



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 26 Aibreán 2022*

*Tuesday, 26 April 2022*

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

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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## **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The days of the mass harvesting of turf are over. This is best underscored by the fact that Bord na Móna has moved from its traditional brown peat business to become a leading and profitable champion of renewables. The Government's proposed outright ban on the sale of turf has caused real distress and frustration for rural communities. The proposal is unfair, unworkable and should not go ahead. The timing of the proposed ban could not be worse, as people are being hammered by the cost-of-living crisis that has seen energy bills go through the roof and that has put enormous pressure on people's pockets. For many families in rural Ireland, turf is their one affordable way of heating their homes. Their only credible alternative is home heating oil, the price of which, as the Taoiseach knows, has doubled in the past year. Yet the Government has sat on its hands on this score. Nothing has been done to reduce these extortionate prices. In fact, the Government's actions will drive these costs higher.

It is therefore not hard to see why people in rural households are so frustrated because the Government is placing them between a rock and a hard place. It will ban the source of fuel on which they depend while, at the same time, refusing to tackle the soaring cost of the alternative. How is that fair? The ban on the sale of turf is a punishment for people who have no alternative way to heat their home. It will be particularly hard on older people and those who are on low incomes living in rural communities.

The Government's ineptitude in its handling of this proposed ban has been nothing short of astonishing. Deputies and Ministers are at sixes and sevens, sowing mass confusion and spreading mixed messages. Over the Easter break, the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister, Deputy Ryan, rode a merry-go-round of contradictions. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, said the ban was going ahead. The Tánaiste then said the ban was being paused. The Minister then responded by saying the ban is not being paused. The Government did not seem to know if it was coming or going. Then, on Sunday last, just to muddy the waters even further, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, said on the radio that the guidelines for the ban are only in draft. All the while,

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Government backbenchers - Deputies from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in rural areas - are falling over themselves to tell their constituents they do not support the proposed ban, with one going so far as to call the whole affair daft. They claim it is all the work of the Green Party and nothing to do with them. Those Deputies will have their golden opportunity this evening to show the people they represent that they are actually serious. They can put a stop to the ban on the sale of turf by voting for the Sinn Féin motion.

Tá an plean atá molta ag an Rialtas chun cosc a chur ar mhón a dhíol míchothram agus do-oibrithe. Ní fhéadfadh an t-am a bheith níos measa, nuair atá oibrithe agus teaghlaigh ag streachailt le billí fuinnimh, atá ag ardú, a íoc. Cuireann an cosc seo pionós ar theaghlaigh thuaithe nach bhfuil aon bhealach eile acu a dtithe a théamh. Ní féidir leis an gcosc seo dul ar aghaidh.

What we need right now is clarity on what exactly has been agreed by Cabinet. Households who rely on turf to heat their homes need certainty as to what they face into. The certainty that the Taoiseach should and must give them is to make absolutely clear that this turf sale ban will go no further. I invite the Taoiseach to give that assurance to those households today.

**The Taoiseach:** In the first instance, in a wide ranging presentation, Deputy McDonald said the Government had been doing nothing on the cost of living. I need to disabuse her of that statement. That is a completely false statement to assert because the Government has worked extremely hard and consistently in easing - not by any means mitigating in total - the cost of living increases that have occurred in recent times. Over €2 billion has now been allocated since the budget to try to alleviate pressure on people, particularly people on the fuel allowance. There has been a 55% increase in the fuel allowance from the previous year. We are now paying out around €1,139 this year, including a €125 lump sum, another €100 that will be paid in the coming weeks and the increases in the budget. That is a fairly dramatic increase in the fuel allowance by this Government in a very short space of time. We have reduced the excise duty on petrol, diesel and green diesel until mid-October, saving motorists between €9 and €12 each time they fill their tank. We have reduced VAT from 13.5% to 9% on gas and electricity bills from the start of May until the end of October, resulting in estimated annual savings of €50 and €70, respectively, for households. This month households are seeing the €200 energy credit appearing on their bills. We will reduce the annual Public Service Obligation, PSO, levy from €58 to zero by October 2022.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** What about home heating oil?

**The Taoiseach:** We reduced the caps for multiple children on school transport fees and have cut public transport fares by 20% until the end of the year.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** What about the turf?

**The Taoiseach:** We will introduce the young adult card next month which will reduce fares for young people under 24 by a further 50%. We lowered the threshold for the drug payment scheme to €80 per month, benefiting over 70,000 families. We brought forward the working family payment increase announced on budget day from 1 June to 1 April.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Turf-----

**The Taoiseach:** We launched a national retrofitting programme with unprecedented grant supports for home energy upgrades and increasing numbers of free energy upgrades for those

at risk of energy poverty. Today the Government approved a proposal for the abolition of in-patient charges for children under 16 from July, to alleviate the financial burden of statutory hospital charges. There is much more in terms of the work we have done for hauliers. The idea that we have done nothing is a falsehood to articulate in this House. There is much more that we have done. On the broader scale, we have engaged in exploratory dialogue with the social partners to deal strategically as a country with the unprecedented increases in energy costs arising from the war on Ukraine and other global issues.

In relation to the turf issue-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Well done.

**The Taoiseach:** -----Deputy McDonald said it herself, in her opening remarks, that a minority now uses turf in our country in respect of their energy needs. It is important that we protect the rights of people in rural Ireland in terms of turbary rights, people utilising turf in their own bogs and traditional practices in turf sharing. They are not being banned at all.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Granny will not go to jail, so.

**The Taoiseach:** There will be no restrictions on people who own their own bogs and use turf in their domestic fire or share it with neighbours. There is no ban on the gifting of peat by those with rights to harvest sod peat.

What Deputy McDonald needs to be very careful of is the fact that the big issue here is the coal industry; that is the big villain of the piece here. Back in the early 1990s, the former Minister Mary Harney introduced a ban on smoky coal that was transformative in terms of air quality in this city and other large cities around the country but I noticed that in her presentation Deputy McDonald did not mention air quality once. It is about time now that people played this fair, down the middle and had a balanced debate on it because unfortunately, there are areas around the country which are above WHO levels in terms of poor air quality and that is not acceptable. We have to take that on board. Ireland was above the European Environmental Agency, EEA, reference levels for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon, a toxic chemical, at four monitoring sites due to the burning of solid fuels.

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

**The Taoiseach:** What I say to Deputy McDonald and to all who have influence in Northern Ireland is that, as Deputy O'Dowd pointed out, there is an amount of smoky coal coming into the Republic with no controls.

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

**The Taoiseach:** This is damaging health here. We need to deal with this too. Smoky coal is the target here, not turf.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Tell that to Eamon Ryan.

**The Taoiseach:** There is responsibility on all sides of the House, including Deputy McDonald-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There is a smoking gun somewhere and you cannot see it.

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**The Taoiseach:** -----to get off the fence in terms of what is necessary-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** It is all her fault now.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Did you not know that?

**The Taoiseach:** -----for the health of people.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** It is all her fault.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will Members please adhere to the time limits? We do not need Fr. Jack interrupting either.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Of course, fair and balanced debate means we have to stick to the fact. The fact is nothing has been done in respect of home heating oil. That is a fact.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Do not attribute falsehoods to me by advancing a falsehood of your own. The cost of home heating oil has more than doubled in the past year and the Government has done nothing to intervene. In fact, its proposed course of action will drive the cost of home heating oil up further.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** To return to the turf ban-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** You are placing a carbon tax on it next week.

**The Taoiseach:** We have offset that. You know that.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach accepts what I have said. He has accepted that the ban as proposed by the Minister, Deputy Ryan, is utterly wrong and utterly unfair and will leave people in rural Ireland, particularly older people and people on lower incomes in a really difficult place. I invite the Taoiseach again to clarify that there will be no ban and that the proposed ban, whether it is the finished item or in draft form, is officially from today ditched and assurance is given to people living in rural Ireland not alone that they can harvest their own turf but that those who do not have turbary rights can access that turf to burn in their grates to heat their homes. That is what we need. We need clarity. The Taoiseach should not talk in riddles. He should tell us that the madcap, half-baked, unfair notion advanced by Eamon Ryan is now officially ditched.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is in the programme for Government.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** If the Taoiseach is not prepared to do that, I remind his backbenchers they will have the opportunity to take their stand this evening by voting in favour of the Sinn Féin motion that proposes the ditching, stopping and halting of this proposed ban in its entirety. That is what we need.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

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

**The Taoiseach:** I do not believe in the abolition of the carbon tax and neither does Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** We never said that.

**The Taoiseach:** It is in the motion. Sinn Féin really engages in endless duplicity on this issue. It calls for the abolition of carbon tax but it factors the revenue from carbon tax into its alternative budgets. It calls for stopping any increase in carbon tax but when we offset-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Will the Taoiseach answer my question?

**The Taoiseach:** -----the impact of that carbon increase, it still plays games. The excise duty on kerosene, which is the main home heating oil, is carbon tax. Be honest about it. Be transparent about it.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** Yes, we know, and you are going to increase it next week.

**The Taoiseach:** You never call it. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald keeps on saying “excise duty”. It is carbon tax on home heating oil.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** And it is going up next week.

**The Taoiseach:** What we decided to do is take offsetting measures-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** You are talking about turf.

**The Taoiseach:** -----to more than compensate for the increase which will not impact on people. The real issue here, which Deputy McDonald has not addressed-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Is turf and you are afraid to answer it.

**The Taoiseach:** No, it is not, actually. It is smoky coal.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is turf.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** You are afraid to answer the question on a ban on turf.

**The Taoiseach:** The bigger issue is, and Deputy Fergus O’Dowd nailed it in November 2021 when he spoke in the Dáil, is that we need a major clampdown on the cross-Border sale of solid fuels and the appalling illegal advertising. Lots of smoky coal is coming into the Republic and it should not. The North should ban it also. The North should deal with it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I asked about turf.

**The Taoiseach:** I have answered Deputy McDonald on turf.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** No, you have not.

**The Taoiseach:** We dealt with it in-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** You were asked about turf.

**The Taoiseach:** Calm down, please. Just calm down. For you this is manna from heaven. It is the great issue again. Let us have hyperbole, exaggeration and so on like that. The reality is-----

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**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** You were asked about turf and you would not answer it.

**The Taoiseach:** I want to clarify the final point

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Try and explain-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** What about Moneypoint and several thousand tonnes of coal a day?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy knows.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Moneypoint.

**The Taoiseach:** All of you know that anything being proposed will have no impact this winter.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** So that makes it all right.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** That makes it fine so.

**The Taoiseach:** No, but you keep on saying this is not the right time. Has it registered with you that it will not impact this winter-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The turf is being cut now.

**The Taoiseach:** -----in any shape or form? It is not being stopped right now.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** He is not answering the question.

**The Taoiseach:** I made the point that in any event, it has been made crystal clear that people who have bogs and who normally cut their turf will be able to continue doing that.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is not what the Taoiseach was asked.

**The Taoiseach:** They will continue to be able to share that with their neighbours.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** He was not asked that.

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

**The Taoiseach:** The traditional practices in rural Ireland will continue regarding turf. The Deputies just need a bit of calm perspective and balance in all of this. We can resolve this pragmatically.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is the Fianna Fáil position. It is good to know.

**The Taoiseach:** The Sinn Féin position is to get on any bandwagon it can to win a few votes. That is its position on a continuing basis.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Taoiseach should tell his party Deputies who are running around the rural communities saying something else.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** There are two sides to every argument.

**The Taoiseach:** Do not sue me now.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are back in the House after a two-week recess and I would have thought people would have come back more restrained-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We did not realise-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** ----and in a position to conduct business a bit more efficiently. I remind Deputies that time is laid out by the House and I do not make up those time restrictions. The Deputies do that. If they do not like them, they should change them, but for as long as the times are laid down, Deputies should please respect the House and those time limits.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** The question many people around the country are asking currently is who is running the country. Is it the Taoiseach's Government or the permanent government? We know the Secretary General of the Department of Health, Robert Watt, is in a rarefied position, not least because his pay grade is above the Taoiseach's. Does that mean he can snub or thumb his nose at attending Oireachtas committees and decline to be held accountable for decisions he takes? The same Secretary General thinks so little of the Oireachtas finance committee that he did not even bother responding to its request for a meeting tomorrow to discuss the botched appointment of Tony Holohan to a position in Trinity College Dublin.

There was a significant €20 million sum associated with this proposed secondment and the finance committee is tasked with investigating State spending so why will the Secretary General and the Minister for Health not appear before that committee? How on Earth does the Taoiseach expect Dáil committees to have any authority in their functions and, for example, convince people in semi-State sectors or the private sector to appear before them if civil servants on very high salaries refuse to do so? Who exactly is calling the shots? It is certainly not the Ministers.

We learned in yesterday's *Irish Examiner* that the Taoiseach's colleague, the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for disabilities, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, cannot even get a meeting with HSE managers in individual community CHO areas around the country. When the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, requested those meetings from the managers of the nine different CHO areas, she was told it was not "operationally feasible". She was contacted not just by individual managers but by the national director of community operations, who essentially told the Minister of State to get back in her box. We know disability services are in crisis and the High Court has ruled very recently that the HSE's current treatment of assessment of needs for children is illegal. The Minister of State cannot get a 40-minute meeting once a month with HSE managers.

Do Ministers in the Government have authority over the Departments they oversee? To her credit, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, was trying to get answers and to the root of what is causing the rot in the disability sector. We know different CHO areas perform differently and there is a variety of reasons for that. Some perform way better than others so it is perfectly legitimate for the Minister of State to seek those individual meetings.

Who is running the country? Is it the Government or the permanent government? Is the Taoiseach happy that senior civil servants are snubbing invitations to Oireachtas committees? What will the Taoiseach do about civil servants refusing to meet his Ministers? Do elections and democracy matter? Who is running this country? What is happening is really frustrating many people.

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**The Taoiseach:** At the end of the day, we have a democracy. Directly elected Members of this House pass legislation and our fundamental and basic laws on an annual and sessional basis. The power lies in this House in terms of legislation and raising issues on a timely basis. With any funding initiatives and so on, the elected Government and the Oireachtas sanction the Estimates of various Departments. Any individual proposals, and so on, have to go through the various procedures that are laid down. There is no escaping that at the end of the day. In respect of Oireachtas committees, my understanding is that the Minister has not refused to attend, and has made this clear in communications with the Chair of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach. The Minister has said that an external review has been commissioned. From my perspective, it would seem logical that we allow the external review to conclude in a matter of weeks, which would then feed into any consideration by any Oireachtas committee. I think a number of Oireachtas committees - certainly two - have indicated an interest in the matter. It is something we need to resolve. I do not believe, as someone articulated yesterday, that the same people should go before three committees; namely, the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach; the Joint Committee on Health; and potentially the Committee of Public Accounts.

