.

9 o'clock

It will include the annual programme for minor capital works on the offshore islands, co-funded by the relevant local authority. So far this year, I have approved works valued at €2.09 million for non-county roads in Donegal. My Department continuously seeks opportunities to expand its existing schemes to further enhance the infrastructure on the islands. I was delighted to announce last month that I was introducing a new measure specifically for islands under the CLÁR programme. This measure will give island communities and groups the opportunity to seek up to 90% funding for community vehicles and other community facilities.

The key island projects set out in Project Ireland 2040 are being progressed this year. These include three major harbour projects, namely, improvement works to piers on Inis Oírr and Inis Meáin in County Galway and at Magheraroarty, serving Oileán Thoraí in Donegal. These projects are all at different stages in their development and will continue to be progressed as quickly as possible.

The Deputy referred to the Dursey Ireland cable car. Cork County Council closed the Dursey Island cable car on 1 April 2022 for a period of seven months. The local authority had made no provision for alternative island access for the duration of the maintenance period. I am over time and will speak further in the supplementary answers.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The issue for people on the islands is that while the Government says it plans to progress vital infrastructure development for island communities, they believe the reality is different. In the case of Dursey Island, instead of an immediate reassurance to those who farm and live there, the council and Department played pass the parcel. The Department provided funding for a public service because ultimately it was always going to be the responsibility of the Minister's Department. The community and public representatives, including me, had to fight for that. This is not an isolated case. Every time questions to the Minister's Department come up, Deputy Connolly and other Deputies, including me, ask about the forthcoming policy for the islands. Offshore communities have been waiting for years for that policy. It is ridiculous. Numerous questions about island infrastructure and access were tabled today. Does the Minister see why island communities are concerned about the mismatch between Government plans and Government action when it comes to matters such as this?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I want to be clear about the Dursey Island cable car. This was a problem of Cork County Council's making. It made an announcement with no prior notice to my Department. It just said it was closing the cable car. I was pleased to step in at the last minute, last week. I was kept abreast of the matter. I worked hard with Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan and Senator Tim Lombard to find a solution. I provided funding to Cork County Council, which will procure a ferry service. It hopes to have an outcome from that procurement process in the coming days. I was not found wanting when it came to the islands. Cork County Council has a responsibility, when it takes a service away from people, to come up with an alternative. It did not engage with my Department, but when it did, we were able to work with it and to find a solution.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I cannot speak for Cork County Council, but the last-minute nature of the announcement was unacceptable. Weeks before the closure, I raised it with the Minister's Department. It is disappointing that the Minister is unwilling to acknowledge the frustrations and worries of the island community. It is an incredibly resilient group, but it needs Government policy backed with concrete measures to support it now. I have continuously pushed for investment in small piers on our islands and coastlines. They are vital infrastructure to support local communities, fishing, recreation, tourism and accessibility, but they are significantly underfunded. Every year, Cork County Council and other local authorities get insufficient funds to maintain and develop the piers. Some piers got welcome funding under the recent Brexit adjustment fund, but I could list many more in west Cork alone. What are the Minister's plans to prioritise investment in those small piers?

Funding was eventually put in place for the Dursey Island cable car. I am grateful to the Minister and her Department for that. I am trying to highlight that it took a long time. It was raised with the Department earlier. Will the Minister reassure those communities?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: If you take away a service, you have a duty to put in a replacement. The council did not engage with us, but when it did, we got a solution. I recognise the work of Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan and Senator Lombard, who worked hard to find solutions.

Regarding what I have done for the islands, there has been unprecedented investment in the islands. I was on Bere Island in the summer. I attended a Cabinet meeting remotely from a remote working hub on Bere Island. I went to visit a glamping facility that received investment through the LEADER programme. I set aside a special allocation under the CLÁR programme which is specifically for islands. They can now apply for different projects that are funded under CLÁR and they are not competing with the mainland. I have also embarked on a number of critical infrastructure projects, which are going through a process. I will answer questions later about the islands policy, which we are working on, and also about piers and other island locations.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I have visited a good few of the islands and I absolutely understand the concerns of the islanders. I have been there and listened to them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I saw the video about the concerns of the people on Dursey Island. We responded when an approach was made to us.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Whatever about the concerns of the islanders, the poor Chair looking at the clock is concerned.

Ukraine War

72. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the additional supports that will be provided to community and voluntary groups, including local partnerships that have stepped up to support Ukrainian refugees. [18308/22]

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Deputy Paul Donnelly: I ask about additional supports that will be provided to community and voluntary groups, including local partnerships, that have stepped up to support Ukrainian refugees.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The Government is working to ensure that local capacity, resources and knowledge are brought to bear on the overall humanitarian response to people fleeing Ukraine and seeking protection in Ireland. My Department is contributing to the effort by linking with key stakeholders at community level, providing information, assisting the co-ordination of supports through the community sector and enabling flexibility in programme delivery to shift focus onto the Ukraine response.

My Department recently hosted an information webinar attended by over 160 participants from community and voluntary sector organisations involved in the Ukraine response effort. The webinar provided information, disseminated key messages and encouraged communication and co-ordination. As part of the overall Government response, officials from the Department will regularly meet key national stakeholders from the community and voluntary sector to provide any necessary guidance, help address any operational issues that might arise locally and ensure consistent communications.

My Department has also committed to enabling flexibility in programme delivery where necessary to support the response. For example, flexibility has been offered to local development companies in respect of social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, resources. This will ensure that approximately 600 community development workers are available to help support arrivals from Ukraine. In addition, organisations supported under the community services programme can include Ukrainians in the target groups for their services. Exceptional additional funding for staff resources is being provided by my Department to volunteer centres providing support in front-line reception hubs and to a community support programme, CSP, organisation to assist its efforts in co-ordinating the response to Ukrainian refugees.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: We are all in touch with many members of community organisations who work with and support Ukrainian refugees. They utilise every tool and all funding and support that they have built up in our communities over the years to support the thousands of Ukrainians who are coming into our country and communities. That is not unlimited and it has a cost to the people whom these organisations were already supporting in disadvantaged areas. I am concerned about the Minister of State's answer about shifting the focus of different programmes to supporting Ukrainian refugees. That is fine. However, it cannot be at the cost of existing services, which have been providing supports in disadvantaged areas for years. As I said, there is a limit to the support and staffing hours that can be utilised. Therefore, they need extra funding and extra support. It has to be on top of, and not from a shift in focus.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I would add that 600 community development workers have been freed from the majority of their core work to assist with helping and supporting people who are arriving from Ukraine into their locality. There was also a 10% increase in the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, budget from last year. That will add a significant additional resource and capacity to the local development companies going forward.

In terms of community volunteering, exceptional additional funding for staff resources is being provided by my Department to two volunteer centres in Wexford and in South Dublin, which are dealing with particularly large pinch points. They are providing support in front-line

reception hubs. As well as this, there is a community services programme in Lisdoonvarna Fáilte, which is another area that is experiencing a high demand. There is exceptional additional funding allocated to Lisdoonvarna Fáilte to assist in its efforts in co-ordinating the response to Ukrainian refugees.

I take the Deputy's point about resources being shifted. We have had to act quickly and that was the quickest way that we could do it. However, as I said earlier, we will be maintaining close contact with the organisations on the ground and with their national representative bodies as the weeks and months go forward.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: As I said, I have no issue with the fact that we had to react quickly. The communities, the organisations and the voluntary and community organisations acted really quickly. In some cases, they acted quicker than the State. This is because the State did not notice that, for example in my constituency, upwards of 70 Ukrainian refugees came into the community. The local organisations were not informed. Yet, they went in, they did the work and they stood up.

When the Minister says that 600 community development workers have been freed from their core work, that means that their core work is not being done. That is my point. We need a medium-term and a long-term strategy to deal with this refugee crisis, because there will be possibly upwards of 200,000 people. The strategy should also deal with how we continue to support the core work of those 600 community development workers. They were not sitting around, twiddling their thumbs before this. They were doing valuable work in our communities. That work cannot be disturbed, lost or put aside for a number of weeks or months. This work needs to be done, and it needs to be done at the same time as we support Ukrainian refugees.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I accept the Deputy's point. I think we will see an improvement in co-ordination at a local level over the coming weeks with the establishment of the community response fora. There is capacity at a local level that has not been best utilised because of the lack of co-ordination over the initial few weeks. There have been small areas of overlap. There have also been people who have not been reached. That cohort is most important and is a priority at the moment.

I would urge the public to contact our local volunteer centre. There is still a lot of goodwill out there. People want to help and want to get involved. I would direct people to their local volunteer centre, if they have time and effort to give. However, I take the Deputy's points and we will be monitoring the situation closely. As I mentioned, we have provided additional funding in some exceptional circumstances. We will be taking information from the ground up, as well as from national organisations in monitoring the situation across the country.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Island Communities

74. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the current contracts for the ferry and air services to the Aran Islands and Inishbofin in

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County Galway will expire and new tenders sought; the proposed improvements being planned for these services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17916/22]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister might outline when the various contracts to the Aran Islands and Inishbofin and, more important, the planned improvements that she intends to introduce to these services, will come to a conclusion. I say this because they do need improvements. They were brought forward about ten or 15 years ago. However, they have remained static or, in case of the Aer Arann service, regressed terribly in the last ten years.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. As he is aware, the public service obligation, PSO, status of the air service to the Aran Islands lapsed some years ago. My Department is now bringing the service back into EU public service obligation regularity compliance. The procurement process is currently under way for the new contract. Once completed, it will bring long-term certainty of service to the island communities. The existing contract for the air service to the Aran Islands will continue in the interim to ensure that there is no break in service. I am confident that a successful operator for the service will be announced in the coming weeks and that the island communities will have a better air service over the next four years.