Certainly, there are issues here that need to be dealt with and addressed, including from a health research perspective. The secondment of the CMO was a proposal that did not go ahead in the end. As I have said repeatedly, it is regrettable that the entire situation happened in the manner that it did. There was some merit in the idea of building up capacity and pandemic preparedness into the future and learning lessons from our experience over the last two years in relation to the pandemic, which was a once-in-a-century event. As a country, we did relatively well compared to other countries in dealing with the pandemic and the crisis. All the people involved in that, in the public health arena and elsewhere, deserve credit for that. However, there has to be due process and procedure in relation to this issue. In my view, the sensible way to proceed is to allow the external review to conclude. It will not take too long. It is a matter for the House, ultimately. I am not dictating on it. It is then a matter for the committees to proceed with it. I think we might have a more comprehensive, informed position in relation to it if we allow the review to conclude. The Minister has made it clear to me that he has no issue in coming before a committee, but he believes that there is a sequencing that would make sense.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** That was a long three minutes. There was €20 million involved here. It is perfectly legitimate for the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach to interrogate that. The committees are committees of this House, not committees of the Government. If there is an external review, it is an issue for the Government or the Department. As with Sláintecare, for example, an all-party approach is needed. When the head of the HSE and the Secretary General met with the Joint Committee on Health recently in relation to Sláintecare, it was very clear that they do not want to implement Sláintecare in full. The permanent government was making that decision. The permanent government is telling the Committee of Public Accounts that we cannot have a report or discuss the cost of the national children's hospital. We keep being told that lessons are being learned, yet we do not learn lessons. The Minister of State with responsibility for disability services is being refused access to the people who are on the front line on the operational side. The Taoiseach knows, as do I and everyone else in this House, that there is a very significant problem with disability services. It is absolutely improper to refuse the Minister of State access to the staff in order to interrogate the issue and understand what it is going on so it can be resolved.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I want to pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for

her commitment and ongoing work on disability issues. I did not get a chance to deal with that issue in my first three minutes. Indeed, I work with the Minister of State and, in my view, there has to be a review of the progressing disability services programme. I will be meeting with the Minister of State and the CEO of the HSE in relation to that in a while, to deal more comprehensively with disability services. The progressing disability services programme is, advertently or inadvertently, taking some resources from special schools, for example, which I do not think is an acceptable way to go. I have held this view for a long time. To be fair to the HSE, the progressing disability services programme has been progressing for quite a number of years under successive governments. It is important that we evaluate it, but also work to ensure we do not dilute existing resources in existing locations as that policy is being rolled out. That is a particular concern of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. She holds monthly meetings with all nine HSE CHO disability managers in attendance, alongside the HSE headquarters management team. Nonetheless, the Minister of State should always be in a position to meet any team in any location across the country.

In regard to broader matters, it is important to point out that the issue the Deputy relates in terms of secondment was paused.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** There is much backslapping and a bit of lauding going on. I am going to bring the Taoiseach very much back down to earth.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not feel any backslapping yet.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Despite all of the things the Taoiseach has announced, nothing has changed in the sector for carers in home care support. I have stood here many times, complaining of the issue at hand, and that is that our carers are not available to deliver the home care support service. It is not all about the fact we cannot get carers. It is about the system in general. Despite the fact we have the best paid civil servant as the head of the Department of Health and we have three Ministers all appointed in the Taoiseach's time, nothing is changing. In fact, it is getting worse. We have a Minister and two Ministers of State and we have a home care support system that cannot deliver care on a seven-day basis to a person who, up to his accident, was a 74-year-old tax-paying farmer, who was taken home by his wife and family to be cared for at home. He is now paraplegic. I have had Mr. Cummins's name on the floor of the Dáil before. Despite the fact the accident happened and he returned home last October, he still only receives five-day care, one hour in the morning and one in the evening. I cannot get an answer from the head of that department in CHO 5, Helen McDaid. I have sent numerous emails, which are not even acknowledged, never mind addressed, and I cannot get a return phone call despite leaving several messages. Mrs. Cummins has suffered Covid and is not in the same position as she was to deliver her own care for her husband yet we cannot get an answer from CHO 5. I empathise greatly with Deputy Rabbitte not being able to get an answer, and she is the Minister of State.

I believe that, as the Head of Government, it is the Taoiseach's job to address this. Let me read him something that is even more tragic and which was on our local radio this morning. It was a call to the "Morning Mix" on Wexford local radio from Sharon Colgan. Sharon suffers with cerebral palsy and this past weekend she was left alone in a bed that she cannot get out of for 19 hours, with no food, no water and no toileting. She slept and sat in her own urine for seven hours. That is the home care support system that we have. If we cannot do better, we should be ashamed of ourselves.

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I have here the rote letter that the HSE sends back every time:

The home support service operates within the constraints of available staffing resources, which impacts directly on the ability of the service to be delivered in its entirety. There are significant challenges in sourcing home support services at present.

Yes, there are: lazy admin staff. I have spoken to many carers who know what the answer is. We have staff whose clients go into hospital yet they are not put on a rota to look after anybody else. Can the Taoiseach please address this?

**The Taoiseach:** First, I appreciate the issues the Deputy has raised and the individual cases she has raised. It is not satisfactory that any person would have to go through that in regard to access to home care. The issue, as the Deputy knows, is not one of funding now because €150 million of additional funding was provided in 2021 to provide for 5 million more hours of home support, and that funding is being maintained in 2022. That obviously required significantly enhanced recruitment, and it has become a recruitment issue. The total number of people waiting for home support across the system has gone down from 9,000 at the start of 2020 to about 4,500 now, at the end of this month. We want to get that down to zero. That will mean recruitment and reducing and getting rid of barriers to recruitment, and there is work under way on that, as the Deputy knows, in terms of the group that has been established to deal with specific obstacles to recruiting carers, home carers in particular. I will ask the Minister of State to work with the Deputy in respect of those two cases. Across Wexford, the numbers waiting have come down from approximately 700 to 400 and a targeted approach is being adopted.

Very significant initiatives were taken in the last budget around carers. It straddles a number of Departments, including the Department of Social Protection. We have a Minister of State dealing with the area of additional hours and home help hours in particular. Very significant progress was made in securing resources. The biggest challenge we have right now is recruiting people to work in home care capacities. That is the biggest challenge facing us. That is something on which we have to do better, notwithstanding the progress that has been made in respect of external recruitment into the country as well.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** A bad workman blames his tools. The reality is that recruitment is not the only issue. The Taoiseach has been saying that for two years. I have been elected for more than two years and I have been hearing it for two years. The lists are getting longer, despite the fact that-----

**The Taoiseach:** They are not getting longer.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Yes. They are.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** They are not.

**The Taoiseach:** They are not.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Yes. They are getting longer in certain areas.

**The Taoiseach:** They are not.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** The Taoiseach can shake his head all he likes. I have given him just two examples of my constituents. I could give him 102 examples but I only have three minutes. Rather than see the Taoiseach shake his head, I want to see an audit of how administration

is being carried out. Most carers are tasked with delivering 26 hours. Does the Taoiseach know what the average delivery is? It is 19 hours. There are always seven hours going a-begging that nobody seems to take care of. I know this because I have talked to the previous staff. I have had exit interviews with staff who have left the HSE, which the HSE clearly does not even do.

It is about time the Taoiseach stops making excuses and blaming the tools, and starts to look at the real issues. It is not just about recruitment. There are many issues. We need key performance indicators, KPIs, for the staff to whom the Taoiseach has given the highest level of wages in this country. They are the ones who are responsible for seeing that this is working. It is not working but it is in place to keep people in their homes, to keep the taxpayer giving them value for money and to allow people to be cared for in their homes. It only works if it works.

**The Taoiseach:** Some 2.9 million extra hours were delivered last year. That is a KPI. The Deputy can shake her head all she likes but that happened. Some 55,000 people receive home care. Do we want to improve it? Yes. Do we want to do more? Yes. We will do more. Recruitment is a significant issue.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** How many letters went out and were delivered?

**The Taoiseach:** I want to make the point that in addition to that, there were increases in the carer's allowance in terms of the capital disregard and so forth. Many of the initiatives that were made were welcomed by the carers' association and carers' groups at the time of the budget. The bottom line is this-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** The Taoiseach cannot decipher between spin and delivery. Some 9.5 million were sanctioned but none were delivered.

**The Taoiseach:** With all respect, the Deputy had her say. I respectfully suggest that the Deputy cannot decipher either. I accept that there is not a day in the week when someone will not be able to point to a particular case-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Some 19 hours of home care and seven hours lying in her own urine.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but what one cannot do-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Some seven hours lying in her own urine.

**The Taoiseach:** -----using an individual case, is say there has been no increase or reduction, as the Deputy has said.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** It was an announcement.

**The Taoiseach:** There have been reductions. The Deputy has interrupted every second of my response. If she makes points, the least she can do is have the courtesy to hear the response. I have offered her-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I have heard the response for two and a half years.

**The Taoiseach:** -----a meeting-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Two and a half years.

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**The Taoiseach:** -----with the Minister of State in respect of any individual cases-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** The Minister of State cannot get a meeting with the Taoiseach either.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and to deal with those. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has been meeting people up and down the country about this. She has been more into action-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I thought the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was over mental health.

**The Taoiseach:** -----than any Minister for elderly care whom I have seen in recent times. That is not to cast aspersions on anyone who went before the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. She is on top of her brief. She is working extremely hard to deal with this issue. She has secured the additional funding for home help hours. Recruitment is an issue. The Deputy should not try to dismiss that-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I am not dismissing that. The Taoiseach is using it as an excuse.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because we have expanded so much in such a short space of time.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Over the past few months, the Minister for Transport has been making one bizarre announcement after another. The first was that Irish people should grow salad on south-facing windowsills to ensure food supplies during Covid-19. The second was to tell drivers to slow down on the motorway to save fuel. The third was to have one car in the village to which people from rural communities should cycle and use to go to work. The fourth was to stop people from burning turf and he will not arrest grannies if they do so. All these weird announcements are, one way or another, being supported by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is making the country a laughing stock throughout the world. Another damaging announcement made by the Minister for Transport recently was the 20% cut in public transport fares, as well as the proposed 50% cut in fares for students and young people availing of those services. One would say this should be welcome. If it goes ahead, however, it will have a disastrous effect in rural communities, as no local commercial operator can avail of the 20% or 50% reductions. I raised this in the Dáil with the Minister as soon as he announced the 20% decrease in early April, but he still railroaded ahead with it, wiping every private operator off this decrease, leaving many of those with struggling businesses asking if they can survive.

The local commercial or private operators, as we all know, were still reeling from that shock when the Minister announced in the last fortnight that he is railroading ahead with a 50% decrease in fares for students and young people. Again, this is to be welcomed. Again he has nothing put in place for private operators to pass this decrease on to the students mainly in rural Ireland. He said that technical and funding issues were preventing him. This 50% decrease will benefit those who travel on Bus Éireann, the Luas, trains, the DART and Dublin Bus. These are all Dublin city-type transport, which I do not want to begrudge.

There are private operators, such as West Cork Connects which carries 80% of the passengers on west Cork routes, has buses leaving Skibbereen and Bantry every hour on the hour every day passing through Clonakilty and Bandon to Cork on one side and from Dunmanway, Ballineen and Innishannon and to Cork on the other. This service has opened up west Cork. This local commercial operator is employing many staff in west Cork, but it is not allowed to pass on the recent 20% decrease, or the proposed 50% decrease, to west Cork students. This is

not just putting that operator's business in jeopardy, but also that of Wexford Bus, Cobh Connect, Aircoach, GoBus and Citylink. All these operators, and many more, are facing the same wipe out. This is another gaffe by the Taoiseach's Minister.

On top of this direct hit to the young people of rural communities who depend on private operators to connect their communities, can the Taoiseach tell me why his Government wants to wipe out private operators? Unlike Bus Éireann, the Luas, Dublin Bus, the DART and the train, these private operators have to pay their own staff, fuel and daily wear-and-tear on vehicles. Instead of encouraging these operators, in the context of the so-called Connecting Ireland dream, the Government is going to disconnect transport completely in rural Ireland. Why was what should have been such a positive announcement by this anti-rural Government not held off until everyone, rural and urban, could avail of this decrease?

This Government's decision will see private bus companies being forced out of business by State-backed cuts and leave them contemplating taking legal action. Not only is this unfair, but it is anti-competitive as well. Seeing as the Minister for Transport cannot get this right, will the Taoiseach step in and treat everyone in rural and urban Ireland the same when it comes to this decrease in fares for our youth?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising a range of issues. I did not quite catch the first couple. By the way, salads are good for you.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Is it alright for the pig farmers?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not think it is weird to enjoy a salad. I also do not think it is weird to cycle, for that matter. We need a sense of perspective and a bit of calm too.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Michael Collins welcomed, I think, the reduction in transport fares we have announced and now brought in - in the context of the cost of living - for public transport and for young people. It is very important that we reduce public transport fares, and the Minister for Transport can do that readily within the legal frameworks. It is not as easy with the private transport issue. We will continue to look at that to see how we can be supportive. The Government was very supportive of all the transport network during Covid-19 pandemic, for example. Perhaps the Deputy might also like to acknowledge that too. I refer to public and private enterprises, in transport and elsewhere. The Government therefore does not have any position that is anti private transport as suggested by the Deputy.

Also, across a broad swathe of policies, the Government is very pro-rural Ireland. The Government has invested hugely in rural Ireland across the board and we will continue to do so in a whole range of ways. The Brexit adjustment reserve fund, for example, is being worked on by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, along with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath with a view to ensuring significant funding goes to the parts of rural Ireland impacted by Brexit, for example, and by challenges with the fishing industry. We have been very strong in respect of agriculture and rural development. The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, has been very strong regarding community hubs throughout rural Ireland. There have been substantial investments. I refer to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage,

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Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the various funding for towns across rural Ireland in the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, in conjunction with and complementing the work of the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys. If you go through any Department, very significant allocations have been made for rural Ireland. We want to rebalance the economic development of this country. We believe there is an over-concentration and we have to rebalance that into the future. We want to develop strong regional cities like Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway that will then strengthen the rural hinterlands of those cities. Public transport is all over west Cork as well. It does not have the same frequency but it is in most towns in west Cork and is complemented by private transport. School transport is a State-funded scheme but it is predominantly provided by private operators. The Deputy should know that. That is just the way it has always worked in terms of CIÉ outsourcing to private transport operators.

In respect of the specific issue the Deputy raised, the Minister will continue to look to see what he can do to support private operators. We should not stop implementing a good policy in reducing fares for young people in particular. I think it is a very good idea.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank the Taoiseach for his answer but I do not think he quite grasps what the question was all about. He spent about two minutes talking about fishing and farming. Good God, he should come down to west Cork and talk to the fishermen and farmers. He will not be long there; he will be run out of it quickly.

The Taoiseach has to be straight with the public here. Outside of Dublin the local commercial bus operators are the biggest operators in the country, carrying out 30 million passenger trips yearly, mainly in rural Ireland. In a recent meeting with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, the private operators asked straight up why they were not included in the 20% bus decrease for young people on their buses. They were told it was for financial reasons that the Minister could not go ahead with it. To the whole country's astonishment, a few weeks later, he announces a 50% decrease, again excluding young people in rural Ireland. Where did this Minister find the money that he did not have a few weeks earlier? Was it carbon tax money robbed from the hard-working people of rural Ireland? The local commercial operators are convinced this Minister wants to wipe them out of business and basically get rid of them. One of them asked me why he does not just come out and be honest about it and not drip-feed, destroying their business day by day. Can the Taoiseach tell me today that this is not a fact? What is the exact date that local commercial bus operators will be allowed to pass on the same decrease allowed for all Dublin city travellers to students in rural communities?

**The Taoiseach:** Nobody wants to wipe anybody out.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** That is what the Government is doing. What about the post offices?

**The Taoiseach:** The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, does not want to wipe anybody out for that matter or any private transport operator. They will not be wiped out either. The fullness of time will show that. The Deputy was up in this House advocating for measures to reduce the cost of living. In the budget I thought it was a very imaginative and good move to reduce fares on public transport for young people. To me that is an excellent decision.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Is it for all of Ireland?

**The Taoiseach:** We should be doing more of that into the future. It is the way to go.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It should be in the country, not just the capital.

**The Taoiseach:** There is public transport all over the country.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Taoiseach cannot grasp it; we do not have public transport in most rural communities.

**The Taoiseach:** Sorry, there is public transport in rural communities.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Where do we have it? When do we have it? I can name plenty of places in west Cork that do not have it. We have private operators and they are willing to do this but the Government is wiping them out. It is sitting on its hands.

**The Taoiseach:** The private transport operator is very important in rural Ireland but there is also public transport and the Deputy should not pretend there is not. It is not just Dublin, either, and the Deputy knows that too. Rural Ireland has Local Link and a whole range of initiatives that the Minister has supported and put funding into.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Has the Taoiseach travelled to those towns and villages? Can he name them?

**The Taoiseach:** I can because I went on public buses to west Cork.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Can he name all the towns and villages? Has he forgotten Cork?

**The Taoiseach:** I can name all of them - Clonakilty, Bandon and the whole way down. It is for the whole country and the Deputy knows it well.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Was the Taoiseach burning turf in Courtmacsherry?

**The Taoiseach:** I did.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That thankfully concludes Leaders' Questions.

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The report of the Business Committee has been circulated and can be taken as read. In accordance with Standing Order 35, I call on the Government Chief Whip to move this week's Order of Business.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach(Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move: "That the Order of Business be agreed to."

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I want to raise a very serious matter that has been raised by Deputy Catherine Murphy. It concerns the facts that the finance committee wrote to Mr. Robert Watt, Secretary General of the Department of Health, that it has actively sought information pertaining to the proposed secondment of Dr. Tony Holohan to Trinity College Dublin and that it has sought all the information pertaining to the clearance of up to €20 million in public monies associated with that move. It also concerns the facts that the Department has not provided that information, that the Minister and indeed Mr. Watt himself refused to appear before the committee and that the committee has now written for a second time to the Secretary General of the Department of Health.

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have only a minute for each of these questions.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This makes a mockery of the business we do. It is wholly unacceptable that a Minister or senior civil servant not only refuses to co-operate with a committee of this House but also acts to actively frustrate its work. We need a substantive response from the Taoiseach on this matter to make it very clear to his own ministerial team and, perhaps more important, the public administration — senior civil servants, including Mr. Watt himself — that Mr. Watt has no authority or role in frustrating the work of any committee, the committee in this case being the finance committee of this House.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Will the Taoiseach intervene to ensure that the information sought by the finance committee is furnished-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----and that the Minister for Health and Secretary General appear before the finance committee?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Deputies are getting very frustrated over there.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I wrote to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, last week on foot of his request for suggestions on how we should deal with the ongoing housing emergency while at the same time providing the accommodation needed for Ukrainian refugees. I outlined detailed proposals and asked that we discuss the issue this week. We now have a housing emergency on top of a housing emergency; it is a matter of vital urgency. If the Minister is asking for opinions — I have certainly furnished mine — we need to debate them. I understand he has briefed the Cabinet on proposals. Are we going to discuss this matter? I think we can have a win-win whereby we seriously impact upon the housing and homelessness crisis and accommodate Ukrainian refugees, but it will take unprecedented emergency measures. These need to be debated as a matter of urgency in this House. I appeal to the Taoiseach to make time available this week to have that discussion.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** As the Ceann Comhairle knows, I have been asking at the Business Committee for weeks to have a full and comprehensive debate on agriculture, including the pig industry – you name it. The Taoiseach said earlier that he believed we would come back relaxed after Easter. We would be only for the Mutt and Turf Show and the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, talking on every radio station about locking up grannies and anybody who gave a bag of turf to their neighbours. We need a full debate on agriculture and the attack going on in rural Ireland. The Taoiseach seems to think it is doing grand and he acknowledged that he burned turf himself, but we want a debate on this. It is the Government that created this mess. The Tánaiste said banning turf was like taking wine off the people in France, which is kind of a nice catchphrase, and the Taoiseach said he would pour oil on troubled waters. Then we heard some expert on RTÉ the other day saying we were burning wet turf. With a gallon of petrol, you could not burn a sod of wet turf. The Government is on a different planet. We need a debate here on agriculture and all things rural.

**The Taoiseach:** I thought the aromatic flavour of wine was more berry-like and that whis-

key was more peat-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** That is funny. The Taoiseach should talk to his Tánaiste.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach should see whether he will be laughing when he-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach is on the green tea.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputies all need to relax a bit.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach is drinking too much green tea.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Taoiseach is relaxing too much. He should come down to Kerry and see whether they will laugh when they see him coming.

**The Taoiseach:** People will not be stopped from using their own turf. I do not know how many times I have to say it in the House. It disappoints the Deputies-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Will the Taoiseach tell it to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan?

**The Taoiseach:** -----that I say it because they want to believe people will be stopped. It is a great campaign; it is fantastic. Keep running it on, lads. Keep jumping up-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** Let us tell the people of rural Ireland they are being deprived and will have nothing, and that they are being destroyed.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** What does the Taoiseach tell his backbenchers?

**The Taoiseach:** It is a great line. The Deputies have played it over and over and continue to do so because it kind of works for them now and again.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** What about the backbenchers?

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** What about the people?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about the people?

**The Taoiseach:** However, the substance of the issue is this: people who have their own bogs have no issue in terms of using turf. They can share turf with their neighbours. The traditional practices regarding turf will continue. This winter there is no issue at all. All of the arguments have been that now is not the time and it should not happen this winter. It will not happen this winter anyway in terms of timelines. I have to make that point. I apologise to Deputies. I want to have a sense of perspective about this, but some Deputies do not want to entertain that at all. That is fine. They are over the top in terms of their presentation.

In terms of Deputy McDonald's points, I dealt with that in my response. The Minister is not refusing to go before any Oireachtas committee. I have made that point. We need to identify which committee, or whatever the Oireachtas wants to decide regarding that. Ministers are

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clearly aware of their responsibilities in that regard. An external review is under way. That is my view. It is a matter to be resolved. I do not know which committee will deal with it, or if a number of committees will deal with it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Pass the parcel.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is not an answer. That is entirely-----

**The Taoiseach:** The substantive point is the more relevant point on the Order of Business. People raise issues on the Order of Business normally to change the Order of Business in terms of debating time and getting more hours. I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for responding to the Minister's request for submissions on the Ukrainian crisis. We have six hours of debate on legislation this week. If Deputies are agreeable, we could agree to a debate on this issue next week. We should have a substantive debate on it, and I would welcome that.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 70; Níl, 50; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	

Dáil Éireann

<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		

<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Carol Nolan and Michael Healy-Rae.

Question declared carried.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister for Health and the Secretary General of the Department of Health, Mr. Robert Watt, have both refused - refused - to attend the Oireachtas committee on finance. Furthermore, the Secretary General has failed to furnish that committee with documents it has requested; in fact, he has not even given it the courtesy of a response. I have in my hand a copy of the latest letter from the committee to the Secretary General, in which the committee Chair notes the lack of engagement and the apparent unwillingness to discuss and clarify matters of significant public concern. I put it to the Taoiseach earlier and I put it to him again that this is just unacceptable behaviour.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is unacceptable that Government Ministers and-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up now, Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** But I want-----

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I want-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I am sorry. The time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----a substantive answer to this question. Will the Taoiseach ensure-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy. Your minute is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----that Robert Watt, the highest paid civil servant in the land, is-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please, will you co-operate?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----not allowed to frustrate the work of the finance committee? I want confirmation of that from the Taoiseach and confirmation that he will, if necessary, intervene.

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

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy keeps saying the Minister for Health has refused. The Minister for Health this morning said publicly that there is no question but that he will go before a committee.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The finance committee.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** When? Tomorrow?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, including the finance committee.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The invitation is for tomorrow.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputies are interrupting again. The truth is simple. I repeat it for them again. The Minister for Health has said there is no question but that he will go before the finance committee or any other committee that asks him to go before it.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** What about Robert Watt?

**The Taoiseach:** He has helpfully suggested that there is an external review, an external independent review which the Deputy and other Members of this House asked for - it always moves on, of course - and that when that has happened and has been concluded, he believes a better conversation could be had before the committee. That is all.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What about Robert Watt?

**The Taoiseach:** That is all. On the issue of a public servant, I do not like the witch hunt nature of the approach that has been adopted. As far as-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** There is no witch hunt.

**The Taoiseach:** It certainly has that ring about it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** There is no witch hunt.

**The Taoiseach:** That needs to be watched as well.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** There is no witch hunt.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not aware of who has written to Mr. Watt or whether people have written separately, but will I pursue that issue.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The committee should not have to hunt down public representatives.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I have the letter here. I can cross the floor to the Taoiseach and put the letter in his hand.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, we are out of time. Other Members questions will not be reached.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This goes to the heart of how we do our business in the Oireachtas. It is unacceptable that any civil servant, Robert Watt or anyone else-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Can we stop the clock please?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----believes they can frustrate the work of an Oireachtas committee. That is unacceptable.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is completely unacceptable that anybody would try to interfere with the proper workings of the House. It is also unfair and unacceptable that the time criteria

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set out would be frustrated either. All of it is unacceptable.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I think it is of a different scale and order, respectfully.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your point is valid. Nonetheless, let us all lead by example. I call Deputy Bacik.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I raise with the Taoiseach the issue of ongoing concerns about the independence, ownership and governance of the new national maternity hospital in light of recent reports by Jennifer Bray and by Justine McCarthy that the HSE board has approved the legal framework and constitution of the new hospital, yet two members of the board have dissented from that decision due to unresolved concerns. I note Dr. Peter Boylan, who wrote today in *The Irish Times*, has suggested that the term “clinically appropriate” will be used in the national maternity hospital designated activity company document to qualify the obligation to provide all medical treatment to women, including abortion services. Will the Taoiseach give a commitment to bring the final documentation before the Oireachtas and before the Oireachtas Committee on Health before it can be signed off? We need to ensure there is a commitment that all the necessary treatments that women require for our reproductive healthcare will be met in the new national maternity hospital and that there will be no qualifying words which might restrict the availability of necessary medical treatments in the hospital.

**The Taoiseach:** They will be met and they will be provided. All procedures that are legally available in the State will be provided. The memorandum has not yet come to the Government. It will have to come to Government. It will go before the Oireachtas. We need a new maternity hospital.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** That is agreed.

**The Taoiseach:** Well, it is not agreed, because it has gone on for years, and the pace of construction of new hospitals has not been the strongest area, to be straight about it. Many hospitals that have been built have taken an inordinate amount of time to commission and develop, with arguments about them. I remember that Tallaght hospital took an inordinate length of time back in the 1980s or 1990s. There is another side to this story as well. I do not think that women are being well served by the conditions and the quality. I am not speaking of the clinicians but of the current physical surroundings.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up. I call Deputy Cairns.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Taoiseach for confirming the process.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I have called Deputy Cairns.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I hope the Taoiseach is aware that Cork has the worst children’s disability services in the country. Families are not coping seeing their children deteriorate with the lack of services. There are no words for the suffering families are enduring, not to mind the State’s neglect of children with disabilities. Progressing disability services has failed. Children are worse off than they were before reconfiguration. Not only are these children’s rights being denied, their capacity to live full, independent lives is being removed by the State. A key cause of this is lack of accountability. It is disgraceful that children’s disability managers refused to meet the Cork parents’ advocacy network and others. Yesterday, we learned these managers also will not meet the Minister of State with responsibility for disability. Where is the account-

ability? What is the Taoiseach doing in response? In particular, what is he doing to address the disgraceful lack of children's disability services in Cork?

**The Taoiseach:** First, there have been huge advances over time in disability services across the spectrum, in education in particular, compared with how they were. Progressing disability has caused issues in respect of a dilution of services. One of the key areas that need expansion - we have provided the resources - is the provision of therapies. Special needs assistant, SNA, provision, for example, has grown exponentially and dramatically over the years. Resource teaching has grown dramatically over the years. When making an assessment, all that has to be factored in as well. It is the area of therapists and the relationship between progressing disability services and the education services where it is not satisfactory at the moment.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Does the Taoiseach think the management should meet with them?

**The Taoiseach:** I have already said I will be meeting with the CEO of the HSE and with the Minister on this shortly.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yesterday, the Minister for Health announced that IVF will be funded by the public system in 2023. For many couples, of course, that is a very welcome announcement. If it happens, it will mean that Ireland is no longer the only country in the EU without any public funding for IVF. It would mean that access to this fertility treatment will no longer be reserved for those who either have enough money or for those who are willing and able to go into substantial debt.

However, I do not want to hold my breath about it, because we have heard this before from the then Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, in 2016, it is in Sláintecare, it is in the programme for Government, and there has been precious little progress. I am asking the Taoiseach for a guarantee that this will actually happen in 2023 as well as for a timeframe for when that will be within that year. I am also asking for a commitment that sufficient funding will be provided for the public system to ensure it can be done publicly as opposed to being outsourced to private, mostly for-profit, providers.

**The Taoiseach:** To be fair to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, in the area of women's health, he allocated €31 million in the previous budget for new developments to support women's health. There was additional funding for the national maternity strategy into 2022 and beyond, access to contraception for women between 17 and 25, further developments in menopause care by an increase in the number of specialist menopause clinics from one to four, and increased investments in sexual assault treatment units and a range of other developments. Therefore, the Minister has form in showing his commitment by securing funding. He intends to roll out a model of care for infertility that will see the introduction of advanced assisted human reproduction treatments, including IVF, in the public health system. The Minister plans to commence this in 2023. That is his commitment.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** The Taoiseach is aware that the next round of national wage negotiations are likely to get under way shortly. He is also aware that the Commission on the Defence Forces recently recommended that both PDFORRA and RACO should be permitted to associate with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, should they wish to do so. I note PDFORRA has been calling for this for years. Last week, RACO balloted its members, 85% of whom indicated this is something they wish to pursue. Will the Government allow PDFORRA and RACO to associate with ICTU before the next round of pay talks? If so, when are we likely

to get that permission?

**The Taoiseach:** That matter will be considered by the Minister and subsequently overall by the Government. We also need to think it through as to what is in the best interests of the Defence Forces in terms of pay and conditions. The commission has finished its work. In keeping with the commitment in the programme for Government, the Minister for Defence will now consult the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body. I would like to discuss further with Deputy Berry the best way that would be optimal for the rank and file in our Defence Forces. Just joining may not necessarily result in that in the short term. We need to look at that base and so on and make sure we can create a better situation for overall pay and conditions for the Defence Forces.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Taoiseach and all Members know the past two years have been a torrid time for both young and old. It has been particularly torrid time for children with additional needs. I am asking the Taoiseach about St. Rita's in Clonmel, which is a respite centre for the holiday period. There are people in Tipperary and many other areas of the south east who need certainty as to whether they will have a place to go to during the summer to get care. These centres do fabulous work and provide fabulous supports for these children and their families. I am interested in St. Rita's in Clonmel in particular.

**The Taoiseach:** I will get back to the Deputy on that. I will talk to the HSE-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** They need certainty.

**The Taoiseach:** I know and I will see if I can get further information for the Deputy on it.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I would like to return to the issue of the National Maternity Hospital. The Taoiseach's earlier response was that a memo has not gone to Cabinet yet. He said that when it does, it will then go to the committee or the Dáil. I would like the Taoiseach to be very clear to me now. When it goes to the committee or the Dáil, will the decision have been made by Cabinet?

In his reply, the Taoiseach talked about the delay. All of the women in this House, as well as male Deputies, are unhappy with the delay but it was not caused by debate or questions raised in the Dáil which actually led to a better outcome in terms of clarifying matters on foot of what was raised with us by concerned doctors. The Taoiseach went on about delays but where are we at with this? Is it a foregone conclusion now, notwithstanding our concerns, three motions passed unanimously by the Dáil and the concerns of the two female dissenters on the board? Most specifically, is it open to change when it comes before the Dáil?

**The Taoiseach:** The board has made a decision. That is my understanding. When a board meets, there can be people with different perspectives but when a board decides, a board decides. That is how boards work.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** That was not my question.

**The Taoiseach:** I know but a new phenomenon is developing-----

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** That was not my question.

**The Taoiseach:** -----now, with the idea of dissenting members of boards. There can be people with different----

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The Taoiseach only has one minute to answer.

**The Taoiseach:** I know. I am making a point and challenging some of the assertions. People can have different views but when a board decides, it decides, by a majority or whatever-----

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I asked a specific question.

**The Taoiseach:** I will answer the specific question.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Good.

**The Taoiseach:** Government is elected to make decisions. The Government will take a decision and it will be brought before the House.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** As the Taoiseach knows, from 1 May, the south east will have a technological university with five campuses, 20,000 students and 6,000 graduates per year. This is absolutely excellent and will be a game changer for Carlow. We have two excellent colleges at Carlow IT. I compliment the Taoiseach and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris for their work on this.