With regard to the ferry service to the Aran Islands, the existing contract will run to 30 November 2022. As with the air service renewal, my Department has engaged with the island communities to discuss the current service and improvements that can be included in the tender document. The main issues of concern are the sailings timetables, the challenges for users with reduced mobility boarding and alighting from the ferry. My Department will endeavour to address these issues as best it can through the tender document.

Finally, the current contract for the Inishbofin ferry service will continue to 31 December 2024. Given that this contract will be in place for over two and a half more years, there are no plans to commence a new procurement procedure in the near future.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can the Minister tell me if there will be increased frequency of PSO flights to the island under the new island Aer Arann contract? Second, is she planning to have increased frequency of ferry services to the islands? As I said in my original question, it is the way it was 15 years ago when we brought it up very rapidly to that level of service. However, it was never intended that it would stay at that level forever. This is because there are increased demands all the time. Third, is there a proposal to provide an air service to Inishbofin, which is very urgently needed?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: There is no proposal for an air service to Inishbofin. As I understand it, there is no particular demand for an air service there. In terms of the ferry service, a number of issues have been raised by the islanders. We have taken those on board. All contracts, as the Deputy knows, are procured through a tendering process and adhere to all procurement rules and regulations. All competitions are conducted in an open, fair and transparent manner. As part of any contract renewal, the Department seeks submissions from the island communities on how a service can or could be improved. Submissions are assessed by the Department and, if permissible, are included in the tender document. As I said, if permissible, they are included in it.

The Aran Islands are currently connected to the mainland by reliable and frequent air, ferry and cargo services. The ferry and heavy cargo service to Inishbofin is operating well at pres-

ent. They are looking for a number of things, including extra savings and disabled access. We have consulted with the islanders and we will try to include as much as we can in the request for tender.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In improving the services, can the Minister confirm whether the islanders benefit from a 20% reduction in air and ferry fares, like the rest of the country did for internal public transport from 1 April? As the Minister knows, they pay some of the most expensive fares. They have no option but to take public transport to get in and out of the islands. Can the Minister confirm to me whether they did or did not benefit from the 20% decrease in public transport fares that apply to all rail and buses that were publicly contracted?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As the Deputy is aware, the Government recently announced schemes that are designed to lessen the impact of the rise in the cost of living that is currently being experienced by all sections of our society. One such announcement includes a €54 million package that will see a 20% average fare reduction on PSO bus and rail services that are managed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, on behalf of the Government. That scheme does not extend to other transport contracts that are funded by the Department of Transport or to the transport services to the offshore islands that are funded by my Department. Although the Department is not opposed to the introduction of such a scheme for island residents, it is concerned that retrospectively applying a fare reduction to contracts that were procured through a public procurement process may create issues for private and subsidised operators. I am happy to look at this. I have written to the Attorney General seeking advice and clarity on the issue. That advice will be made available to the Department in the coming weeks. The island's ferries are subsidised to the tune of 50%.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What about buses? I mean no disrespect but buses and trains are subsidised and there seems to be no problem with public procurement in that regard.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Minister and Deputy. Our time for this question has elapsed.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I said, I have written to the Attorney General and I will await his advice on the issue. The Deputy can understand we do not want to cause difficulties with any procurement process that leaves us open to challenges.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I will return to Question No. 73; we are travelling backwards. I remind Deputies that in the event of substitutions, an email should be sent to the office of the Ceann Comhairle to update the House on it. Question No. 73 was originally in the name of Deputy Gould but it will be put by Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Community Development Projects

73. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an update will be provided on the provision of a community centre to the Ballyvolane area; if officials in her Department have met with either Cork City Council or local residents with the aim of achieving this; and the way a community can apply for funding to develop such a project. [17933/22]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the Acting Chairman. It was my understand

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that such an email had been sent, so apologies in that regard.

The Minister of State will be familiar with this issue, which I raised with both the Minister of State and the Minister and which I raise today on behalf of Deputy Gould, of the area of Ballyvolane just outside Cork city. Almost 2,000 houses are planned for this area and yet, with two large strategic housing developments, SHD, in the pipeline, there is no community centre in the area. The request is there for a community centre in the Ballyvolane area.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. To answer Deputy Gould's initial question about contact with our Department, my Department has not had a direct approach from Ballyvolane residents in relation to the building of a community centre in the area, although I am informed there were meetings between the residents and Cork City Council on the matter.

In terms of the supports we provide, the community centres investment fund, which was recently announced by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will be launched shortly. This will support community groups, particularly in disadvantaged areas, with the upgrade and development of their existing community centre facilities. This fund is not intended for the construction of new buildings, however.

My Department also runs a number of smaller capital schemes such as the community enhancement programme, which provides small grants to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas. Funding is allocated by my Department to each local authority area. Further details of the programme can be found on my Department's website.

Other capital supports available from my Department, such as the LEADER programme and rural regeneration and development fund, have more rural areas as their focus. The urban regeneration fund, covering areas with larger populations, is available within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, further details of which are available from that Department.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Some of this is about being forward looking. Whatever discussions were held, we must take into account how much the area is going to grow. Many people coming into the area will be new to it. They will not necessarily be familiar with the community and, obviously, this is an established community.

All in all, the city council and the Department need to be proactive here. Building 2,000 houses means a lot of people going into the community. There is a need for community infrastructure. Community centres and resource centres can be transformative for an area. The Glen Resource Centre is an excellent example of that. This community centre has brought a huge benefit to the local community. Academic research into community centres shows they can have positive impacts on communities' health and well-being while also building more sustainable, stable communities.

Will the Minister of State consider meeting with the city council to consider this and other communities that need local community centres and examine how they might be provided for localities, especially areas that are growing rapidly?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I thank the Deputy. I think it is fair to say there is a planning function here as well. If a local authority is granting permission for large swathes of housing, it needs to plan for a community centre in that area as well. That is not happening everywhere. The question of whether we will actually support the local authority to do that comes up occasionally in

this House, even if the local authority does not have a plan. Local authorities need to have a plan. We have some funds that can support such plans to build an actual building. We do not have a fund to support a building from scratch as well. To give a little bit more detail on the community centres fund, €15 million will be available to community groups. Funding will be available under three strands with grants of between €10,000 and €300,000. Further details on the application process and opening dates will be available quite shortly as well. There is little point in me meeting unless the local authority has a plan actually to build the centre.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: While that will be useful, there is a general proposal but there is very little meat on the bones of it. There is a proposed SHD for Lahardane but there are no details. There needs to be an opportunity for community input. It is proposed that there will be a community centre. The local community needs the opportunity to give input and there is no timeline.

Deputy Gould has raised this repeatedly, as has our local representative, Ms Mandy O’Leary-Hegarty, and Councillor Mick Nugent. If the Minister of State is in a position to meet with the city council on this, and indeed any of the other issues the council wishes to raise in terms of community infrastructure, that would be welcome.

I will also take the opportunity, because it applies to similar funding streams in terms of community facilities, to raise once again the issue of the need for a new premises for the Barrack Street Band, an issue on which we have been in contact.

As I said, this is a rapidly growing area with 2,000 people coming into it. There is a need for community infrastructure. If the Minister of State is in a position to meet with the council and the local community, it would be very valuable to try to progress the plan. There is a general sentiment from the council that it wants to progress a community centre but there is no detail in the strategic housing development plan.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy Colm Burke wishes to come in on this as well.

Deputy Colm Burke: I agree with my colleague. I served as chairperson of Blackpool Community Centre, which takes in Ballyvolane, which forms part of the parish of Blackpool. More than 20 years ago, when there were more than 1,150 houses in Ballyvolane, there was an application for planning permission for a community centre which, unfortunately, never got through. We started off with more than 1,150 houses without a community facility and we are now building a huge number of additional houses, which I think will start off with one planning application having already gone through for more than 750 new houses. A second one has gone through for more than 250 houses. That is more than 1,000 new houses, and yet no specific project has been put in place for the development of a community facility in an area that will have more than 2,500 houses. It is very important there would be engagement with the local authority but also that a message is sent to the local authority about the priority of having appropriate community facilities in place. It is important in relation to the Glen facility, for instance, which my colleague raised. In fact, most of the money for that project came from the European level, not from Government level. Let us not, therefore, wait around for Europe to come forward with money for this one.

Deputy Joe O’Brien: I thank the Deputies. I think Deputy Gould will appreciate this as well. I visited his area last year. The residents of Fairhill also have a need in this regard. We

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can be supporters; we cannot be first movers in this situation. This is primarily a competency for the local authority, which, if it moves forward and has a plan, we are happy to support through the various funds we have available.