I have a question about the integration of Carlow College, St. Patrick's into the Higher Education Authority, HEA. What is the timescale and the plans in that regard? This is a fabulous building and a fabulous college but there is an urgency with regard to its integration into the technological university, which is of the utmost importance.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue but obviously these changes do not happen overnight. I am very familiar with Carlow College, St. Patrick's, which is an excellent facility. In my view it would serve the public interest well if it was incorporated into the South East Technological University. History shows that any facilities and land we acquire for educational purposes will be well used into the future, in terms of expansion and so forth. I know that the Minister is very committed to this and will work towards that end.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence rates have seen a significant increase in recent years, particularly, and regrettably, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government is due to publish the third iteration of national policy developed by the Department of Justice shortly. Is the Taoiseach aware of the New Zealand Government's approach to supporting victims of domestic violence by the introduction of domestic violence leave? Would the Government consider the introduction of such a provision here and would it be supported by the Department of Social Protection?

**The Taoiseach:** I think it has already been announced that it is the intention of the Government to work in terms of domestic violence leave. That is something we are committed to doing but I will get further details on that for Deputy Farrell.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The HSE has just informed me that it does not know how many GPs in any county, or State-wide, are accepting new medical card patients because it does not collect that data. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have been unable to find a GP in Mayo to take them on. These constituents were only assigned a GP after they contacted the HSE themselves. This comes on the back of the HSE being unable to tell me how many dentists were taking on new medical card patients. Staff in my office called every dentist in the county and discovered that Mayo has no dentist taking on new medical card patients. It was only then that the HSE confirmed that this was a fact. This is a problem that needs to be

addressed. We cannot hope to fix the problems that we are not even measuring. The lack of access to GPs and out-of-hours GP services in rural areas is getting worse by the week and the knock-on effect this is having on Mayo University Hospital and other acute hospitals is extremely worrying and is costing lives.

**The Taoiseach:** There are two elements. First, the Government is funding out-of-hours services comprehensively and has been doing so for quite a long time now. That was introduced to ease pressure on GPs generally in terms of weekend cover, rostering and so forth. Increasingly, however, there are issues in rural Ireland with access to GP care and the recruitment of GPs to serve. That is an ongoing challenge.

Second, in relation to dentists, there are ongoing negotiations with the association representing dentists in terms of the State sourcing and contracting services. The State has to get value for money for that and an additional €10 million was allocated in the budget to deal with that. It is my understanding that the negotiations are coming to a conclusion but there are discussions to be had. I will get information on the up-to-date position for the Deputy.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I welcome the announcement by the Minister for Health on the State funding of IVF by 2023 but as the Taoiseach will appreciate, this is not just a matter of putting some money forward. There needs to be an overall and complete package for those undertaking IVF. What preparatory work has begun to ensure that both parents will be eligible for leave, including sick leave, during this period, that eligibility will be inclusive of all of society and that the process will be open and accessible to all very quickly? The uncertainty is already playing on the hearts and minds of so many people around the country.

**The Taoiseach:** Obviously the Minister will have proposals in the forthcoming Estimates for the budget. Phase one of the roll-out of the model of care has involved the establishment at secondary care level of regional fertility hubs within maternity networks in order to facilitate the management of a significant proportion of people presenting with infertility issues at this level of intervention. Phase two of the roll-out will see the introduction of tertiary infertility services including IVF in the public health system planned for 2023, at such time as infertility services at secondary level have been developed across the country. The key legislation, the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Bill, passed Second Stage on 23 March and has been referred to the Oireachtas Select Committee on Health for Committee Stage. It is important that we get that Bill through to create the legislative base for this.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** Unfortunately University Hospital Limerick is making headlines for all the wrong reasons. Last week a national record for the number of people on trolleys was set in the hospital. There has been a very significant amount of investment in the hospital but it does not seem to have reaped the dividends one would expect. Numerous front-line staff have contacted me. They are working in intolerable conditions and are extremely worried about the treatment patients are receiving and the standards pertaining in the hospital due to the severe overcrowding.

The Government must order a full review of managerial practices at University Hospital Limerick. Where is the accountability for these ongoing issues? How many senior management positions are there at the hospital? There is growing concern regarding the filling of senior management positions and a belief that the people who have taken up posts in the recent past in the hospital are not meeting the required standard for senior positions in the HSE. The hospital is under extreme pressure and people in the area are seriously concerned and worried. I would

like to see a full review into what is happening at University Hospital Limerick.

**The Taoiseach:** I appreciate the issues the Deputy has raised. There has been significant investment in University Hospital Limerick but there are very significant issues there. It is my belief and the Government's view that we must look at further increasing bed capacity there in the short to medium term. I will talk to the HSE about the points Deputy Cahill has made about governance.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** On the same issue and as Deputy Cahill has said, University Hospital Limerick is consistently the most overcrowded hospital in the State. I raised this issue with the Taoiseach recently. Incredibly, 113 people are on trolleys today. This means there are no beds and, unfortunately, not enough trolleys for people. Yesterday 105 people were on trolleys and last Thursday there was an historic high of 126 people on trolleys. There is no let-up in this. The Taoiseach will not intervene but something needs to be done. We cannot wait for the planned 96-bed unit, which is to be delivered in three years' time if we are lucky. It will only deliver 48 beds because 48 will be taken out as well. What will the Taoiseach do? The nurses are calling for an independent HIQA inquiry. Will the Taoiseach support this? It should be done as a matter of urgency. The people and the staff deserve something better.

**The Taoiseach:** We need to act to see what we can do in the short and medium term to improve bed capacity. We can do all of the audits and inquiries from here on in but that will not necessarily improve the situation.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** You have been Taoiseach for a year-----

**The Taoiseach:** I am not going to step in and run every hospital.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** You are ignoring the hospital in Limerick.

**The Taoiseach:** My point is this-----

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** You have done since you were elected.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please let the Taoiseach answer.

**The Taoiseach:** I believe we need additional bed capacity in the mid-west. We were able to move very quickly in some areas because the hospitals came forward with good proposals. For example, in Clonmel-----

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** So you have no interest in Limerick.

**The Taoiseach:** -----through Deputy Cahill we got something done relatively quickly on bed capacity. There has been a fair degree of investment in University Hospital Limerick-----

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** And it has worsened.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and there are issues there that we need to address.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** That is why we need an immediate investigation into why it is not working.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are out of time.

**The Taoiseach:** We can investigate ourselves to the end of the world.

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**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are out of time. If the remaining three Deputies pose their questions in 30 seconds, we will then go to the Taoiseach.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The ongoing saga of the temporary replacement for the Dursey Island cable car rolls on, with the announcement last week that the long-awaited replacement ferry service will start this week but can be funded for only three weeks. Many politicians have welcomed this but I am furious. The people of the Beara Peninsula and residents of Dursey Island as well as landowners and visitors are left with only a three-day-a-week service. I have raised this issue on numerous occasions. My colleagues have followed me in doing so. Will the Taoiseach go to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and look for a properly funded seven-day service for the people of the Beara Peninsula and Dursey Island? It is only fair.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** One in 12 children is now on some form of hospital waiting list. More than 100,000 children are on some form of National Treatment Purchase Fund list. One in three children has been waiting longer than a year for treatment or assessment by a hospital consultant. Over the Easter period, the Irish Hospital Consultants Association issued a press release on these figures. It states children will suffer from health and developmental issues that could have been reversed or mitigated if only they had been seen in time. What does this say about the State and the public health service?

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** Last week the Government confirmed its plans to fund IVF fertility treatment for public patients from 2023. This is welcome and fantastic news because at present Ireland is the only country in the EU not providing state funding towards IVF. Unfortunately, the statistics show that one in every six couples will struggle to conceive. IVF costs €4,000 to €6,000 per cycle. This is a huge expense that is out of reach for many young couples. Will the Taoiseach outline the Government's plans to ensure middle income earners as well as those on medical cards will get funding for IVF?

**The Taoiseach:** With regard to the cable car I will again speak to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. At least it is a start. I would like a whole new service there. I would like a whole new ferry. I am determined to do this. I believe it is being judicially reviewed at present as there is some objection to what I believe are good proposals to provide a proper modern cable car facility. There are great opportunities there. It should be developed in the fullness of time. This is my view.

With regard to the waiting lists for children, there is an overarching waiting list plan by the Minister. Covid-19 had a huge impact on waiting lists. It exacerbated what were already significant delays. Let us not underestimate the impact of Covid-19 on waiting lists. Significant investment has been put in place to deal with that.

I would like to return to a question raised by Deputy Michael Collins earlier. It is only fair to the House to say there is a process of negotiation and discussion under way with private bus operators. When I was discussing it with the Deputy, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, helpfully said he had already met them six weeks ago. He was seeing what way he could do something for them with regard to application of the youth card reduction. There is further engagement on that front.

This will be the third time I will answer on the issue Deputy Higgins raised. This is illustrative of the broad views across the House in respect of IVF and the need to provide support and funding for it. I dealt with it in the previous two replies. The Minister will have a more

comprehensive account of it as well.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence has completed its consideration of the Defence Forces (Evidence) Bill 2019 and has made amendments thereto.

### **Personal Protective Equipment (Covid 19) Bill 2022: First Stage**

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 to ensure employers provide employees with FFP-2 grade masks, or higher, where necessary during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular to education workers and healthcare workers, and to provide for a review of this provision within 3 months of enactment.

The Bill proposes that employers, and in the case of public sector employees the State, will have to provide appropriate personal protective equipment, in particular N95 or FFP2 or higher-quality masks, for everybody to protect them when they are at work. This is a vital issue because we know that Covid is an airborne disease. We know that, unfortunately, it is still with us and that new and even more deadly variants can emerge. If we are to successfully “live with Covid”, we have to take extremely seriously issues such as ventilation and mask wearing.

This is a public health issue. It is a workers’ rights issue. The very least that can be done is to say that workers are entitled to get masks to protect them in their places of work. It is ironic that we walk into the Dáil and on the right-hand side there is a table with high-quality FFP2 masks. These masks give us all significantly higher levels of protection than either the cloth or surgical masks that many people wear. They multiply the level of protection that people have. It is not okay that we as Deputies and Senators in our place of work get these to protect us and teachers, shop workers or transport workers do not get them. There are all sorts of workers who have face-to-face interaction with the public all of the time. To be clear I am not saying that Deputies should not get them. I think it is great that Deputies get them and everybody who works in the Oireachtas should be able to avail of them. The point is that they should be made available to all workers. This is about taking seriously the issues of ventilation, worker safety and public health.

It is a very simple measure. It would have very limited costs for employers and the State but it would make a big difference in terms of the safety of workers in their workplaces. It would also make a significant difference over time to the spread of Covid and the impact that the spread of Covid has had, most horrifically in terms of the deaths that continue to occur from Covid-19 and absences from work, the massive disruption in people’s lives and the massive extra caring burden placed on people, primarily women. It would impact all of these things. When the Government moved to undo the requirement for mask wearing it made a point of stating it would get rid of the requirement but that the strong public health advice and the advice from the Government would be that we need to have mask wearing everywhere. This has not

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been the case in reality. The Government has not followed through with this advice. We rarely nowadays see advertisements encouraging people to wear masks. The Government should take seriously its own rhetoric. It should strongly encourage people to wear proper masks that give people the best protection they can, as well as investing in ventilation and filtration. The Government should match that by saying it will provide quality masks for ordinary people for free so they have a choice and can avail of masks to provide the best protection for themselves and those with whom they come into contact.

I thank the people in my office who worked on this Bill.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Bill is a Private Members' Bill and Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Impaired Farm Credit Bill 2022: First Stage**

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for a *sui generis* Debt Management Protocol for the farming sector— A. to provide for the disaggregation of lands charged with repayment of farm debt into two parcels, the "Farmlands" and the "Farmhouse", B. that debt secured on the parcel designated as the farmhouse be governed by the legislation, general law, and regulatory codes of conduct pertaining to a debtor's principal place of residence, and to take account of the special position of any co-owner thereof, C. for the role and regulation of receivers as credit servicers and as agent of the debtor, D. that possession and sale of the farmlands by the secured creditor be deferred until after a moratorium affording the debtor space and time to engage in preparation of a proposal of a "Farm Debt Settlement Arrangement", E. further provisions relevant to early discharge of farm debt, following the approach of Directive (EU) 2019/1023, F. that the said measures be modelled on the company examinership provisions in the Companies (Amendment) Act, 1990, as to a moratorium and otherwise, but also reflect the provisions in the Personal Insolvency Acts, 2012 to 2015, regarding the Court's discretion to enforce on creditors a Farm Debt Settlement Arrangement proposal which modifies the terms of the secured loan but also satisfies section 71(1)(d)(i) and section 115(A)(9)(e) and (f) of the said Acts as to fairness for each class of creditors, and allows the farmer a fresh start for a farm with ongoing viability, G. for measures to open access to cross border liquidity for second mortgages at sustainable cost, and H. for the option of returning overindebted lands to State ownership in the interests of the patrimony, food security and the climate change agenda.

This innovative Bill aims to protect the family farm from vulture funds and provide for the availability of low-interest credit to Irish family farmers who have for far too long been

treated despicably by our pillar banks. The Bill is sponsored by my Rural Independent Group colleagues, some of whom are here with me. It has been carefully drafted on our behalf by the former Master of the High Court, Mr. Edmund Honohan. I really cannot thank him enough for that.

For too long the Government has facilitated vulture funds and banks to seize and sell family farms in Ireland. This Bill would create a policy platform to tip the scales back in favour of landowners and farmers, and it is all about protecting the small man or woman against predatory financial institutions. It is sad we must have this Bill but it is vital and necessary in 2022, in the middle of our decade of centenaries.

The agrifood sector and the role of farmers in the Irish economy are critical, generating gross added value equating to €14.4 billion per year. Furthermore, the sector employs one in every ten workers in this State. Farmers are under attack from all quarters. First, the Government is targeting deep cuts at a farmers' ability to earn a living with climate action reductions and an inadequate new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, programme. We have now seen how the one we have will not even be accepted by the bureaucrats in Europe. Second, banks and vulture funds continue to seize and sell farms all over the country, with Government policy stacked in favour of those institutions. We have observed first-hand the destruction and crippling impact these forfeitures and seizures have caused to families in rural communities. It has brought devastation. That is why we have brought forward this imaginative new Bill today.

As I have said, this Bill would not have been possible without the exceptional and invaluable voluntary contribution of the former Master of the High Court, Mr. Edmund Honohan, his staff and loyal supporters, who are in the Gallery today. He intended to be here but has been held up in traffic. Mr. Honohan's first-hand knowledge of the difficulties faced by farm families and his exceptional legal expertise have been instrumental in the publication of this Bill. On behalf of countless families that have spoken to me, my colleagues in the Rural Independent Group and, I am sure, many other Teachtaí Dála, I note the fairness, the protection and the humane way in which he treated the people who arrived in the courts system before him. They are grateful to him for his stewardship, courage and dignified treatment of people. It is what we all expect from the institutions of the State.

My colleagues and I in the Rural Independent Group are very pleased to introduce this Bill today. Later today in the audiovisual room, our group will be pleased to have Mr. Honohan and his colleagues to address matters in this Bill and answer questions for any Deputies or Senators. We would like to see as many people as possible coming and getting their teeth around the issues in this Bill. If there are questions, they can be explored also. The session will be in the audiovisual room and addressed by Mr. Honohan, and all Deputies are invited to attend.

Following from today, we sincerely hope all Deputies will join us and fully support the Bill and the farm families it seeks to assist. There are many such families. We all have them in our constituencies. We have all had occasions where we have tried to help and found the tide too strong in favour of the institutions, whether they were banks, vulture funds or whatever. Much legislation has been introduced, including the hearsay legislation, that has opened the floodgates for the vulture fund carry-on.

Without substantial local agriculture in local ownership, such as family farms or otherwise, our towns will be blighted and rural Ireland will continue to decline. For too long the pillar banks have woefully and wilfully used and abused the farming sector in this country. Our Bill

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would pave the way for a new State-run institution to extend low-interest credit to all farm enterprises in a specialised manner. It would be a major shift in allowing access to capital for rural Ireland, boosting an entire rural economy and providing regional development in the process. This is badly needed, especially after Brexit, Covid-19 and everything else, as well as the current pressure from the price of oil. I hope the Government can see its way to accepting the Bill at this Stage and we can get cross-party support for it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Bill is a Private Members' Bill and Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I move "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

#### **Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Office of the Ombudsman) Regulations 2022: Motion**

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Office of the Ombudsman) Regulations 2022,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 11th March, 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna - Questions**

#### **North-South Implementation Bodies**

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Shared Island dialogue all-island women's forum civic initiative. [13967/22]

2. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [14205/22]

3. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [14208/22]

4. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Shared Island dialogue

on sport. [16697/22]

5. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [17877/22]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [17986/22]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [17989/22]

8. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the latest Shared Island dialogue initiatives. [18040/22]

9. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Shared Island unit of his Department. [18297/22]

10. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach the details of the recently published National Economic and Social Council report, Shared Island: Shared Opportunity. [20364/22]

11. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the National Economic and Social Council comprehensive report on Shared Island: Shared Opportunity. [21062/22]

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of his Department's Shared Island initiative. [21125/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 12, inclusive, together.

Through the Government's Shared Island initiative, we are engaging with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future and to deliver tangible benefits for the whole island, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. The Shared Island dialogue series is a key part of our approach, bringing together more than 1,300 civic leaders so far from across all communities, traditions and regions to discuss how we can work for a shared future on this island in practical and meaningful ways.

Nine Shared Island dialogues have been convened to date, including on tourism and sport this year. Most recently, a dialogue was convened on 24 February by the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Jack Chambers, at the Sport Ireland campus. This brought together over 120 stakeholders to discuss the role that sport plays in building trust and understanding across communities, and how we can enhance sports co-operation on the island.

Dialogues will be held throughout this year, now on an in-person and regional basis, focusing both on sectoral issues and wider societal concerns for the whole island. The next dialogue will be convened by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, on "enabling rural and community development on a shared island" on 20 May in Monaghan.

I have participated recently in a number of civil society-led dialogues on Shared Island themes, including at the John and Pat Hume Foundation in Derry and at an event with Queen's University. Last Thursday, I spoke at the launch of a new Shared Island conversation series of the Think-tank for Action on Social Change, TASC, that will focus on "building inclusive prosperity based on social and economic equality". I also look forward to meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement this Thursday

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to discuss the Government's Shared Island initiative.

The initiative is also leading to exciting new civil society projects, including the All-Island Women's Forum, bringing women together from across the island to further develop women's role in peacebuilding and civil society and to address under-representation of women. The President addressed the first in-person meeting of the forum in Enniskillen in February and I look forward to engaging with its work as it develops over this year.

On 12 April, I participated in the launch event in Dublin Castle for a major report to the Government by the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, on Shared Island: Shared Opportunity. Following broad-based consultation across the island over the past year, NESC has made a series of recommendations on how we can deepen beneficial co-operation across the island in economic, social and environmental terms. It found very significant support in practice for all-island approaches to key challenges. The council's recommendations will be positively considered by Government Departments and we will consult and seek to take forward agreed recommendations with our partners in the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government. Finally, the Government is continuing to work to deliver beneficial North-South co-operation and investment as a key part of our Shared Island initiative, including, most recently, on 2 March, when I and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced over €37 million in awards to 62 projects by the Higher Education Authority, under the Government's major North-South research programme, resourced through the Shared Island fund. On 1 April, in a meeting with the North West Regional Development Group in Derry, I announced a new €5 million shared island development funding scheme, open to local authorities across the island. This scheme will support the development of a pipeline of new projects by cross-Border local authority partnerships to deliver on agreed regional development goals and the Shared Island dimension of the national development plan, NDP. The Government will also continue to engage with the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government to seek to take forward collaborative investments, implementing our goal under the revised NDP to invest for a more connected, sustainable and prosperous island for all.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Northern Assembly recently passed legislation providing for statutory entitlement to at least ten days' paid leave for victims of domestic abuse. Similar protection is urgently needed here. We know that some organisations in the public and private sectors already provide domestic violence paid leave for their employees. This entitlement is usually supplemented with training for managers to ensure victims can secure the workplace support they need. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, undertook to include domestic violence paid leave in the forthcoming work-life balance Bill, but the draft heads of this legislation, as published last week, make no reference whatsoever to this promised workplace protection. Deputy O'Reilly and I published robust legislation in 2020 providing for ten days of paid leave for victims of domestic abuse. The legislation was drafted in consultation with the sector. It has been endorsed very widely by unions and the sector. We have had very wide engagement on the issue. There is wide support for the provisions of the Bill. It is broadly agreed that the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 is the legislation within which the protections should be placed. Our legislation received cross-party support during recent committee scrutiny of the Bill, yet at Government level, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and the Tánaiste have refused to engage on this proposal. Does the Taoiseach agree that there is an urgent need for a statutory entitlement to paid leave for victims of domestic violence? If that is the case, I ask him to support our legislation, which, incidentally, is before the committee again today.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I thank the Taoiseach for that comprehensive report. I acknowl-

edge the work undertaken to date under the Shared Island initiative, including the Shared Island dialogue. It seems that the task of building a consensus around a shared future is ongoing, and that the work is increasing in pace. I note that the Taoiseach will be launching another report from the ESRI on Thursday on the education and training systems on both sides of the Border. This follows a previous ESRI report on the primary care systems North and South. In addition, a new series of dialogues is under way on the theme of building inclusive prosperity. There is a lot happening. In passing, I also wish to compliment the John and Pat Hume Foundation for the role it is playing in building common ground on the island of Ireland, in Northern Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

At a recent think tank on the Shared Island initiative organised by TASC, to which the Taoiseach referred, the Taoiseach expressed concern about the functioning of the Stormont Assembly and the North-South Ministerial Council ahead of the Assembly elections next month. Does the Taoiseach agree that the Irish and British Governments will need to be ready to intervene, in a proactive way if necessary, to get the Northern Ireland institutions up and running as soon as possible following the elections, and to generally encourage the full implementation of all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement?

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. I had the opportunity to listen to some of the discussions in the Shared Island dialogue on the provision of health services on this island. There was a great outline in those discussions of the opportunities to provide more health services on a cross-Border and all-Ireland basis. Indeed, in those discussions there was impatience with the slow pace of progress in this area. I recognise the importance of the establishment of paediatric cardiac care in Crumlin and also the great progress with cancer care in Altnagelvin for the north west of our country. We have some co-operation in the central Border area through the 1992 scheme of co-operation and working together that is being funded by the EU and the Irish and British Governments. However, we need a greater delivery of acute hospital services on a cross-Border basis. I am thinking of right across the Border area. South-West Hospital in Enniskillen should be co-operating with Sligo, Cavan and Monaghan hospitals. In the north east, Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry should be co-operating with Drogheda and Dundalk hospitals. I think there is great potential there to bring additional health capacity to the Border region. It would help to complement existing services and bring about greater efficiencies. In that context, we need better access to accident and emergency care on a cross-Border basis. I think the Shared Island initiative can considerably enhance additional health capacity throughout the Border region that will benefit communities on both sides of the Border in a better delivery of services and easier access for communities.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I note the importance of the Shared Island dialogue. Indeed, we recognise the merits of this initiative. I note, as the Taoiseach said, that an important all-Ireland women's forum was held under the auspices of the National Women's Council in March, aiming to address the under-representation of women in politics on the island. I should say as Chair of the Joint Committee on Gender Equality that the committee will be addressing this issue when we seek to ensure the implementation of the 45 important recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly. I note the Taoiseach also spoke last week at the TASC Shared Island dialogue focusing on social and economic activity. I ask whether the Taoiseach has considered a dedicated dialogue with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and other unions in respect of the trade union movement specifically, which, as we know, operates on an all-island basis. Indeed, it has played a critical role in our history and draws support from all communities on this island. It is a century now since the Labour Party and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions called a general

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strike as Ireland was on the brink of Civil War. We believe in an agreed united island, founded on fairness, equality and solidarity for all people on the island. We want to see a process involving citizens' assemblies, approved by both the Oireachtas and the Assembly in Stormont, as a means of exploring how a united Ireland can be achieved on a truly consensual basis and by agreement across the island. I ask whether the Taoiseach agrees with that proposal, and with the concept of dialogue specifically dedicated to discussions with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and other unions.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** On the Deputy's last point, a general strike across the country to address the cost of living crisis would be a good idea at the moment, and would be a good example of unity on a Shared Island basis, but that is not the point I wanted to make.

The Taoiseach referred to the role of women on an all-island basis. Notwithstanding the Government's commitments on the new national maternity hospital, which we are very sceptical about, I wonder whether all procedures that should be available to women, and are legally available to women, will actually be provided, given the influence of the Sisters of Charity on the St. Vincent's Hospital Group and their ownership of the site. What sort of signal does it send to the North, to women and to the idea of diversity and inclusivity on an all-island basis, when we are trying to overcome decades of sectarian division, the idea of sectarianism itself and the domination of State institutions of services like health and education, that the new national maternity hospital will be on a site owned by a private religious charity? Does that not just completely undermine any credibility we might have as being serious about a different type of Ireland that breaks from the past and will be attractive to people from all political traditions, about bringing about unity in this country and about bringing genuine co-operation, on an all-island basis, to critical things like women's healthcare?

*4 o'clock*

Indeed, there is the wider fact that the majority of our schools and much of our health service continues to be in the hands of private religious organisations dominated by one particular religious viewpoint. Is that not problematic? Does the Taoiseach not think we have to do something about that and to separate church and state in all areas, particularly women's healthcare, if we are to be taken seriously in terms of uniting this country on an all-island basis?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I spent much of the last week campaigning for People Before Profit candidates in the Assembly elections. The issue on the doors everywhere, just like in the South, was the cost of living and rising energy costs in particular. People are being hit extremely hard. As a glimpse of the kind of elections we may have if this crisis continues, people were absolutely furious with the big parties for doing nothing to protect them from energy costs, when they can see and there was widespread awareness that the big energy companies were pocketing massive, historic profits.

Our proposal for a £1,000 credit for households affected by the crisis was warmly welcomed by people. It has the benefit that whereas tax cuts will disproportionately benefit high energy users, who are disproportionately people with higher incomes, a flat £1,000 credit for households would be a progressive measure and those on low incomes would gain the most. The question is whether the Government has considered such a measure - a €1,000 household credit measure - to protect people in the South, something that would be a real action that would insulate people from soaring energy and other costs.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The shared island unit dialogue certainly needs to be expanded to deal with the constitutional issue but the unit needs to attempt to deal with cross-Border issues. A particular issue at the minute is hybrid remote working. The example I give is people living in the North and working in the South who were remote working, many of whom have been told they now need to be at work five days a week. There is obviously a tax registration onus for employers. This is something we definitely need to deal with. Tech companies are making advertisements stating that to apply for a job, people need to be resident in the South. This is not particularly acceptable and it is something we need to come up with a sensible solution to.

We have two other threats at the minute, the Nationality and Borders Bill and the possibility of a hard border for non-Irish and non-British people on the island of Ireland, which is obviously not good enough. We also have the legislative threat to the Irish protocol. This cannot happen. On a further issue that we need to deal with, a constituent told me about Ukrainians who are staying with them for temporary protection and they need a biometric visa to go to the North which costs about €100. We need a sensible solution to that.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** In the midst of elections in Northern Ireland and the backdrop of continuing chaos at Westminster, the Andrew Marr show on LBC believes that the British Government is going to include a provision in the Queen's speech that will give British Ministers the powers to suspend and breach the terms of the Northern Ireland protocol through domestic legislation that will allow them to halt border checks. What preparations are under way by the Irish Government, with the European partners, to address this attempt to breach international law? Crucially, what role can the shared island dialogue play in ensuring that the real voices of people in Northern Ireland, the business people, the manufacturers and the farmers who are actually benefiting from the protocol, are heard among all this political noise?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Inné, bhuaíl mé féin agus Gemma Brolly, iarrthóir Aontú i nDoire Thoir, le Conradh na Gaeilge ar Bhóthar na bhFál i mBéal Feirste. Dhíriú muid isteach ar an bhfeachtas don reachtaíocht Gaeilge a chur chun cinn sa Tuaisceart.

It is incredible that the Irish Language Act has been promised since 2006 in the North of Ireland and it has been promised multiple times in agreements and discussions by both Governments ever since. The Assembly was resurrected on the basis of the Irish Language Act going through and, indeed, the British Government said up until last month that it would deliver on the Irish Language Act. However, like much of the Good Friday Agreement, it exists on paper but it is invisible in reality now, North and South.

This Government is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. The Government is not co-guaranteeing anything with regard to the Executive, the North South Ministerial Council or the Irish Language Act. The British Government has reneged on this against the will of the people of the North of Ireland but it has also reneged on the Government. Does the Government not feel embarrassed in any way that it was involved in an agreement to bring back the Assembly on the basis of the Irish Language Act being implemented and the British have reneged on it again? A previous Taoiseach from Fianna Fáil said they would not stand idly by. Is Fianna Fáil and the Government not standing idly by now?

**The Taoiseach:** To put the historical record correctly, the word "idly" was never used in that particular statement.

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Deputy McDonald raised the first question, although it was not specifically on the shared island and was on domestic violence and the statutory provision for paid leave. The Minister, Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, is committed to that and has made commitments in that regard. He will follow through on that and I want to assure the Deputy of that.

Deputy Haughey raised the issue in regard to the ESRI and its work on education. I am looking forward to that on Thursday because I think that is important. Bit by bit, the research that is under way under the shared island unit is very substantive, from the National Economic and Social Council to the ESRI studies on primary care systems in health, on education and on broader issues that lend themselves to North-South co-operation, particularly climate change, biodiversity, health and so forth. The fundamental point that Deputy Seán Haughey made is one I agree with. It is extremely important that the politicians and parties that are elected in the aftermath of the election fulfil their mandates and establish the Assembly and the Executive. It is very clear that people in Northern Ireland want their elected representatives to act on their behalf. They do not like abstentionism. They want people to take their seats in the Assembly and they want Ministers in the Executive to make it work for the people of Northern Ireland in respect of a whole range of services.

It is interesting that all of the parties in the election have now focused on services. In New York, there were kinds of banners on front pages and headlines looking for unity now, but that has all gone away over the last three weeks and it is about health, about education and about social services. It is interesting to watch and observe, and I have observed it.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** We were always on about that.

**The Taoiseach:** On the health services, which were raised by Deputy Brendan Smith, I visited Altnagelvin recently. The work that has gone on between North and South has been very effective, in particular the huge funding that went into the capital provision for the comprehensive cancer care centre there. With regard to Deputy Smith’s point, when I was in Altnagelvin I met an individual who had travelled from Donegal having suffered a heart attack. He had stents provided very quickly in Altnagelvin and was out the following day. In our configuration, we are saying that people in the north-west should head to Galway as the major tertiary hospital. In the fullness of time, as Deputy Smith said, in the various hospitals along the Border we should look at it regionally in a cross-Border, practical way.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Genius.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no need to be so catty or cynical about it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am just saying that the penny is dropping. Genius.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not dropping. I have been involved since I was Minister for Health. I want to be positive about this. We need others to participate in this. We need the Northern health authorities to participate in this. We had participated in this through investment and, likewise, the Northern Executive in the past agreed on a cardiac service for children and that there would be one national centre on the island because the volume of patients matters in services of that kind. I think we can do more in respect of health services across the Border and that is something I would like to expand even more. The CAWT initiative has been effective and I will engage with the Health Service Executive and the Minister for Health in that regard.

Sometimes, on the Executive side, there are different views and perspectives on this, as

everybody knows. What is important is trust - that we build up trust with all traditions on the island that this is not some Trojan horse but that it just makes practical sense for the people in the region and that catchment area that they have quicker access to health services, particularly in regard to heart, cancer, paediatrics and so forth. That is the spirit within which I would like to proceed on that front.