I would also mention the community activities fund, under which Cork City Council was allocated €307,000 last year. That was a fund to support community and voluntary funds affected by Covid-19 but it also supported its community centres' running costs, insurance bills and utilities as well as improvements to facilities. It can provide the funds necessary for repairs and the purchasing of equipment as well. I absolutely take the Deputy's points, however. We are happy to meet at a support level but not as a first mover on this.

Digital Hubs

75. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the roll-out of remote working hubs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18041/22]

110. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the delivery of remote working hubs; the progress of the development of a national hubs network; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17888/22]

138. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an update will be provided on the connected hubs in County Limerick and north County Tipperary; the process on becoming a connected hub; and the available funding for hubs under the connected hubs funding stream. [17898/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to ask the Minister about the status of the roll-out of remote working hubs. Obviously, there are various types of funding and funding streams with regard to these. We can all see the logic behind them in areas that have not had the roll-out of broadband we would like to see where they give people a facility to work in their area. We have obviously seen where it can help us reduce the amount of commuting in built-up places like Dundalk and all that is happening. Could we hear about where the roll-out is at?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I propose to take Questions Nos. 75, 110 and 138 together.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 recognises the potential of remote working hubs as key economic assets for our rural towns and villages. Notwithstanding the clear benefits to individuals and families in terms of quality of life indicators, remote working from hubs will also support local economies, reduce carbon emissions and may arrest or reverse the depopulation of certain areas. In May last, I launched the national connected hubs network together with the *connectedhubs.ie* platform. The platform offers a suite of booking and hub management applications to members of the network. Currently, 223 hubs are live on the platform, with this number increasing on an ongoing basis. In total, 20 of these 223 hubs are located in counties Limerick and Tipperary, with a further 32 hubs within these counties mapped for invitation to join the network. I will provide a table for the Deputies that gives a breakdown of these figures.

My Department continues to fund the establishment and development of remote working hubs under a number of funding streams. For example, under the connected hubs 2021 fund-

ing call, more than €800,000 was awarded to applicants in counties Limerick and Tipperary, enabling the enhancement of their remote working facilities. I have also recently announced funding of €18.5 million under the 2021 town and village renewal scheme. Successful projects included 28 remote working proposals. In February, I launched the connected hubs 2022 funding call, a €5 million funding stream to further support remote working facilities, including broadband connection points, throughout the country and to add further capacity to the national hub network. My officials are evaluating the applications that have been submitted and I expect to announce the successful applicants in the next few weeks. Details of all these schemes and successful applications are available on gov.ie.

The development of a national hubs network is a key commitment in Our Rural Future and I am committed to continuing my Department's support for the ongoing development of a comprehensive and integrated network of remote working hubs in recognition of the vital role they can play in our post-Covid recovery. I am a very strong supporter of remote working hubs. Remote working has been a game changer for rural Ireland and has helped to revitalise our towns and villages, allowing people to remain in their communities while taking up high-quality jobs. I launched a broadband connection point only two weeks ago in a very small community called Maudabawn outside Cootehill, County Cavan. I was able to say to the people there that they could do the same job in Maudabawn that they could do in Manhattan, and that is a fact because of remote working technology. The hubs are the way to go. If someone is working from home, work can impinge on the person's home life and that is not what we want. With remote working hubs, people will have the discipline of going to work in the morning and, even better, they will finish in the evening, go home and leave the work behind them. We should all have the right to disconnect, but if someone is working from home, that can encroach on the person's family life, which is not good for anybody.

This is why we have been investing in remote working hubs throughout the country. Whether through converting old cinemas, Garda stations, banks or railway stations, many types of derelict buildings have been identified by local authorities and we have been able to provide funding through the town and village renewal scheme and the rural regeneration and development fund to help them convert these buildings into modern-day use. What better way to use them than as remote working facilities? They are comfortable, the health and safety requirements are met and the worker sits at a chair that will not harm his or her back, which cannot always be said about a kitchen table. Moreover, the worker sits at a desk of a suitable height and works in a comfortable environment.

We should promote remote working hubs at every opportunity and I want employers to embrace this because there is a win for employers as well in that they will have happier workers and productivity will increase. Employers will not have to pay exorbitant rents in city locations when they can get a much cheaper alternative in rural towns and villages.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I imagine there will be a considerable degree of agreement on the issue of remote working hubs. Remote working is a game changer. While it will suit certain people to work from home and everyone is now talking about hybrid working, which might be the best of both worlds, I would also use that phrase in regard to remote working hubs. An example is Creative Spark Downtown in Clanbrassil Street, Dundalk, where the benefits of a workplace can be seen without necessarily the need to undergo long commutes, as might be the case where a business is based in Dublin or further afield. That is vital. I have recently had phone calls relating to the connected hubs funding call and people have expressed interest. We need to ensure the correct funding mechanism are in place in order that we can deliver this

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scheme where it is needed. It will be a lifeline for small towns, in particular, and even for larger towns such as Dundalk. We have a big issue with vacant sites. They could be used as hubs but, of course, we will also have to consider the wider issue of housing.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister for taking such an interest in this issue. It is ironic that modern technology is bringing back rural Ireland. This affords people with the opportunity to work in their local village and support their local shops and community daily, without being required to commute all the time to cities to work. I recognise, therefore, the funding being invested in this area.

It would be very worthwhile, whether it is done through National Broadband Ireland's website or the Department's website, to outline clearly the locations of the current broadband connection points, the connected hubs that are in place and the proposed hubs. That should be provided, in particular for County Limerick and north County Tipperary, because it is very important.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: We launched the connected hubs initiative in the Mill Enterprise Centre, Drogheda. There is no better example than there of the potential of remote working. There is a great deal of industry and remote work and it is an excellent place. The connected hubs scheme is available to access on an app. On their mobile phone, people can book a desk or an office and it is all done online. It is easy access and we wanted to make sure of that.

Separately, the connected hubs funding call is open to applicants. There was funding of €9 million last year and I have just opened the funding process for this year. It is open to remote working spaces that join up to the connected hubs scheme to apply for funding. We want to create a connected hubs ecosystem. I want to see this country light up. The app will outline all the places that are available.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, County Louth has a number of these hubs and is already seeing successes, as the Minister pointed out in respect of the Mill centre, Drogheda, and beyond. Creative Spark has its primary building as well as this new, secondary building, but a considerable number of other businesses are examining the idea too. Sites are available and can be utilised for this, and many companies will no doubt avail of it. Due diligence needs to be done to ensure the level of funding is appropriate. In respect of aspects of the connected hubs funding call, there are limits. It is about improving circumstances where there are already remote working hubs or where remote working of some sort exists. Do we need to consider other modalities to be able to provide for new, perhaps small remote working hubs in towns such as Dundalk?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: When does the Minister expect the app will be up and running? It is hugely important that people see that and that there be encouragement for every town and village to have a remote working hub. It is something I passionately believe in. We have towns throughout east Limerick and north Tipperary that it would work very well for but it is about knowledge and people's awareness, so that towns and villages that do not have them would say they are a vital infrastructure requirement and pursue them. I assume the Minister will always be open and will have rounds coming up all the time in terms of further remote working hubs.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: In terms of funding for remote working hubs, the local authority can apply to my Department for the town and village renewal scheme or the rural regeneration scheme for the infrastructure. In terms of the kitting out of the facilities, you can apply

to the connected hubs but, if you want to do so, you have to register to use the app.

We have 223 hubs on board and aim to have 400 on board by 2025. I expect us to meet that target way before that. We have asked the Western Development Commission to do this on behalf of the Department. It is working with Enterprise Ireland and the IDA to promote the hub network to employers and sell the benefits, including reduced overhead costs and happier, more productive workers. I consider remote working to be a well-being initiative. We want to get employers to see the benefits of remote working and we want more people to get involved with it. We have one chance and it is now. We do not want to let it slip or let people go back to the old normal but keep them in the remote working spaces.

Harbours and Piers

76. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the full foreshore application for Inis Óírr pier has not been lodged and may be delayed further for another 12 months, given that Galway County Council must undertake updates to the original environment study in order to comply with European Union legislation before the application can be lodged; her views on whether the funding set aside for the pier will cover the necessary work given the increase in building costs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18035/22]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tá inní ar mhuintir Inis Óírr nach bhfuil an iarratas iomlán do cheadúnas imeall trá curtha isteach go fóill agus go mbeidh moill eile do bhliain eile leis mar gheall go gcaithfear, de réir rialacháin an Aontas Eorpaigh, an staidéar timpeallachta a thabhairt suas chun dáta. An feidir leis an Aire a dheimhniú go gclúdóidh an maoiniú na costaisí ó tharla go bhfuil ardú tagtha ar phraghsanna? I know the Minister has an interest in the question but I am aware of timing.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Galway County Council is the responsible authority for the maintenance and development of infrastructure on the Aran Islands.

The development of the pier on Inis Óírr is listed among the strategic objectives set out in Project Ireland 2040. A steering committee consisting of representatives from my Department, Galway County Council and the consulting engineers has been meeting regularly to monitor progress. I understand that Galway County Council submitted a pre-application, with supporting documents, for a foreshore licence in July 2021. It subsequently held a meeting with the foreshore unit in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, where it was advised that the environmental reports it had submitted needed updating and that additional reports were needed.

Further to that meeting, Galway County Council sought quotations from environmental consultancies to carry out a gap analysis study. This was to review the environmental information available and to compile recommendations for the extent of further studies required which would form a part of the supporting materials for the foreshore licence. The gap analysis study is now under way. It is estimated that it will be completed in early May. Additionally, Galway County Council is in regular contact with the foreshore unit and they have agreed to assist the local authority with mapping the area where the licence will apply.

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In relation to the cost, while Galway County Council has given projected costs for the development, a definitive cost will not be available until the tendering process has been completed. Work on this project will span a number of years and I am confident that funding will be available to complete this important project.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. That is something the people of Inis Oírr will be glad to hear. It has been great the Minister has taken this project very seriously, as it deserves to be. It is interesting to hear of the gap analysis study the Minister expects to be completed by early May because the people of the island were in contact with me and were concerned the analysis could take another year. It is welcome to hear the Minister saying the money should be there.

Tá sé go maith a chloisteáil go gceapann an tAire go mbeidh an staidéar sin déanta i mí Bealtaine agus go mbeidh an t-airgead ar fáil. Braitheann sé ar an gcostas agus níl an costas iomlán againn go fóill.

That is welcome. One of the questions people from the island will have concerns how long the Minister expects the entire process to take. That is for the gap analysis study and the environmental assessment to be done and the foreshore licence application to be put in fully. I know these things take years but will the Minister respond in relation to that?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: These things take a long time. I wish they could be done sooner. I have been on Inis Oírr, visited the island and know the problems the residents highlighted to me. We want to try to sort them out. We have to do the environmental study. The foreshore licence and environmental studies are the sort of things required for this type of project. My Department is meeting fortnightly with Galway County Council to make sure we can progress these issues. If there is anything we can do to move it on, we will. The foreshore licence rests with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We continue to focus on it to make sure we get this moved on as quickly as we can. I have outlined the current situation.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Minister has outlined clearly the situation and the people of the island will be glad to hear that. The issue, as the Minister knows, is the whole health and safety aspect, and they are really concerned about that. We have seen with storms in the past how badly it is impacted. That has an impact on the community in terms of being able to come to or leave the island, and there is a real-life health and safety impact. People from the island are wondering if, given the health and safety element, there is a way to fast-track it. I know the Minister is meeting with Galway County Council regularly and that is welcome but that is a question they have put to me.

Tá sé go maith go bhfuil na freagraí sách soiléir agus go mbeidh an t-eolas sin ar fáil do mhuintir na hoileáin ach tá a fhios agam go bhfuil siad an-bhuartha mar gheall ar chúrsaí sláinte agus sábháilteachta. An féidir fast-tracking a dhéanamh ar bhonn na cúrsaí sin?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I am aware of the safety concerns relating to the pier, particularly during the summertime, when the number of people using it increases. The day-to-day maintenance of piers, including the development and enforcement of the by-laws, is primarily an issue for the relevant local authority, in this case Galway County Council. Officials have been in contact with our colleagues on that council with a view to ensuring the pier is safe for users, particularly during the construction phase. To ensure the safety of the public, Galway

County Council has recently published draft by-laws for the management of the pier and is collating submissions received from the public. I understand the council also hopes to employ a harbour master at the pier to manage traffic to the pier and ensure everyone's safety, particularly during the high volume months of summer.

Question No. 77 replied to with written answers.

Departmental Schemes

78. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to increase funding and resources to local development companies that administer schemes such as the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme which will have an increased role in the provision of advice and services for Ukrainian refugees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18038/22]

Deputy Pauline Tully: Will the Minister outline if she has plans to increase funding and resources to local development companies that administer schemes such as the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, which will have an increased role in the provision of advice and services for Ukrainian refugees.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I am always glad to take the opportunity to talk about SICAP. That programme is our country's primary social inclusion intervention. It aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality. It is delivered locally by the local development companies referenced by the Deputy, who work with the most disadvantaged and hardest to reach in our communities. My Department is in constant contact with the 49 local development companies, LDCs, and their representative body, the Irish Local Development Network. I am familiar with the work they do, their unique role and their potential to play a key role in the overall framework of supports for new arrivals from Ukraine.

I believe SICAP to be an important programme and I was delighted to secure a 10% increase for it for 2022, the largest increase since the programme was launched. This represents a €4 million increase and provides for the creation of a significant number of job places for new community work on the ground in communities across Ireland.

Late last year, I also asked that, in 2022, SICAP have a particular focus on five national priorities, one of which was new communities. SICAP staff, working with LDCs, have valuable experience and knowledge of available resources in their areas to support migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Every realistic flexibility is being offered by the Department in respect of SICAP so that its circa 600 community development workers can contribute locally in responding to the needs of the Ukrainian refugees as they are accommodated around the country.

SICAP workers were to the forefront in their communities during the community call response to Covid-19. Building on these structures and relationships, community response forums are being repurposed in each local authority area. These will enable all those involved at a local level to work together to support the integration of Ukrainian refugees into our communities under the stewardship of the local authorities. I am keeping a close eye on local efforts around the country, in particular the role played by LDCs and SICAP. I will continue to support them however I can.

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Deputy Pauline Tully: I thank the Minister of State. He referred to the 49 LDCs. I am conscious that they assist 15,000 community groups and up to 170,000 individuals annually, which represents a tremendous outreach and a large amount of work. My two LDCs are Cavan County Local Development and Monaghan Integrated Development, which deliver a range of integration and resettlement programmes and supports to refugees and asylum seekers in new communities who have come here to escape conflicts. Like other groups working with refugees and asylum seekers at local level, for example, family resource centres, which are funded differently, LDCs will be placed under severe pressure because they will face an increased workload over the coming months as we welcome more Ukrainians who come to Ireland to escape the dreadful conflict unleashed upon them by Russia. LDCs are under pressure as it is, though. We want to see them continuing to support local people who need it as well as refugees from various countries, including Ukrainians, who deserve immense support. While I welcome the Minister of State's comments on additional support, will it be sufficient to reach everyone who needs it?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: The Deputy made an important point about the role of SICAP, in that it does one-to-one work with people while also supporting community groups. She mentioned a figure of 15,000. That will be an important role for SICAP. It is important that we support Ukrainian groups that are organising themselves. SICAP would be well placed to do that, but it is also a good use of resources to support others in developing their own groups and carving out their own paths.

Community response forums will be useful in making the most of the resources. That there are 600 community workers is good, and that number is growing with the 10% increase in the budget, but there are demands on them as well. The best use of their time will be achieved by co-ordinating with community response forums, given that there are other community groups that can add to the community workers' capacity. The community response forums will play an important role in ensuring that we get the most out of SICAP.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The supports being offered to refugees and new communities are invaluable, but they are usually for a limited time. I have met some refugees. Although they received invaluable support, they were expected to cope on their own after a certain while. They had made connections with staff and were still putting questions to them and looking for their support even after the programmes they had been on had finished. The staff had got to know them and were reluctant not to help them. The staff are taking on a great deal of extra work and responsibility.

If any of us had to uproot suddenly and go to a different country where we were unable to speak the language, were unfamiliar with the culture or way of life and had nothing with us, we would want support as well. The greatest support of all is staff and we would make connections with those staff. There needs to be enough support to help the Ukrainians coming to Ireland, to continue helping other refugees who are here and to continue helping local people on the ground. This is my greatest concern.

It has been mentioned to me that community response forums did not reach out to family resource centres. While this is a different issue, I hope that they will because those centres provide a great deal of support to people on the ground.

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I would encourage community response forums to reach out to every available community and voluntary group. On the other side, I would encourage community

and voluntary groups to contact the forums. It is important that everyone who can do something is in the room, there is co-ordination and we are making the most of resources. At particular pinch points where there is exceptional pressure, we have added resources to the community services programme: Lisdoonvarna; the volunteer centres in south Dublin to help in Citywest; and Wexford.

I will take this opportunity to send the message out to the public at large that, if people want to help, they should contact their local volunteer centres. We now have strong volunteering infrastructure in Ireland. We have a local volunteer centre in every local authority area. These centres support people and organisations in facilitating volunteers. I encourage people to take this opportunity if they wish.

Urban Development

79. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update regarding the placement of town regeneration officers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17895/22]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I wish to ask about the establishment of town regeneration officers as outlined in the Town Centre First policy.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Government recently published “Town Centre First - A Policy Approach for Irish Towns”. This publication represents a major new policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. It contains 33 actions that will give our towns the tools and resources they need to become more viable and attractive places in which to live, work, socialise and run a business.

Action No. 3 of the new policy refers to the provision of town regeneration officers, who will be appointed in local authorities to drive the implementation of the town centre first policy. Town regeneration officers will be crucial in managing the implementation of the policy at a local level and ensuring the development and implementation of Town Centre First plans. The role of the town regeneration officers is clearly outlined in the policy. I was delighted to secure additional funding of €2 million for these posts in budget 2022. As a result, it is envisaged that a town regeneration officer will be appointed in local authority areas across the country.