I agree with Deputy Bacik. The trade unions have offered, as have the employer organisations, to work on the all-island aspect. Through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, that we have established, there is an agenda on shared island and a sub-committee of LEEF is dealing with the shared island issues. To be fair, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has been a cross-Border body for a long time and there has been strong engagement. We need to support that. We stand ready, through the shared island unit, to support practical initiatives across the trade union movement. If any issues come forward, we will respond to them. That point was made to me in the aftermath of the TASC debate last week when I met with people afterwards.

In terms of Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, we need to provide modern facilities for women in this country in the areas of maternity, gynaecology and so forth. Every day we lose in getting the national maternity hospital off the ground is a day lost in terms of quality care for women. In that context, the Government has worked with the HSE to improve on the outcome of the Mulvey negotiations at the time of the mediation during the previous Government. My understanding is the proposal will represent a very significant advancement, absolutely guaranteeing all procedures that are legally available in this State to women who would avail of services in a new hospital. We need to move on with it and there has to be a transfer of property and so on and State control.

In education, we have moved on with Educate Together a lot over the years. There is plurality of choice now for many parents. That will progress, evolve and improve. In healthcare, it has been more patchy but the health board hospitals are State owned and we have independent hospitals such as St. James's Hospital and Beaumont Hospital. The creation of the HSE created a more national framework for hospitals-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I apologise for interrupting the Taoiseach. I will let him run over the time for these questions by 15 minutes as the questions put by three or four Deputies have still to be answered. We will then move to the second group of questions but we will not reach the third group.

**The Taoiseach:** On the health front, we are moving to a situation where, increasingly, all of the tertiary hospitals and other model hospitals are State run, funded and controlled. That is where it is heading because of the complexity of health. In my view, that is the way it has to go on the health side.

Deputy Paul Murphy spoke about his campaigning for People Before Profit in the election and said that from his perspective, people are furious with the absence of any movement on the cost of living by the Executive and the main parties. He suggests a credit of €1,000 for every household across the board. That does not seem very targeted either. I have no doubt people would be very pleased if they were told that on the doorstep. Anybody told he or she will get €1,000 if he or she votes for a candidate will be pleased. I am not sure it deals with the inflationary issue but that is a matter for broader economic debate.

Deputy Ó Murchú made a fair point about hybrid remote working in terms of tax registra-

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tion. The Minister for Finance is looking at that and has agreed to engage with the Executive on that. There are issues there. They are not simple but we have to work on them to facilitate cross-Border hybrid working. The Nationality and Borders Bill is a significant problem. We will have to work with the British Government on that. I would prefer if these types of proposals did not keep emerging from the UK Legislature. They are not helpful. They will be damaging to Northern Ireland, in particular and from a practical point of view, tourism in Northern Ireland. If one thinks about it, it makes no sense. Northern Ireland is developing and moving on economically. The protocol is helping. Inward investment is happening in Northern Ireland. When I was in Derry recently, there was confidence.

I am very conscious that we are in the middle of an election and I will not rise to the bait. It is not that Deputy Richmond is providing the bait but these proposals have been announced and pulled back, announced and pulled back. Let us allow the election take place in as calm an atmosphere as we can possibly facilitate from our perspective. We will take up those issues. I am a great believer in adherence to national law, as are most modern states and parliaments. We will watch that space too.

Aontaím leis An Teachta Tóibín go bhfuil géarghá ann reachtaíocht agus Acht na Gaeilge a chur i bhfeidhm agus tá dualgas ar Rialtas na Breataine na gealltanais a thug siad a chur i bhfeidhm agus a chomhlíonadh. Beimid ag coimeád an bhrú ar Rialtas na Breataine é sin a dhéanamh. De réir dealraimh, níl siad chun é sin a dhéanamh roimh an toghchán ach deirtear go mbeidh siad sásta é a chur i bhfeidhm i ndiaidh an toghcháin.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** An féidir leis An Taoiseach bualadh le Conradh na Gaeilge?

**The Taoiseach:** Is féidir liom bualadh le gach aon duine. Bhuail mé cheana féin le Conradh na Gaeilge.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Tá a fhios agam.

**The Taoiseach:** Braitheann sé ar an dialann ach beidh mé sásta.

## Social Dialogue

13. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [12671/22]

14. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination of his Department. [14171/22]

15. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [14280/22]

16. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [14283/22]

17. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [14284/22]

18. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [15025/22]

19. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [16208/22]

20. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [16698/22]

21. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination of his Department. [19340/22]

22. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the social dialogue co-ordination unit of his Department. [20340/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 to 22 together.

The Government recognises the importance of regular and open engagement with all sectors of society as we tackle the many economic, social and environmental challenges facing the country. In particular, the Government has been working to strengthen social dialogue in a range of areas, including the national economic dialogue which will next take place in June, the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, whose shared island report I launched recently, the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council, the national dialogue on climate action which held a stakeholder forum in March, and through many consultative groups set up in different sectors and direct engagement with Ministers and Departments on specific issues of concern.

In recent months, I have had a number of engagements with social partners in a variety of different formats, including through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, which brings together representatives of employers and trade unions with Government to exchange views on economic and employment issues as they affect the labour market and which are of mutual concern.

Under the auspices of LEEF, there has been significant progress on many issues, such as the introduction of statutory sick pay and the ongoing high-level review of collective bargaining. In addition, LEEF played an important role during Covid-19, including dialogue on income and business supports and agreement of the national work safely protocol.

The most recent plenary meeting of LEEF, which I chaired, took place on 13 April. Given the serious economic challenges facing Ireland in the period ahead, it was agreed at that meeting that the members of LEEF would enter a process of dialogue to explore the potential for developing an approach to managing and responding to these challenges and pressures in a strategic and sustainable way. This exploratory process will take place over the coming weeks.

Other engagements I have had with social partners include a series of meetings last year with representatives from the environmental pillar, the community and voluntary pillar and the farming and agriculture pillar to discuss how social dialogue can be strengthened, as well as issues of concern to those sectors. I hope to meet again with these pillars in the period ahead as we seek to navigate and tackle major challenges facing the country, especially as a result of the invasion of Ukraine.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** In August last year, ActionAid Ireland, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Men's Development Network all called on the Government to ratify the International Labour Organization, ILO, convention on violence and harassment. As the

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Tánaiste and his Minister of State have recognised, ILO Convention 190 is the first ever international instrument on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. This protection is, of course, especially relevant for women but for men too.

I have repeatedly raised this matter with the Tánaiste and Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment since the ILO adopted the convention in June 2019 but there has been no tangible progress. For two years now, I have been told that his officials are engaging with relevant Departments to establish whether further legislation is required for ratification, yet no detail of these engagements or their outcomes has ever been offered up.

In 2019, the then Minister for Business, Enterprise and Employment stated her intent to undertake a consultation with unions, employer representative bodies and others to progress ratification. In January 2020, the Tánaiste made the same commitment. Just this month, the Minister of State at his Department admitted that not only has this consultation not yet taken place but it will be months before it is established. The Government has committed to protecting women and men workers from harassment and violence. On that basis, I urge the Government to engage with the Tánaiste to ensure ratification of ILO Convention 190.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** There has been recent dialogue with the Irish Refugee Council in the context of meeting the housing challenges of Ukrainian refugees. It is also important that we continue to meet the challenges we face in respect of the existing housing crisis and homelessness emergency. As a part of doing that, it is important that we look at solutions to find additional housing not already in demand or in the pipeline. Undoubtedly, part of the solution, as the Irish Refugee Council has proposed, is to ensure that some of the 162,000 holiday homes are put to use. Some of those are rented throughout the year and will not be available initially but others are heavily underused. These are furnished, serviced and in walk-in condition. Many are located on the edges of towns and in communities with existing infrastructure. We need some leadership from the Government on this issue. We need a call to get some of these holiday homes into use and to tap into the goodwill that exists in this regard. Details must be provided for people. There should, for example, be lease agreements for 12-month periods. Owners should also be provided with some compensation in respect of wear and tear so they can source alternatives for holidays. When will a decision be made on this issue? Why has it not been done to date? Will the Taoiseach clarify which Department is taking the lead on this issue?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I have raised on several occasions the issue of a low-paid, front-line group of people who worked all during Covid-19. Without them, many of our shops, hospitals, public transport services and many public and private corporate entities could not have functioned. I refer to private security workers. Rank-and-file security officers recently set up a new campaign, Security Officers United, and some of its members will be outside the Dáil at 1 o’clock tomorrow campaigning for decent pay. The employment regulation order, ERO, for that sector means these workers get paid less than €12 an hour. It is shocking. Some of their employers have blocked an attempt to give a miserable pay increase that would bring the rate to just over €12 an hour. These workers are campaigning to have a minimum pay rate of at least €15 an hour. There are 16,000 private security workers. They are miserably paid and essentially treated with no respect. They have no pension entitlements. Often, they have no guarantee of hours. Their employers are often charging the companies who have contracted for these services many times the rate of pay being paid to the workers. That is really scandalous. The workers get paid €12 an hour, but the company hiring them out gets paid €20. It would be great if the Government would send a representative-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. His time is up.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** -----outside to Kildare Street at 1 p.m. tomorrow to meet some of these private security workers and have a social dialogue with them.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The teacher unions had their conferences over Easter. One clear message from right across all the conferences was the need for substantial pay increases to compensate for the rising cost of living. The Teachers Union of Ireland, TUI, conference went so far as to pass a motion that said unless a meaningful pay offer was made by the end of the school or academic year which provides for increases that keep pace with the level of inflation, the TUI should initiate a ballot for a campaign of strike action. The union is absolutely right. If teachers do not get a pay increase that is higher than the rate of inflation, they will, in reality, experience a pay cut. This goes not just for teachers and all public sector workers, but for all workers across the board. Will the Government make a meaningful pay offer to public sector workers? Will it increase the minimum wage to €15 an hour to accommodate workers in the private sector? Will it support other private sector workers who take action to ensure they do not experience a real reduction in their wages?

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I previously raised with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste the urgent need for an increase in the national minimum wage to address the cost-of-living crisis confronting households. With inflation rising, it is clear Ireland needs a pay rise and that people need to see the pay in their pockets go further. The 30 cent increase in the minimum wage that came into effect in January has simply not been enough to address the rising costs facing our lowest paid workers. Ireland is a high-cost and low-pay economy, and this is putting great pressure on working people.

In our submission to the Low Pay Commission this year, the Labour Party argued for an immediate increase of €1 in the minimum wage and for a clear, multi-annual pathway to deliver a living wage within three years. Has the social dialogue unit examined, or can it examine urgently, the need for an emergency increase in the minimum wage? Have any such proposals been tabled with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, to which the Taoiseach referred, to consider bringing a request to the Low Pay Commission to bring forward any such increase? Could the Taoiseach also indicate if it is intended to bring forward legislation to provide for a living wage? In response to a question I put to the Tánaiste just before the Easter break, he raised this prospect. Will the Taoiseach confirm what the Government's plans are? It is clear we must see an effective increase in the pay people receive to meet this enormous increase in the cost of living.

**The Taoiseach:** Regarding Deputy McDonald's point, I will revert to the Tánaiste in relation to that. We all of course want workplaces that are free of violence and harassment. A whole raft of legislation is already in place on our Statute Book dealing with harassment and violence in the workplace and to protect employees. Sometimes the various declarations passed by international organisations have wide-ranging implications which must be examined in considerable detail before they end up on the Statute Book here through legislative ratification. This is often not understood, and sometimes people feel it is just a matter of getting on with it and endorsing such proposals without having any examination of the implications of international resolutions passed in various forums. That said, I will ask the Tánaiste to revert to the Deputy regarding this issue.

On the Irish Refugee Council and its recommendations, one of the issues now is that thou-

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sands of houses have been pledged. Many holiday homes have been pledged. The issue now is to process those as quickly as we possibly can. Some are empty houses and some are shared houses. The Irish Red Cross was the initial recipient of the pledges of accommodation. We have provided resources to local authorities and Army personnel to make calls and so on. The fundamental emphasis right from the beginning has been on procuring hotels and a whole variety of other accommodation. It is extraordinary that 16,000 people have been accommodated in seven or eight weeks and more than 25,000 people have come into the country. Some have been accommodated privately through families. Other NGOs have pledged houses through their informal networks.

I met representatives of one organisation yesterday - Angie Gough and others - which organised 200 houses to be made available. They had some interesting perspectives on this matter and regarding what supports we can give to hosts, because there can be many uncertainties in that regard. I refer to what has happened in the education and health systems and in the provision of personal public service numbers, PPSNs. Of those Ukrainians who have come into the country, 99% now have a PPSN. There is also an extensive one-to-one employment service engaging with Ukrainians regarding access to the workplace, for example.

I have met many displaced persons - which is what Ukrainians prefer to be called - who have fled the war. Their gratitude to the Irish and for what is being done is heartfelt. That was the overriding response I got from them yesterday. Obviously, there are concerns about education. They are worried. We have to work with them to reassure them that we will be able to do all of that. There were meetings in the schools in that area yesterday with the parents to try to facilitate the entry of their children to primary school and so on. Those children have also been through a great deal of trauma. A whole range of wrap-around services are required. There will be significant challenges because this is the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War. The United Nations has published extraordinarily shocking figures on the numbers of people displaced internally and those who have fled Ukraine. As we speak, close to 5 million people have moved to other countries in Europe. Those displaced internally could number approximately 8 million. These are frightening figures of terror, trauma, death and destruction. We simply have to do everything we can to respond. The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, is leading that response in terms of the pledges and so on. Equally, public servants are working flat out and I want to pay tribute to them. They have been flat out for the past number of weeks procuring facilities and so forth. Individual pledges and the safeguards that have to go with them are far more time-consuming too. There is a balance that has to be struck between the two and they are working on that.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised Security Officers United, private security workers and issues of pay. I will talk to the Tánaiste about it but there are various labour relations mechanisms by which these issues can be improved upon.

Deputies Paul Murphy and Bacik raised the teachers’ unions. In the social dialogue we are having with the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, we agreed we would explore the broad range of issues around inflation and the cost of living and that we would enter into exploratory talks with a view to having an inclusive strategic response to these issues that would be in the best interest of society as a whole. Obviously pay is an issue in that respect. In 2021, the average increase in pay was about 4.7% and in 2020 the average increase in pay was 5.2%. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has invited the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the public service unions to talks in respect of the existing agreement. That will commence.

On Deputy Bacik's point about the minimum wage, there is a process and procedure for that. We are best placed to stick with that but we will hear what people have to say in respect of presentations on it. There are established independent mechanisms to advise Government on general increases in the minimum wage.

### **Prüm II Proposal: 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 on automated data exchange for police cooperation ("Prüm II"), amending Council Decisions 2008/615/JHA and 2008/616/JHA and Regulations (EU) 2018/1726, 2019/817 and 2019/818 of the European Parliament and of the Council,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 1st February, 2022.

The Prüm decisions, which this proposal seeks to update and improve, represent a cornerstone of European law enforcement information exchange. The Prüm decisions enhanced the crime-fighting capacity of our law enforcement agencies while respecting data rights by enabling member states, on a hit, no hit basis, automatically to search the law enforcement DNA, fingerprint and vehicle registration data of other member states with which they have established a Prüm connection. In our connected age, it is clear that peace, co-operation and effective law enforcement information exchange with our European partners are vital tools in our shared fight against crime.

Ireland put in several years of hard work and spent valuable resources on establishing our compliance with the Prüm decisions, which were transposed into Irish law via the Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act of 2014 in respect of DNA and fingerprint co-operation, and the Vehicle Registration Data (Automated Searching and Exchange) Act of 2018. I know that if we were to choose not to opt into the new Prüm II proposal via either Article 3 or Article 4 of Protocol No. 21, we would not only miss out on the benefits of the new features contained in the proposal but our existing co-operation under the present Prüm decisions would come to an end. This is clearly not in the public interest and would undermine important measures to support public safety and security, weakening An Garda Síochána's capacity to respond to the increasingly dynamic criminal threats we face.

The new features of the proposal offer tangible improvements that Ireland should embrace. In respect of the new technical solution, the central router, this should greatly improve the breadth of our Prüm co-operation and the efficiency of that co-operation. At present, connections are made on a member state to member state basis, resulting in duplication of effort and expense. The central router will act as a message broker, and once connection is established with the central router, each member state will be connected to all other member states that have connected. Importantly, however, the central router will hold no data and member states will

retain ownership and control of their own data.