A national Town Centre First office will drive the delivery of many of the recommendations outlined in the policy and support the co-ordinated roll-out of the policy by local authorities, town regeneration officers and town teams. My Department has agreed the structure of and funding for the national implementation office and the town regeneration officers with local authorities. The first step is the recruitment of the head of the national implementation office, which will be progressed shortly, and the recruitment of town regeneration officers will follow on from this in the coming weeks.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I understand that these town regeneration officers will be recruited local authority by local authority, which more than likely means that someone external will be brought in. That is welcome because we will need someone within the local authorities to focus on this and drive the Town Centre First policy, which is a good policy. If it does what it is supposed to, it will make a significant difference to town centres across the State. It will tackle

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the levels of vacancy and dereliction that have, in some cases, been there for a long time. Many towns across Roscommon and Galway have not recovered from the 2008 crash. They were then hit with Covid and, to a lesser extent, Brexit. They have suffered, so they need a policy like this to bring life back to their centres.

Where will the national Town Centre First office be located or has that been determined yet?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: No. Next week, we will advertise for the position of the head of the national Town Centre First office. I am not sure where the office will be located, but I am sure a space is being organised for it somewhere. In a few weeks' time, we will ask local authorities to hire town regeneration officers. It is a good job with an attractive remuneration package.

We are putting these structures in place because we have many different Government schemes that are targeted at supporting our towns and villages.

10 o'clock

For example, in my Department there is the streetscape scheme, in addition to the town and village renewal scheme and the rural regeneration development fund. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has the repair and lease scheme, the urban regeneration fund and the Croí Cónaithe scheme, which will be announced shortly by the Minister. We want a joined-up and co-ordinated approach. We want a plan with local engagement and we want the town regeneration officer to engage with the local town teams, the local chamber of commerce, businesses and residents. This is very much the bottom-up approach. I want all the people working together because sometimes they are inclined to go off in different directions. We will get them working together. The town centre first regeneration officer will be the focal point in that regard.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: The position for the person in that head office will be advertised next week. When does the Minister foresee that local authorities will begin recruiting? When does she see that part of the process being finalised?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As I said, I am expecting that in a few weeks we will ask local authorities to hire the people to get them in place as soon as possible. As the Deputy knows, funding was also provided by my Department to consider a specific town in every single county. Some €100,000 was provided to look at that. The town regeneration officers will work with all the towns and villages in their area. It will not be specific to the one town that got the funding. As I am sure the Deputy knows, Strokestown got that money in her constituency. We want those who got the funding to look at the different aspects of their town and we want the plan. I was in a village near me last night, Newbliss, where a plan was launched. Again, towns and villages are going nowhere if they do not have these plans. We have been funding plans in a number of different places. Some towns are very good, while others are a little more disjointed. The role of the town regeneration officer will be to pull them all together and then draw down the different funding schemes that are available.

Departmental Strategies

80. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the forthcoming progress report on the Our Rural Future strategy considering the strategy commits to reporting every six months and the policy was launched almost one year ago; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17892/22]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: What is the status of the forthcoming progress report? I acknowledge it is published and I read it with great interest. I will raise two aspects of the report. It has many references to the acceleration of broadband and also refers to the success of the remote working hubs, with which I entirely agree. There are two matters. One relates to the ability to accelerate the broadband programme. Has the Minister had any engagement regarding that on the back of this progress report?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: Our Rural Future represents the Government's blueprint for the development of rural Ireland up to 2025. It provides the framework to achieve the vision of transforming the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas. It was published in March 2021 and contains more than 150 measures across the whole of government for short-term recovery and long-term development.

Implementation of the five-year policy will be delivered by a series of progress reports and work programmes, which allow for the policy to be flexible enough to respond to new challenges and issues as they emerge. The first progress report was published on 25 February and is available on my Department's website. It provides updates on a total of 216 actions contained in the 2021 work programme. The level of achievement detailed in the report is extremely positive, with a completion rate of just under 80% on actions to be delivered by the end of 2021. Some key actions delivered in 2021 include the establishment of the national hubs network, the launch of the town centre first policy, and the publication of a range of important policies and action plans, including the new agrifood strategy, Food Vision 2030, the sustainable tourism interim action plan, and an action plan for apprenticeships.

A new work programme for 2022 is being finalised in conjunction with Departments and will be published shortly, with activity already under way on many of the actions it contains. The key challenge now is for us to maintain the momentum of delivery from the first year of the policy in order to ensure that the full impact of Our Rural Future is delivered for rural communities throughout Ireland. This policy applies right across the Government. Every Department has had to submit its actions and I will be holding them to account to make sure they deliver.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is welcome to see so many of those actions either delivered or well under way. I welcome that. I will speak on two aspects of that progress report, in particular. The very first measure relates to broadband. The report references the acceleration of the broadband programme, which was a commitment in the programme for Government. The Minister will know that National Broadband Ireland, NBI, is under significant pressure. It had a target last year of 115,000 premises to be passed but 34,500 premises were passed by the end of last year. That is concerning because of the catch-up that is now needed, never mind accelerating the programme from a seven year roll-out to a five year roll-out, which would be very welcome given that so many of us in rural communities do not have broadband, have very poor Internet access and struggle daily, especially those who have businesses in such areas.

The remote work strategy interdepartmental group is also referenced in the report. Will it

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look at the legislation on remote working, which will be very important if remote working hubs are to work and be sustained?

Deputy Heather Humphreys: NBI is rolling out the national broadband plan. There are probably many more connections than had initially been anticipated. Its representatives said that to me when I spoke to them informally. They said there was a lot of demand for connections and NBI is rolling them out. The good thing about NBI being on the ground is that it means other providers are also stepping up to the plate. In fact, the national broadband connection comes less than half a mile from my house but, thankfully, another provider was able to step in and I was able to get a wireless connection that means I have good broadband. The fact that the national broadband plan is on its way is helping others to step up to the plate. That is also a good thing.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is important that the Minister has a real level of direct engagement with NBI, even though it is not exactly her Department's remit. Given how crucial the roll-out of broadband in a timely manner is, and its importance to rural communities, it is important she engages regarding it. I know that she is doing so. The target that was missed last year was significant. When we look at the likes of Eir, it met its targets. While Covid may be used as part of the reason, other telecommunications companies met and exceeded their targets; NBI did not. That is of concern. It is of particular concern for us in rural communities because we need broadband.

I ask that the Minister play a role regarding the remote work legislation. It will be very important. We want the remote working hubs to work in our communities. They are very important. They will sustain rural communities, keep people in their communities and benefit the local economy. There are many benefits to them but we have to get that legislation right.

Deputy Heather Humphreys: As the Deputy knows, the Tánaiste is bringing forward legislation on the right to request remote working. It is possibly before one of the Oireachtas committees at present - I am not sure where it is - but that is welcome. It is important we have that conversation with employers and employees. We want to encourage them because this has to be a win-win for employers and employees. Some of them may be concerned about it and may be worried. I know, in particular, that Tracy Keogh from Grow Remote has been fantastic. She has been encouraging people to take up the option of remote working. There are sometimes concerns around that but we need to allay those fears. We should take every opportunity we get in this House to promote the benefits of remote working and the game changer it has been for our rural communities.

Question 81 replied to with Written Answers.

Bus Services

82. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the engagement between her Department and other Departments in respect of the local transport services for communities not served by scheduled public transport services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17939/22]

Deputy Colm Burke: There will be an increase of approximately 25% in the availability of rural bus services. What engagement has there been between the Department and other Depart-

ments to deal with the areas where there will not be connectivity or a service?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: Our Rural Future is the Government's national rural development policy. It sets out an ambitious blueprint for the development of, and investment in, rural Ireland over a five-year period. It is a whole-of-government policy, and the more than 150 measures set out within it are being delivered by the Departments with responsibility for the relevant policy areas, including the Department of Transport.

Our Rural Future was developed following extensive consultation with rural stakeholders and communities, and issues of rural transport provision featured strongly in those discussions. The policy was developed on the basis of these consultations, leading to a strong focus on improving the provision of transport and other services in rural areas.

The first Our Rural Future progress report was published in February and it provides updates on actions detailed in the policy's 2021 work programme. These include rural transport measures such as the expansion of Local Link services, investment in greenways and active travel infrastructure, as well as other public transport upgrades to the bus fleet and train stations and the development of the forthcoming Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, which aims to expand the public transport network in rural areas and to increase service levels.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has the community services programme, CSP, which supports in excess of 2,000 positions in more than 420 community organisations to provide a vast range of local services through a social enterprise model, including the provision of transport services such as accessible transport services for an independent lifestyle for people with permanent or temporary mobility difficulties, physical and sensory disabilities and the not-for-profit sector. CSP funding is provided as a fixed annual contribution towards the cost of an agreed number of full-time equivalent positions, including a manager where appropriate, focusing on communities where public and private sector services are lacking either through geographical or social isolation or because demand levels are not sufficient.

Of the six organisations that are supported under CSP which provide a range of community services to older people, including transport, one is based in Macroom in Cork. It was supported with funding of more than €146,000 for the provision of services through the operation of three day care centres, transport services to older people and the provision of meals on wheels services.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State. However, would he not accept that despite the increase of over 25% in the level of services, there will still be areas which need additional support and work? Should there be further engagement, perhaps with our local authorities, to ensure we can provide that transport service?

I know the increase of 25% is over a five-year period. In my own constituency there is talk of a new service between Cork, Whitechurch, Carrignavar, Glenville, in the Grenagh area and Tower, Courtbrack out to the Rylane area. The question is the timeframe. Do we have an idea of the level of increase in the first, second, third, fourth and fifth years? What other work can be done in the areas where there is no proposal for providing additional services?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: I do not have the detail of the stages of investment and what will happen on the ground over the next few years. The Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan is a major national public transport initiative funded by the Department of Transport and managed by the National Transport Authority, NTA. The aim of the plan is to increase public transport

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connectivity, particularly for people living outside major towns and cities. The Department of Transport has allocated €5.6 million from budget 2022 to the NTA to commence planning under this initiative. I think it is fair to say the planning will come first and the investment will follow in the next few years. Connecting Ireland proposes to expand the public transport network to rural areas and to increase service levels. As the Deputy said, there is a 25% overall increase in rural bus services. Some 70% of people in Ireland will have access to a public transport service that provides at least three return trips daily to the nearby town. The active travel infrastructure will also connect in with these over time.

Deputy Colm Burke: I ask about the review of services. Places have developed where there is not a service and that connectivity is lacking. I think of my own area, for instance, where Dripsey to Ballincollig has developed but there is no bus service from Dripsey to Ballincollig even though it is the nearest town to a big rural area. Would that also be part of the overall review?

Deputy Joe O'Brien: Again, that is really a question for the NTA and I am happy to take that question and seek detail on the transport connections to it as well.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Local Authorities

Deputy Pa Daly: I am glad of the opportunity to raise this at such short notice. Recently, I met a family from Killarney, Steve O'Mahony, his wife, Teresa, and their daughter, Alexis. I want to raise an issue on their behalf. We discussed a cut that has been made to disability funding. This cut was not made by the HSE or the Department of Health. It is the removal of funding for ceiling track hoists from housing adaptation grants. Alexis is six years old next week. She has cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, subluxation of her right hip and a high risk of aspiration, that is food or drink going in to her lungs. Alexis is completely dependent for her daily care. She requires constant repositioning for washing and to prevent injury, and she needs two people to hoist her.

The Minister of State will be aware of housing adaptation grants. Kerry County Council has a budget of €3 million to spend on housing adaptation grants, which help our elderly and disabled family members, making life easier for them living in the community. Grants are available to make repairs or improvements to their homes. According to a letter received last month by Mr. Steve O'Mahony, in September 2020 the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government informed local authorities that ceiling hoists should not be included in the housing adaptation grant. Since then, most local authorities no longer provide funding for the provision of the hoist itself although they may fund the structural works, that is, to place hoist tracks

in the ceilings. Mr. O'Mahony had raised this issue in July last year and he was told by the Department that departmental officials were engaging with the HSE. That was in July. Again, in September, following a question, he learned that officials were still engaging with the HSE.

While these discussions take place, however, those with disabilities, their carers and their families are suffering. Steve, Teresa and Alexis have a quotation for €5,000 for the provision and supply of a ceiling track hoist. According to Alexis's occupational therapist, OT, a hoist will improve the efficiency of lifting, improve Alexis's quality of care, require fewer caregivers, decrease her care needs and reduce physical discomfort and injury to her five-year-old body parts. It facilitates more time to her parents to provide care for their child. Alexis has other equipment needs that occupy a lot of floor space and, as she grows, it is highly recommended, again by the occupational therapist, that a ceiling hoist will ensure comfortable mobility and a dignified experience for Alexis and her carers. It will give this family a break. This is essential for this family.

Families like the O'Mahonys are already struggling with the physical, mental and financial costs of care. There is, according to the OT, a risk of a high incidence of musculoskeletal injuries among caregivers. Teresa, Alexis's mother, already has back injuries as a result. Decisions like these, or the lack of a decision in this case, exacerbates and compounds their struggles. I am asking the Minister of State to make a decision that basic fairness to this family and fairness to people with disabilities demands. Their home is ready to go. Will the Minister of State reverse the decision, please, and allow funding for these essential works from housing grants?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank the Deputy for articulating the case of Alexis and her family and the comments by the OT about improving the quality of care and reducing physical discomfort. These are really vital issues for her care, well-being and her quality of life. My Department provides funding to local authorities under the suite of housing adaptation grants for older people and people with a disability to assist people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable to their needs and to facilitate early return from hospital stays.

The detailed administration of the grants, including their assessment, approval and prioritisation, is the responsibility of the local authorities. The current housing adaptation grant for older people and people with a disability scheme is underpinned by secondary legislation. The provisions of regulation 7 of the Housing (Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability) Regulations 2007 set out the types of mobility aids the grant can be used for, including accessible showers, access ramps, grab rails, stair lifts and so on. The Department has also provided guidance to local authorities since the scheme came into operation in 2007.

Medical aids and devices that require the assistance of a carer who is specially trained in their use are not currently funded under the scheme. Consequently, the funding of ceiling hoists, which are medical devices that require specialised training to use, are not provided for under the scheme. However, funding can be provided for the infrastructure to support a hoist, for example, the reinforcement of a ceiling. In order to provide clarity on this matter, a specific question on the funding of hoists was included in the frequently asked questions document issued to local authorities in 2020, which clarified that funding was not available for ceiling hoists.

I can confirm that officials from my Department are engaging with the HSE and the Department of Health on this issue as it is important that there is a clear avenue for funding of hoists

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going forward. Officials met in March to specifically discuss fixed-track ceiling hoists and it is hoped that a suitable agreement on funding of hoists will be reached over the coming months. My Department is committed to ensuring that the grant is appropriately targeted.

Housing for All commits to undertaking a review of the range of housing grants available to assist with meeting specific housing needs both for our ageing population and people with a disability. An initial element of this review has begun and is currently focused on the existing grant limits and income thresholds applicable to the grant schemes. The wider scope of the review, to be completed this year, is also under consideration and is being informed by ongoing engagement with external stakeholders, including the Department of Health, the HSE, the Irish Wheelchair Association and the Disability Federation of Ireland.

This probably does not provide comfort to the family the Deputy has spoken about but certainly it offers some hope in the sense that the discussions between the HSE and the Department will lead to some conclusion that might have a more streamlined response, as he has requested. I await his response.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State. What is going on here is unbelievably bureaucratic in that the reinforced ceiling costs can be provided for but something that requires the assistance of a carer cannot. In this case, a carer inevitably means Mr. and Mrs. O'Mahony. They are caring for their daughter who has a severe disability - cerebral palsy and quadriplegia - but are excluded from the scheme. The Minister of State's answer would be great except it is the same answer the Department gave in July and September of last year and again last month. While these negotiations are taking place, the family of this child, who I met at the St. Patrick's Day parade, continue to suffer. Steve O'Mahony said that families like his do not want these hoists for their children out of choice but because they are a basic necessity. Every day that this drags on, he said, is another day of physical stress caused by constantly moving the person with the disability, washing them and so on.

Will the Minister speak to his officials to see if the scheme can be expanded? I would not ask him to do so if it were not essential for young Alexis to be helped and her family to be given a break.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I assure the Deputy I will take this matter back to the Department. I agree with him. A conclusion should have been brought to the discussions between the Department and the HSE to provide clarity to families. Perhaps the issue here is that medical aids and devices such as a hoist require the assistance of a carer and specialised training. That may be the matter under negotiation. As I am not sure, I cannot state that is the case. I will take the specific case of this family back to the Department because it is one that is reflected in other families across the country who are experiencing similar issues. These are good grant schemes, which have provided help to thousands of families. However, there is an issue that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. I will take the matter back to the Department on the Deputy's behalf.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State. I will provide him with the name and address of the family.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: I would appreciate that.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil suim faoi leith ag an Aire Stáit san ábhar seo. Is é an t-ábhar atá faoi chaibidil agam ná an ionad cóireála séarachais, wastewater treatment plant, atá beartaithe do Chéibh an tSrutháin ar An gCeathrú Rua i gConamara. Tá sé beartaithe le fada an lá agus níl a fhios agam cé chomh fada agus atá muintir an cheantair ag streachailt agus i mbun feachtais chun ionad cóireála séarachais a fháil. Toghadh mise don chéad uair in 1999, níos mó ná 22 bliain ó shin, don chathair ach bhí mé ar an eolas faoin bhfeachtas a bhí faoi lán seoil i gConamara mar tá séarachas ag dul isteach san fharraige agus muidne i mbun cainte anseo.

I mo thuairim agus i dtuairim formhór na ndaoine sa cheantar, ní raibh an suíomh a bhí pioctha agus atá ann le haghaidh an ionaid seo feiliúnach riamh. Is é sin an suíomh a bhí aitheanta ag an gcomhairle contae, áfach, agus ansin ag Uisce Éireann. Ní raibh mise sásta riamh ach, ar a laghad, bhí an rud ag dul ar aghaidh. Níos tábhachtaí fós, ní raibh muintir na háite sásta ach bhí sé chun dul ar aghaidh ar aon nós.

Tá an suíomh i seilbh duine phríobháidigh. Tá cead pleanála faighte ag an duine sin le hionad eile a thógáil ar an suíomh. Tá an ceart aige, agus é agus a chlann i mbun feachtais le fada an lá freisin. Is é an deacracht atá ann anois, áfach, ná go bhfuil an chosúlacht ar an scéal nach mbeidh aon ionad cóireála séarachais ar an suíomh sin.

Cad atá le déanamh againn? Níos tábhachtaí, cad atá le déanamh ag Uisce Éireann agus an Rialtas? Ní féidir leanúint ar aghaidh. I mo thuairim agus i dtuairim mhuintir na háite, tá áit i bhfad níos feiliúnaí i Ros an Mhíl ach dúradh linn ag dul siar nárbh fhéidir é sin a úsáid. Tá sé práinneach anois breathnú ar an suíomh sin. Tá an suíomh i seilbh Údarás na Gaeltachta. Tá sé i bhfad níos feiliúnaí. Ní saineolaí mé ach bheadh sé i bhfad níos feiliúnaí, do cheantar níos mó, ná an ceann a bhí beartaithe.

Ag an bpointe seo, níl an dara rogha agam ach é a ardú anocht agus brú a chur ar an Roinn rud a dhéanamh ó thaobh an séarachais atá ag dul isteach san fharraige. I am not going to repeat that in English as I know the Minister of State understood everything I said.

We knew this was the wrong site. I will put it like that. I am not here to say we were right - quite the opposite - but we knew there were difficulties with this site. That is the site that was chosen, however, despite the people of the area highlighting that it was not suitable. I do not want to exaggerate but I have been aware of this matter since I was elected in 1999, even though it was not in my area at the time.

Irish Water put all its eggs in one basket to build a wastewater treatment plant on this site and its owner has just secured planning permission from An Bord Pleanála to build something completely different on it. Fair play to the owner, who has struggled to get that planning but obviously the wastewater treatment plant cannot proceed at the site now. I am seeking urgent clarification first and then I want to hear what steps the Government is going to take to ensure the site that should have been picked in the first place will be picked. I also want urgent steps to be taken to construct a treatment plant there.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo a ardú inniu agus as an seans a thabhairt dom dualgas Uisce Éireann a leagan amach. Tá an freagra as Béarla, agus tá brón orm faoi sin.

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The Water Services Acts 2007 to 2017 set out arrangements in place for the delivery of water and wastewater services by Irish Water and for the scrutiny and oversight provisions that apply in respect of these arrangements. The Deputy will understand the provision of facilities in County Galway is a matter for Irish Water in the first instance. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has had statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Irish Water takes a strategic nationwide approach to asset planning and investment, and meeting customer requirements. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects and programmes is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

My Department has made inquiries on the issue mentioned by Deputy Connolly. I am informed that Irish Water has just today been made aware of the decision by An Bord Pleanála to grant planning permission for an alternative project on the preferred site for the proposed wastewater treatment plant in An Cheathrú Rua. Irish Water is currently reviewing this decision and any implications for the proposed sewerage scheme in An Cheathrú Rua.

The Government is aware that significant and sustained investment is needed to ensure the continued operation, upgrade and repair of the country's water and wastewater infrastructure and to support economic growth in the years to come. In this regard, as part of budget 2022, my Department secured funding of over €1.57 billion to support water services. This includes €1.459 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area.

I agree with Deputy Connolly that this is a critically important project for the area, particularly as the region's population grows. What the Deputy has referenced here is a long-running saga that needs to be addressed by Irish Water. I will take her concerns back through our Department's water section to Irish Water. I hope I have provided some clarity for the Deputy in the response I have given.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Chuir mé an cheist i nGaeilge freisin. Níl mé ag cur locht ar an Aire Stáit ach b'fhéidir go mbeidh an freagra ón Roinn i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge uair éigin. Maidir leis an gceist, is é an t-aon rud atá suimiúil domsa anseo ná go bhfuil Uisce Éireann i mbun athbhreithnithe ar an gcinneadh atá déanta ag An mBord Pleanála. Of interest to me, other than the background with Irish Water, of which I am fully aware, and the history, which I do not need, is that Irish Water is "currently reviewing this decision" by An Bord Pleanála to grant permission for something else. Irish Water was fully aware of this and was considering a compulsory purchase order for this site for a very long time. It was conveyed to Irish Water over and over again that there would be no co-operation because the owner had other plans for that site. I pass no comment on those plans but this has not come as a surprise to Irish Water. It knew it was under appeal to An Bord Pleanála and it knew well that it was not a suitable site.

There is a serious question here for the Government. I know it is Irish Water's responsibility. I never agreed with Irish Water happening in the first place, but that is what happened. We cannot stand over a situation where raw sewage is pouring into the bay in the middle of Conamara, i gcoíllár na Gaeltachta, when there is a suitable site. We knew there was a site all along. I cannot tell the Minister of State how many meetings I and other Deputies and councillors from the area attended over the last while. We tried to say that while we were not experts, there was another site worth looking at that was in the ownership of a State agency. Irish Water told us it

was too costly but nobody has added up the cost of not dealing with the raw sewage going into the water. When we look at costs in a very restricted way, it is stupid in the extreme and here we are. There is a site available. As I said, I am no expert but anyone down there will tell you that the site owned by Údarás na Gaeltachta in Ros an Mhíl is far more suitable and was always thus.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas arís leis an Teachta as an gceist seo faoi áiseanna fuíolluisce ar An gCeathrú Rua a ardú. Geallaim go bhfuil an Rialtas tiomanta do mhaoiniú suntasach a chur ar fáil d’Uisce Éireann. Again, I have a stock response here but this an issue that I will take back through the Department to Irish Water. I am not fully familiar with all of the details of the project but if there is a suitable site, it should be considered. I agree with the Deputy that it is absolutely unacceptable for raw sewage to be discharging into water-courses. It is happening too much in our country. As I outlined in my earlier response, that is why it is critically important that we have put in place record investment for Irish Water to meet these requirements. However, it is important that it is done in the right way. It is important that it is done in the correct way and at the right location. I will take back the Deputy’s concerns and will revert to her with a response.

Coroners Service

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I wish to raise a very difficult issue that has affected many families over the last number of months in the north Dublin region. I refer to the remains of loved ones being released from the coroner service following a post mortem. Post mortems are required following the death of some people but arising from what appears to be the temporary closure of the mortuary in Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown, there is a backlog and hence a significant delay in the releasing of bodies by the coroner service, which is based in Whitehall in my own constituency. This is something that affects people right across north Dublin and I have been contacted by families from right across the area.

The challenge this presents is, in the first instance, to funeral directors who are trying to manage the progression of remains to allow families to bury them peacefully. It also presents a challenge for family members themselves. Ireland has a custom of being able to put people to rest with relative ease but instead of a two- or three-day delay following a post mortem, in some cases remains have been in a mortuary for more than two weeks. This causes real anxiety when families are waiting for two or two and a half weeks to bury their loved ones. Often people will have travelled home from abroad to be with their loved one before he or she passed away. They then have to remain here for much longer than they would have expected. As I said, these delays are a difficulty for funeral undertakers, for families and for people travelling but especially for partners, husbands or wives who cannot lay their loved one to rest and move on.

I do not expect the Minister of State to have all of the answers this evening. The coroner service is the responsibility of the local authority. I was a member of Dublin City Council for ten years and am very proud of the service provided by the coroner. If there are issues with resources or with adjoining facilities not being available, we need to put in place some sort of contingency or redundancy plan. I understand that the facility at Connolly Hospital Blanchardstown has been reopened but we must have some contingency in the system that will allow for an overflow.

A funeral director told me that there were four remains being dealt with each day and that as a result, one family was told that it was number 18 or 19 on the list. They are not terms that

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any family wants to hear following the death of a loved one. I ask the Minister of State to bring my concerns back to the Government to try to ascertain what is happening and why families are experiencing these very unreasonable delays.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo a ardú. I would like to convey the apologies of my colleague, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, who regrets she cannot be here for this matter due to another commitment. On behalf of the Minister, I would like to thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this important matter. As he said, it is very distressing for families to deal with the loss of a loved one without having to deal with something like this too. It certainly does not help with the grieving process for families.

The coroner service comprises a network of coroners located in districts throughout the country. Coroners are independent quasi-judicial office holders whose core function is to investigate sudden and unexplained deaths so that a death certificate can be issued. This is an important public service to the living and in particular to the next of kin and friends of the deceased. Coroners not only provide closure for those who are bereaved, but also perform a wider public service by identifying matters of public health and safety concern. While the Department of Justice does not have a role in directing the work of the coroner and cannot comment on individual cases, it does actively support coroners in carrying out their statutory functions.

The Department is aware of the increased pressure of work being experienced by all coroners due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It has to be said that Dublin is the busiest coronial district and specifically in regard to the situation in the district, the Department has appointed three coroners to the district at the request of the senior Dublin coroner. It is understood that the Dublin coroner and her team are working to facilitate inquests and work through backlogs.

The direction of a post mortem examination, as provided for in legislation, is solely a matter for the coroner concerned and the Minister for Justice has no function in this regard.

The Deputy has described a case where families are being told they are 18th or 19th on a list. It is an issue that needs to be addressed. We need to speed up that process for families. It should happen in a timely manner. The issues raised by the Deputy need to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate that the response outlined by the Minister of State on behalf of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, outlines that three additional staff will be provided to the Coroner Service. That is welcome. It will help to deal with the delay. The response references the pandemic and the impact of it. While we lost many people during that time, this issue only arise this February, March and now into April. We came through the pandemic without those delays, but they are arising now. I believe this is connected to the closure of the mortuary at Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown and the overall pressure on the Coroner Service. I appreciate the Minister would have to investigate those matters, but regardless of that we need to look at what contingencies and provisions are in the service to allow for an increase in demand. Whatever else may happen at the Coroner Service, where I know huge work is done, a delay for families of the order of two to two and half weeks is unacceptable.

I will not delay the House any further. I appreciate the response provided to me by the Minister of State and the commitment that the Government has made to improve the service. I ask that it would continue to address this matter, including the provisions for contingency which I have outlined.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: As stated previously, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has no role in the timing and conduct of post-mortem examinations. The direction of post-mortem examinations is solely a matter for the coroner concerned. However, the Department of Justice has appointed three coroners to the Dublin district to actively support the Coroner Service in carrying out its statutory functions. This should have a positive impact. According to the statutory annual returns, as required under section 55 of the Coroner Act, as amended, there were just over 2,400 post-mortem examinations carried out at the request of the Dublin Coroner's Office in 2021. It is understood that the Dublin District Coroner and her team are currently working to facilitate inquests, to work through the backlogs and, thereby, to provide closure for those bereaved.

I hope this provides some clarity to the Deputy. As I said, it is critically important that we address this issue. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will take on board the concerns raised by the Deputy this evening.

School Enrolments

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, for coming to the House to take this Topical Issue matter on how we will expand our school capacity to accommodate Ukrainian students coming to Ireland.

The suffering and destruction we are witnesses in Ukraine is devastating. I am sure the Minister will share my condemnation of the Russian regime and the horrific war crimes that we are witnessing in the Ukraine at Russia's hands. I welcome all of the Ukrainian people who have come to Ireland and I hope they will feel safe and secure here. As a Government, I am confident that we will do our absolute best to ensure that.

The majority of the people who have come to Ireland from Ukraine thus far are women and children. It is clear that our school system will be under a great deal of pressure to accommodate both existing students and young people coming here from the Ukraine. Within my own constituency, work is ongoing to situate a number of Ukrainian children who are now living in Dublin Mid-West, some with host families and others in hotels. I am also contacted regularly by constituents who are struggling to find a school place in the area for their child, which meets their needs. This capacity issue is particularly apparent in our secondary schools.

I foresee a significant capacity issue in my own constituency in terms of trying to situate existing students and incoming Ukrainian students into what is an already over-subscribed system. I am sure this is not an issue unique to Dublin Mid-West, but rather one that is being replicated across the country in many schools. An issue that some education welfare officers have raised with me and my office is that they do not have visibility on available school places when trying to place a child when he or she has been refused a place in a preferred school. Is there in existence a centralised Department register that could aid in providing that information bridge between Tusla and the Department? The introduction of some sort of register that would provide visibility for education welfare officers would be a really practical measure to upgrade our systems.

We are in an absolutely unforeseen, unique situation. We simply must welcome Ukrainian students while also accommodating existing students. It is possible for us to do that, but I would be lying if I said I was not concerned about how we will manage that. It is a huge challenge. I

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would be grateful if the Minister could outline the work that her Department is undertaking to expand our school capacity to accommodate Ukrainian students who are fleeing war. I would welcome an update on how many Ukrainian students have already been placed in schools here, how many are waiting to be placed and how we will ensure that existing students who are waiting on news of a secondary school place for September will be accommodated. Many parents are contacting me and they are really distressed because their son or daughter is at a particular point on a waiting list. As we all know, it is not until close to the summer that those who have accepted numerous school places will commit to one school placement, thus freeing up places elsewhere. This leads to a huge amount of stress on the part of parents and students. That stress will be added to this year.

Why can we not have a central registration system for second level schools?

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I want to assure the House and the Deputy that meeting the educational needs of children coming to Ireland from the Ukraine is a priority for this Government. I acknowledge the terrific work that is being done on the ground in terms of meeting the needs and the challenges. I have had the opportunity to visit a number of schools throughout the country. I visited Trinity Comprehensive School, Ballymun recently. The welcome, inclusion and effort that is being put in place by school communities is second to none.

The regional teams will be hosted and administratively supported within the ETBs and will lead a network of other key agencies, including Tusla Education Support Service, TESS, National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, regional personnel, National Council for Special Education, NCSE, regional personnel and management body local nominees working together with local schools. All of the key agencies working together in a holistic manner will bring added value and efficiencies to the process of supporting young people and children from the Ukraine.

The teams will initially focus on ensuring that children find school places when they are ready to engage with the school system. The utilisation of capacity within existing schools across the country will be a very important aspect for addressing the need for education provision for Ukrainian children. The Department already has data on potential capacity and under or over subscription at individual schools from its national inventory of school capacity based on schools' annual enrolment returns, and utilises its Geographic Information System, GIS, to facilitate spatial analysis of this and other data. The Department will be engaging further with schools and education partners to supplement this data. Additionally, the Department is currently working to put arrangements in place to share all of this available information on school capacity with the REALT. The spatial analysis facilitated by the Department's GIS supports the production of capacity reports to help the REALT to identify potential local school take-on capacity, based on a given geographical location, such as an accommodation centre. Reports will include data on schools within ranges of travel distances from that identified centre. This facility is expected to be available to the REALT shortly.

TESS will work with all local providers on an ongoing basis to ensure that children and young people are enrolled in school as soon as possible. As part of the process to ensure this, TESS will receive information on families with children of schoolgoing age in different locations. TESS will play a key role in identifying school places through linking with local schools as part of the REALT and in working collaboratively across all Departments and agencies to identify and remove all barriers to school attendance. The education and welfare officer teams

in TESS have been briefed on the co-ordination role of the REALT. The education and welfare service is a key part of the REALT co-ordination response and will be part of the teams.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Minister for her response. I welcome her establishment of the REALT and all the work being done to, as she said, analyse the data and demand. I do not doubt that accommodating so many new students is a considerable challenge but I have no doubt it is a challenge that the Minister and her Department will work hard to overcome.

The capacity issue speaks to the urgent need to push ahead with the school building programme. A number of schools in my constituency have building works at various stages of application and construction. The truth of the matter is they will not be in a position to welcome additional students and to keep classes at a suitable size until and unless these works are carried out. My overarching plea this evening is that we push ahead with all school building projects to ensure school capacity is bolstered as soon as possible to cater to current students and to children and young people arriving from Ukraine.

To my knowledge, schools, including Holy Family Community School in Rathcoole, St. Joseph's College in Lucan and Lucan Community College, are oversubscribed already for September and all of those schools are due to get new buildings. In the meantime, students are having to travel outside the county to places such as Kildare in order to find a school place. I can only imagine that the addition of Ukrainian students, while welcome, is going to increase waiting lists and put further pressure on those schools. We must push ahead with the school building programme. We need to do it at an advanced rate to ensure that we are accommodating all students in buildings that are fit for purpose and that we are creating positive learning environments.

I represent a rapidly growing area with not one but two strategic development zones and yet recently the Department of Education rescinded a site earmarked for a school in our new town of Clonburris, which will accommodate 11,000 people. In the context of the increased demand for school places, demand that is driven by local growth and the influx of Ukrainian children and young people, who we have an absolute moral duty to accommodate, will the Minister commit to reconsidering this decision and to establishing a school in Clonburris?

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be clear that the school building programme continues apace. It is to the credit of all involved that even during lockdown, we managed to continue to do the work that needed to be done. There is no question of the school building programme not progressing as it should, and rightly so.

The primary issue raised by the Deputy related to accommodation being made for Ukrainian students. I reiterate to the House the commitment of the Government to welcoming people fleeing the war in Ukraine and seeking protection here in Ireland. I appreciate that is also the view of the Deputy, as it is the shared view of this House. The Department's primary concern is to ensure that children and young people of schoolgoing age from Ukraine are provided with appropriate educational opportunities in the coming period.

I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to address this matter. The Department already has valuable data, as I have outlined, on the potential capacity of schools and is working to supplement this further through engagement with schools and education partners. The Department's GIS facilitates spatial analysis and reporting capabilities to better interpret and utilise this data. Arrangements for the REALT to have access to this information are currently

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being put in place and this will support those teams in their work to find appropriate school places for Ukrainian children.

To be clear in terms of capacity and demands, going forward, we have a significant building programme in acknowledgement that there will be growth and specific development in particular areas, which demands particular consideration. Some areas have been designated as having growth potential and as areas of high growth as a consequence of our GIS studies and engagement with the local authorities, which are a significant source of information for future planning. All of these points are taken into consideration when areas are designated and earmarked for future development.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.55 p.m. go dtí 9.50 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 6 Aibreán 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.55 p.m. until 9.50 a.m. on Wednesday, 6 April 2022.