The proposal also seeks to enhance co-operation by expanding the categories of data currently amenable to Prüm, namely, DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data, to include facial images and police records. With regard to facial images, I believe Ireland should support this extension. Identification of criminals is of vital importance for any successful criminal investigation and prosecution. There are occasions when the only lead captured in respect of a crime is an image of a suspect from a nearby security camera. An Garda Síochána has indicated in respect of a recent high-profile murder that had the awful crime been committed in a city rather than a relatively small town, it would almost certainly not have been able to identify the perpetrator through CCTV without the use of facial recognition.

The proposal also seeks to expand Prüm co-operation to police records as part of the European police records index system. I note this element of the proposal is optional for member states, so opting in to the proposal does not bind us to engage in this form of co-operation. I believe we should opt in to the Prüm proposal so that this option of extending our co-operation to police records remains open to Ireland. Should we fail to opt in, we will not be able to decide in future that we would like to take advantage of this new means of police co-operation. It is also worth noting that while today the exchange of police records is possible, there is no efficient procedure to do so. The automation of the proposed system, finding out whether relevant information exists in another member state or does not, would reduce the need for manual work and save resources. In case the automated search yields no results, competent law enforcement authorities will not have to process the request and retrieve the information, thereby saving time and resources and better respecting data protection rights. An Garda Síochána was part of the European police records index system, EPRIS, pilot project, the success of which has led to the inclusion of this new feature in the Prüm proposal.

The proposal will also bring Europol and the data the European law enforcement agency holds within the ambit of Prüm information exchange. This will allow member states to perform automated searches on a hit, no hit basis of third country data held by Europol, and Europol to check third country source data against the national databases of member states. Importantly, Europol's participation in Prüm will be in accordance with and subject to the data protection measures in Europol regulation.

Fighting crime and effectively utilising the technology and data available to do so is in the public interest. However, there is also a strong public interest in ensuring data rights are upheld and data protection measures are sufficient. Importantly, under Prüm II, processing of data will be limited to the extent necessary to achieve its purpose. It allows for the comparison of data only on a case-by-case basis, and there is no fully automated exchange. The searching is conducted in an automated manner but expert verification is required to confirm a match before any personal data can be exchanged. The exchange of facial images will not entail the possibility of live facial recognition screening of a large number of persons in public spaces, and there is no envisaged use of artificial intelligence for the comparison of facial images.

The costs arising from our participation in respect of this proposal are difficult to calculate, but the European Commission has produced estimates that appear reasonable. The costs must be considered in light of the importance of fighting crime and ensuring public safety and security.

The Department of Justice, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána and Forensic Science

Ireland, is beginning a project to address the required upgrades to Ireland's automated fingerprint identification system, AFIS. There is an opportunity to combine the needed upgrade work with the technical adaptations that arise from the Prüm II proposal. Ireland benefits from the Prüm-based information exchange to date. Participation in these measures is a demonstration to our European partners that we intend to play our part responsibly in fighting crime and ensuring safety for Irish and other European citizens. It is not only our partners who will be interested in seeing whether Ireland continues to participate in these important police co-operation measures, because the criminal elements in our society and across Europe will be ready and willing to exploit any gap in co-operation should we allow it to emerge. The Government has no hesitation in commending the motion proposing that we opt in. The Office of the Attorney General has advised that opting in via Article 3 is in order and is in fact the prudent course of action. Ireland can support the measures contained within and should opt into the proposal. I commend the motion to the House.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** We have discussed automated data exchange under the Prüm framework on several occasions in addition to cross-border databases related to crime. As we outlined before, Sinn Féin welcomes this co-operation as long as the databases are operated with the correct level of oversight.

Cross-border co-operation is a non-negotiable element of modern law enforcement, especially against organised crime. In 2017, it was estimated that there are 5,000 serious and organised crime gangs, 70% of which are active in more than three countries. Anti-money laundering regulations and civil forfeiture through the likes of the Criminal Assets Bureau have meant these gangs have become increasingly sophisticated, and some of them work in co-operation rather than in competition with each other. This poses great challenges in confronting them. I commend the efforts of An Garda Síochána in tackling large criminal organisations here in combination with other law enforcement agencies, including those in the US, Spain and the UK. There can be no hiding place for the criminal organisations. Irish organisations are alleged to have collaborated with gangs in Italy, the Balkans and the Netherlands, and they are also active in the UK, Spain and the United Arab Emirates. Clearly, more collaboration between law enforcement agencies is necessary. While we hope these gangs can be taken on, I sound a note of caution. With the disruption to criminal networks, we can expect to see increased competition for supply lines and market share. This could lead to feuding and violence, which will see ordinary communities suffering the consequences.

We need to address the underlying demand for drugs, ensure proper healthcare and tackle supply. The link between the casual use of cocaine in this country and organised crime must be highlighted. The proliferation of cocaine use in the smallest towns and villages is directly leading to the enrichment and empowerment of the organisations.

With regard to the set of measures currently under consideration, there are several points to be made. First, the facial image proposals promise much in terms of effectiveness in catching criminals, but there are civil liberties concerns. Data being available only on a hit, no hit basis, with no provision for generalised access, is welcome. It is important to streamline the exchange of personal and case-related data and ensure the automatic exchange of data for criminal investigations, with a high level of data protection. However, envisaging no artificial intelligence does not go far enough, perhaps. We should be wary of the use of automated processes using large data sets. There is a balance to be struck where serious crime is concerned. Databases should be airtight in terms of legal challenges on human rights grounds so criminals will not be in a position to overturn their convictions on technicalities and so we may protect the rights of

ordinary people. Any risks of false positives should be eliminated.

Second, the central router for data needs to be properly supervised. I am curious as to whether there is a physical storage location. With the use of PULSE, we have seen that systems can sometimes be open to abuse and that access to criminal records from other countries carries a risk. This is all the more reason to have the necessary safeguards in place.

Let me sound one more note of caution related to the processes and potential abuses by EU member states. Spain, for example, was found to be using the Pegasus spyware against peaceful Catalan independence activists. International law and treaties create binding obligations in these areas. It is right and proper to proceed with caution. The motion and the measures proposed do so.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** This is indeed an important issue. It is presented as a technical one but one that has significant implications for law enforcement, the ongoing battle against crime, particularly serious crime and terrorism, and international criminal cartels. We have to give our State the capacity to co-operate with other member states and jurisdictions across the globe to ensure the law enforcement side of the battle is as capable of using technology as the criminals.

This is my first opportunity to pay tribute to An Garda Síochána for the spectacular success of last week. The efforts made by the Garda in persuading international law enforcement agencies, especially the United States Department of Justice and the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, to take decisive cross-national action against the Kinahan criminal organisation. This is an extremely important success that underscores the Garda's persistence and dedication to the task.

Before us for approval is a new regulation for updating the existing code of practice, adding to DNA, fingerprint, palm print and vehicle registration data capacity facial recognition and police record data. Only facial images of suspected or convicted criminals could be exchanged. The Minister of State has underscored that today. It is really important. In jurisdictions such as China, there is mass surveillance of populations with artificial intelligence. People can be identified in crowds. People who say discordant things from the administration's perspective can have their movement curtailed. Therefore, the sorts of issues we are dealing with have to have a clear, spelled-out legal underpinning that safeguards the rights and privacy of individual citizens. It must be enforceable.

We need to have independent oversight of all this. I am not sure where the independent oversight is dealt with. The Minister of State might indicate that to us in his reply. With regard to old-fashioned technology for what used to be called phone tapping, there is legally required judicial oversight. That sort of oversight should be available regarding data exchange in the way envisaged in this case. Clearly, there is a need to provide the technology in question to our law enforcers. The battle against crime knows no boundaries and we need to approach it on that basis. We also need to ensure we know to whom we are giving data and with whom we are exchanging it. Some of the issues arising regarding the rule of law, even in some EU member states, cause us concern. We need to ensure what we do is always overseen independently and protected. The hallmark of a democratic and free society must be the protection of individual citizens' privacy. Law enforcement should be clear and open and subject to independent review and oversight.

I note in the opening sentence of the contribution of the Minister of State he cited Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland. At the time of that protocol, the United Kingdom was part of the European Union. I presume it is still necessary to cite that because it is the existing protocol. He might indicate the situation now regarding the new updated Prüm II regulation and the position in regard to the United Kingdom in terms of whether it is fully embracing this and will continue to share the new data on facial imaging and criminal records or is not participating in the ongoing development of co-operation on law enforcement these regulations underpin.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Minister of State for his opening statement. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and the motion before us, short as it is. I support the motion.

All contributions have shown an awareness of the transnational nature of organised crime and terrorism, whether that is people trafficking, weapons smuggling or drug trafficking. People appreciate that. We can also appreciate our law enforcement personnel need the means to reach across borders and access the appropriate information in a timely fashion so that they can deter, detect and prosecute serious crimes. At the very least, our law enforcement personnel deserve that from this House.

A lot of exchange of information is already taking place. The principle is already firmly established. We can already exchange information regarding car registration plates, DNA and finger and palm printing. I understand those categories of information exchange are already functioning well. The motion and associated legislation add an additional two categories to the information exchange, namely, facial images and police records. It is completely appropriate we move forward in an incremental fashion.

Some of my colleagues alluded to the fact that balance is being appropriately struck here, which is important. We have struck an appropriate balance between timely access to information and have ensured the data protection component is also respected. I am glad no artificial intelligence is permitted at this time. I am also reassured by the fact that information received or transacted through the system will be the exclusive preserve of law enforcement agencies. In this country, that will be An Garda Síochána, Forensic Science Ireland and the Department of Transport. It is completely appropriate and fitting that should be the case.

I very much welcome the motion and am happy to support it. I look forward to its swift implementation.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I thank Deputies for their contributions and support. We are facing an increasingly dynamic criminal threat. Criminals are becoming increasingly sophisticated. As Deputy Howlin pointed out, crime is becoming more and more transnational. We have to think transnationally and dynamically to address those issues. The updates are welcome. As Deputy Berry pointed out, the principle is established but we need to keep updating these powers to ensure An Garda Síochána and other police forces have the necessary power. We have to ensure a balance is struck between giving police forces the necessary powers while also ensuring people's data is properly and rightfully protected, as Deputy Howlin pointed out.

Regarding the UK, I cannot say that it is continuing to participate in Prüm II at the moment. My understanding is the position of the UK will be negotiated after Prüm II has been

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completed. Once all of the European Union countries have resolved the situation, negotiation will then be entered into with the United Kingdom. The Data Protection Commissioner is the oversight body for the existing Prüm and she will continue to be the oversight body for Prüm II.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022: Second Stage**

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

I welcome the opportunity to address Dáil Éireann today on the Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022, which was published on Friday, 1 April. As Minister of State with responsibility for insurance, I move this Bill to address a number of insurance-related matters that have arisen after the publication in December 2020 of the Government’s Action Plan for Insurance Reform.

The legislative measures outlined in the Bill will help to increase transparency and bring about clarity in the insurance market, benefiting policyholders and insurers as well as authorities. There has been a critical mass of reforms already achieved in the insurance space in recent years. I believe this has helped to contribute to a significant decline in motor insurance prices.

As we are all aware, the matter of insurance reform resonates strongly with people throughout the country, from individual motorists and consumers to the many SMEs that form the backbone of our economy. I am keenly aware that insurance is also vital to the operation of numerous community and voluntary organisations that make such valuable contributions at all levels of society. Through my regular meetings with people as well as the many useful debates we have had in this House, I understand the availability of affordable cover is critical to groups and individuals throughout the State.

The Government also recognises the importance of a sustainable insurance environment. As set out in the programme for Government, we are continuing to prioritise reform in the insurance sector. The importance we are attaching to this issue is clearly evidenced in the work of the Cabinet committee subgroup on insurance reform. The committee brings together a number of key Ministers and is chaired by the Tánaiste. As acknowledged by all stakeholders, there is no silver bullet to improve the insurance market environment, which is why we have adopted this whole-of-government Action Plan for Insurance Reform.

I am sure we will return to the matter of insurance reform more broadly over the course of this debate. For now, I wish to focus attention on the specifics of the Bill, which is closely related to our ongoing reform work. As mentioned, the aim of the Bill is to address a number of insurance matters that have emerged since the action plan was published. In summary, it will enhance transparency around the practice of insurers deducting State supports from insurance claim settlements; support the Central Bank’s new regulations to ban price walking; provide clarity on certain provisions of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019; and protect existing Irish policyholders following the UK’s departure from the EU by supporting the Central Bank’s technical changes to the temporary run-off regime, TRR, for UK and Gibraltar-based insurers, thus ensuring such firms can continue running off existing contracts here.

I now propose to give an overview of the Bill and each of its five Parts. Part 1 contains standard legislative provisions that cover the Short Title of the Bill and its commencement, as well as some relevant definitions.

Part 2 provides legal clarity on the Central Bank (National Claims Information Database) Act 2018 on the ability of the Central Bank to collect data on State supports deducted from relevant claim settlements. As Members will appreciate, insurers may be contractually entitled to make such deductions in line with the principle of indemnity. However, this is part of a continuous process of improvement to the national claims information database, NCID, thus enabling deeper insights into this insurance activity. The NCID has already proven to be an innovative and unique data-gathering tool.

*5 o'clock*

It has significantly enhanced the collection of statistics and the operation of the Irish insurance market, thus improving transparency and information. Building on that positive impact, collecting this additional data through the national claims information database will provide further evidence to allow the Government to identify future policy interventions. This, in turn, will ensure that any such measures are targeted and evidence-based.

Part 3 of the Bill is intended to complement the ban on price walking and protect consumers from unfair pricing. From 1 July 2022, a ban on price walking will mean that motor and home insurance consumers can no longer be penalised simply for choosing to stay with the same insurer, thereby ending the unfair practice of a loyalty penalty. This will make Ireland a leader in consumer protection as the first EU country to introduce such a ban. There are 2.2 million car insurance policies and 1.3 million home insurance policies in the Irish market. The Central Bank found that home insurance customers who remain with the same company for over nine years are paying 32% more on average than first-time customers. In the motor insurance sector, the loyalty penalty is 14% for those who remain with the same company for over nine years. The Bill will, therefore, require the Central Bank to report to me on the effectiveness of these measures. As such, prompt passage of the Bill is vital to ensure we get timely oversight of the effectiveness of the price-walking ban and can act swiftly if further measures are needed to tackle unfair pricing practices. This approach would also allow insurance providers to continue to provide discounts for new business customers. It will ensure that consumers retain the opportunity to get a better-priced premium by switching insurance providers. This approach, tailored to Irish market conditions, will facilitate competition, including by potential new entrants.

Part 4 of the Bill contains a number of technical amendments to the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 and aims to level the playing field for consumers and strengthen their hand in their dealings with insurers. First, there is an amendment to clarify that legal privilege is protected in the disclosure of information requirements. Second, the Bill clarifies that innocent co-insureds should be able to claim under a contract of insurance. Third, we are introducing a new and transparency-driven section 16B into the Act which will require insurers to notify consumers of any deductions made from insurance claim settlements, including deductions made in line with State supports received by the claimant. Insurers must also inform policyholders of the amount deducted and the reason for the deduction. Finally, section 10 provides for a consequential amendment to the Central Bank Act 1942 in respect of the powers of the Central Bank to enforce certain sections of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019. I acknowledge the work of Deputy Doherty in respect of that Act. Technical amendments have emerged since the

Act was passed and I am sure Members will support them here today.

Finally, Part 5 of the Bill amends the European Union (Insurance and Reinsurance) Regulations 2015, which underpin the insurance temporary run-off regime, TRR. The TRR was set up to facilitate the orderly withdrawal of UK- and Gibraltar-authorized insurers from the Irish market following the departure of the UK from the EU. This was done to protect almost 35,000 Irish policyholders and to ensure service continuity of their existing contracts. The Bill will amend the 2015 regulations to address two technical issues identified by the Central Bank in respect of the temporary run-off regime whereby certain firms that also provide reinsurance, and those in liquidation, can use the TRR to run off their existing Irish insurance portfolio. It should be noted that other EU member states have introduced similar provisions.

The Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach undertook pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of the Bill and published its report in February. I thank the committee for its work and for facilitating timely consideration of the provisions within the Bill. I welcome the report, which sets out the committee's overall support for the general scheme. My officials have examined its recommendations.

On the recommendation to consider measures that would have a more immediate effect in deterring insurers from deducting State supports from claim settlements, I point out that in drafting the general scheme, the Department closely considered how best to address this issue. This included examining the possibility of legislating to recoup retrospectively the value of deducted State supports from insurers, a matter on which the Department sought legal advice. In light of legal challenges that could arise and the contractual nature of insurance contracts, the measures in the Bill are deemed an appropriate and proportionate approach to avoid unintended consequences. Importantly, they have been designed to ensure the Government does not preempt any legal ruling. The issue of State supports may be addressed in the ongoing business interruption test cases which remain before the courts.

The other recommendation of the committee was that the Oireachtas would receive details of the Central Bank's report on price walking on or before the second anniversary of the commencement of the Act. I concur with the spirit of this recommendation as I believe it provides an important layer of transparency and supports the democratic process. In this regard, I point out that the Bill already provides for a report to be provided six months after the first anniversary of its commencement. This will be laid before the Dáil in a timely manner and earlier than the 24 months suggested by the committee.

I welcome the constructive engagement from stakeholders throughout the consideration and drafting of the Bill to date. Officials have engaged regularly with the Central Bank of Ireland and views of industry have been invited and received. Officials have also consulted the European Central Bank, ECB. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires member states to seek the advice of the ECB on draft legislative provisions. We are awaiting a response on this consultation in due course and will continue to engage with stakeholders as we progress the Bill through the Oireachtas.

In conclusion, I reiterate the importance of the swift passage of the Bill. In particular, ensuring swift consideration of the legislation is important in order to get proper oversight of the price-walking ban, as well as the practice of insurers deducting State supports from claim settlements, as soon as possible.

The Bill is being advanced against the backdrop of the Government's ambitious policy agenda as set out in the action plan for insurance reform. I believe that through the Bill we will achieve further improvements in the insurance environment to the benefit of both policyholders and industry. We will continue our work to reform the insurance sector in order to improve transparency and increase competition.

Finally, I thank colleagues for their support for the Bill to date and I look forward to working with them to bring it through the Oireachtas as quickly as possible. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. There are many provisions within it but the primary motive for its introduction was to address an issue that came to prominence at the onset of the pandemic, namely, business interruption insurance in the context of Covid-19. Many businesses, primarily in the hospitality sector, held insurance policies that provided a degree of cover in the event of their premises having to close as a result of a Government or public order decision in the context of an infectious disease. As all present are aware, this led to several small businesses being drawn into a long and costly litigation process with an insurance company that refused to accept liability. I will not comment on the particulars of that case. Much has already been said about it.

What is at stake in the context of sections 2 and 3 is the deduction by insurers of Covid-19-related State supports from final business interruption insurance claim settlements. The Central Bank informed me in written correspondence dated 4 May that at the end of 2021 more than €163 million had been paid to 5,128 policyholders through settled claims and interim payments. This included 4,271 claims that had been settled fully and 857 claims that had received interim payments. It became apparent that insurance companies were deducting the value of State supports provided to firms during the pandemic from the value of the business interruption payouts. There are good reasons these State supports, which included wage subsidy schemes and were ultimately paid for by the taxpayer, should not have been allowed effectively to subsidise the insurance industry with a windfall. That is not the basis on which State supports were introduced or on which the taxpayer tacitly accepted to foot the bill. Many of these insurance companies have thrived during the pandemic, continuing to receive premium payments despite long periods of empty roads or shut businesses.

In March 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, I wrote to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, warning that financial assistance and relief provided by the State should be structured and made with strict conditionality and that public money must not be diverted towards shareholders or used to cushion or protect profit margins. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. We have seen companies that are receiving wage subsidy payments make dividend payments to their shareholders. We have seen insurance companies cynically deducting public moneys from insurance payments they are required to make to their customers. These were not the outcomes of the schemes taxpayers agreed to, but they are the outcomes that have come to pass through a lack of oversight of, and care for, public money.

Specific to the issue of insurers deducting State supports from insurance payments, it should be noted that, last year, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, was explicit in warning that insurance companies that did so would not be let off the hook. It is clear that he has since rowed back on his promise. The insurance industry has, in fact, been let off the hook and this legislation puts a nail in that. Through a freedom of information request I made on 18 January, we know he met with representatives of the insurance industry on 22 June last year and warned

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them that further Government action remained an option. We know that on 24 June, he received a submission regarding the issue of insurers deducting the value of Covid-related State supports from business interruption insurance claims settlements and warned of possible ministerial action in this regard. No such action has happened. It is clear that the only action the Minister of State has chosen to take is through sections 3, 4 and 8 of this legislation. In essence, it amounts to an information-gathering exercise and nothing more - zilch, nada - and the insurers are off the hook.

Sections 3 and 4 of the Bill will require the Central Bank to publish, as part of the national claims information database, data on any deductions from insurance claims settlements by insurance companies that relate to public moneys. Section 8 amends the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019, which will require insurers to notify their customers of any such deductions. What will be done with that information and what will happen next? As has been noted, where public moneys are deducted from personal injury awards by insurers through recovery of benefits and assistance, RBA, schemes, those moneys must be returned to the State. However, this legislation makes no provision for such a scheme in this instance or, indeed, in the future. What action, if any, does the Minister plan to take once this information is disclosed? What possible ministerial action was laid out to him by his officials in a four-page document provided to him on 24 June, which has not been made public? Are these provisions the extent of his response, which is, in effect, to let the industry off the hook?

With reference to the recouping of State money through RBA schemes, I want to make the House aware of a new method insurance companies are using to avoid and circumvent the legislation passed by this House. It involves settling claims of damages incurred but not for the loss of earnings. Such losses do not go to the individual if they were similar to the payments made by way of social welfare. This is a means of circumventing the return of moneys to the State. There is a major issue in this regard and it is one of the matters I will be examining next.

There are broader questions that need to be addressed as we reflect on business interruption insurance in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. I recognise that in response to the crisis, the Central Bank set up a business interruption insurance examination and engaged with insurers on the issue. As I have said many times before, this stood in stark contrast to the actions of the Financial Conduct Authority, FCA, in Britain. The latter took a test case on behalf of policyholders and in the interest of the public. It took that case with a sample of 21 different types of policies, thereby providing clarity to as many businesses as possible. The situation here was very different, where the onus was on small businesses with limited financial clout to take test cases themselves, with no guarantee of success. I have engaged with the Central Bank on this issue and it has informed me that the FCA has legal mechanisms at its disposal that the Central Bank does not possess and which would require legislative changes. Has the Minister explored this issue and considered providing the Central Bank with the legal powers to take such test cases in the future?

Sections 5 and 6 of Part 3 of the Bill concern the issue of dual pricing, or price walking, in the insurance industry. This practice involves insurance companies using big data and algorithms to identify loyal and vulnerable customers who are less likely to shop around or are less sensitive to price changes and then targeting them with artificially high premiums. In simpler terms, it is a practice of price gouging that is recognised to undermine the consumer interests of loyal customers and to harm vulnerable groups. That is what it does. It also exposes the dangers of big data and machine learning with respect to customer rights. I welcome that the Central Bank is now taking action by banning this price discrimination, with effect from 1 July

this year. I have campaigned on this issue for many years, first submitting a complaint to the Central Bank in October 2019. The bank responded and acted on that complaint. It is important that the regulations that come into force are kept under constant review. The Central Bank found that more than 2.5 million customers were paying a combined €187 million more than the actual cost of their policies. I hope these regulations will be successful in putting money back in people's pockets. That is what I set out to do and what I hope to see being done on 1 July.

Of course, this legislation does nothing to end dual pricing or price walking, despite previous claims to the contrary in the media and elsewhere by members of the Government. All it does is ask for a report, within 18 months of this legislation coming into force, on the regulations that will take effect in July. I would have expected such a report to be published in any case and doing so will not reduce insurance prices by a single cent. Nonetheless, we are not opposing this provisions of the Bill, although I question why we need legislation to ask the Central Bank to provide a report. To tell the God's honest truth, I think this is more about party politics than anything else.

I turn to other provisions in the legislation, some of which will amend the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act, as the Minister of State mentioned. I introduced that legislation in January 2017 before it was signed into law in December 2019. Sections 7 and 8 relate to and amend duties of disclosure requirements under the Act. This is a technical amendment to clarify the scope and duty of disclosure requirements after a claim has been made. Section 9 of the legislation amends section 18(4) of the 2019 Act by clarifying that insurers may exclude property loss or damage arising from certain forms of criminality from basic risks insured under a contract. Section 10 provides that the Central Bank will enforce a number of the provisions within the Act. Section 11 makes important provisions that provide for technical changes in regard to the TRR for British- and Gibraltar-authorized insurers in the context of Brexit.

Sinn Féin will not oppose this Bill, which includes several technical but necessary provisions in regard to the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act and the TRR. It should be noted that this legislation was touted as removing dual pricing from the insurance market and confronting the practice of insurers deducting State supports from business interruption insurance payments. It does not do so and we need to be honest and clear about that. Instead, it provides for information-gathering exercises. Price gouging through dual pricing will be banned by the Central Bank independently of the Government on 1 July. Unfortunately, there is no provision in the Bill to stop insurance companies from doing what they have done with Covid payments. While there is no harm in these provisions, they should be recognised for what they are.

There are big problems still to be resolved in the insurance market. Premiums remain too expensive and many businesses and community organisations remain unable to access affordable insurance cover. Despite personal injuries guidelines resulting in personal injuries awards falling by 42% through the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, those reduced claims costs have not been passed on to consumers. My Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021, which will be considered by the finance committee in the coming weeks, will require insurers to disclose whether, and how much of, such savings have been passed on to their customers. This would provide transparency and put pressure on companies to reduce premiums in line with reduced personal injury awards. Given that the Minister is so confident of the virtues of the reports he is providing for in this legislation, I cannot understand why he and the Government have opposed my legislation for the past year. In addition, promises to reform and rebalance the duty of care, which is essential, have not been acted upon by the Government despite years of delay. This legislation provides for miscellaneous measures in the insurance sector. We still are

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waiting for substantive measures to reform the duty of care. Small businesses and community organisations cannot afford to wait any longer.

As I said, Sinn Féin will not oppose this legislation. We recognise the limits of its ambitions, which are disappointing. The Government must act with speed to tackle the big challenges that remain in the insurance market. It must stop blocking the legislation I have introduced, as it has done for more than nine months. Let us get behind that Bill, which is now in committee, and push down insurance premiums for consumers across the board.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to the Bill. The cost of insurance, as we all know, is one of the most frequently recurring matters raised with us as politicians and with policymakers by both individuals and businesses. To that end, effective insurance reform and the speed of that reform should be at the forefront of the work carried out by the Government. While we do not oppose the legislation, as my colleague has advised, or its provisions, it must be pointed out that what is before us, particularly the measures relating to business interruption claims and dual pricing, is little more than window dressing. The measures, as my colleague, an Teachta Doherty, has indicated, are nothing more than an information-gathering exercise rather than effective measures to tackle what we know is happening, which we can refer to colloquially as price gouging or whatever other way we wish to put it. There is nothing effective in the legislation that will actually make a difference.

I welcome the Central Bank regulations banning price walking from 1 July, but that is being done by the Central Bank independently. This is something we in Sinn Féin have campaigned to ban for quite some time.

It is important to see a multidepartmental approach to tackling issues relating to the insurance sector.

Recently, at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, we discussed the general scheme of the personal injuries resolution board Bill 2022. The policy objective of that Bill is to amend the legislation to facilitate an increase in the number of personal injury claims that may be resolved through the board. Tackling issues within the insurance sector across the board and in tandem is what individuals and businesses want and what is needed.

It would be remiss of me not to mention commitments previously made by the Minister of State not to let insurers off the hook for deducting State supports from business interruption payouts. This legislation does not respond to that development, unfortunately. The Minister of State spoke about this and his intention to tackle it. It is very disappointing that this has not manifested itself. Many businesses out there suffered significantly during the pandemic, and for them to see this legislation, it really will not cut it. Insurance companies did well throughout the pandemic. Despite the €20 One4All voucher given to people here and there, they did not give much back to drivers who could not travel throughout lockdown. The Minister needs to look at this section again and include measures to sanction insurers that continue or start this practice on the commencement of the legislation. The finance committee recommended this in its pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Bill, and it is unfortunate that it has not been included in the final draft of the legislation.

A number of people have raised with me an issue that has become even more pertinent as we move into the summer months. People with full driver licences who do not have insurance

policies because they do not own cars face difficulties with short-term leasing of vehicles which require a no-claims bonus or proof of previous driving record as part of the hiring process. These people who rent cars or car-share do not own cars and do not have the capacity to build up no-claims bonuses because they do not have ongoing insurance policies. I would very much welcome it if the Minister of State would investigate that matter.

The public and businesses are crying out for effective, efficient and expedient insurance reform from the Government. I hope the Minister of State heeds these calls on Committee and Report Stages and brings forward amendments to strengthen the Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in that regard, or at the very least supports the amendments that will come from Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I welcome the Central Bank regulations seeking to ban dual pricing. I commend my colleague, Sinn Féin's finance spokesperson, Deputy Doherty, who has painstakingly and relentlessly pursued this issue. That is known the length and breadth of this country. It is disappointing that the legislation will not ban the practice but will simply require the CBI to produce a report on the impact of the regulations. This Bill will see the Central Bank collect information on the insurance companies interpreting business disruption claims in a manner that has led to the deduction of State supports from businesses during Covid. Insurance companies have engineered a transfer of State supports provided to businesses across the State during Covid to boost their own profits. Insurance companies have stripped thousands of euro from policyholders' awards by deducting the value of State supports such as wage supports and rates waivers.

The Minister of State said that the Government was responding to the issue and that insurance companies would not be let off the hook, and now, months later, this is what the Minister of State has brought forward. In truth, this legislation in many ways looks like a political response, that is, an attempt to be seen to be doing something. The Minister of State's own Department stated that business supports should not be seen to be subsidising the insurance industry, nor should the industry be seen to be indirectly benefiting from taxpayers' money. The legislation is a weak and inadequate response to what is essentially the hijacking of public money. If this is in line with the established insurance principle of indemnity, as the insurance industry has argued, we need to address that head-on. This legislation does not force insurance companies to return wrongfully accrued savings to the State, nor does it ban the practice in the future. All it does is require the Central Bank to report on this practice. Ordinary workers cannot be asked to subsidise insurance companies. We need far more than information collection.

The public rightly expected the Government to go after the insurance companies for this money. I think what gets to people is that we have seen this Government pursue people beyond the grave for the smallest amounts of money where people have made minor mistakes in claiming payments, maybe an unemployment payment or a pension payment. People in their 80s and 90s are penalised and criminalised for not ticking a box or failing to disclose even the most modest savings. That is why people see this as the insurance companies and the insurance industry getting off while they are pursued, as I said, beyond the grave, and it is not right. It seems, as always, like there is one rule for ordinary people and another rule for the insurance industry, banking and big business in this country.

Action needs to be taken to ensure the Government retains the ability to support businesses in emergency situations without business being at risk or simply being transferred over to large insurance corporations. This is evident in the fact that the Government continues to drag its

feet in addressing the duty of care. We know that small businesses, sporting organisations and community groups continue to close down or to struggle due to a lack of affordable insurance. Despite promises in election manifestos and the programme for Government, we still have not seen any legislation in this regard. The Tánaiste, who chairs the Government subgroup on insurance reform, promised that legislation to reform the duty of care would be published by September 2021. This is a threat to jobs and our economy. This Government's approach to insurance reform has always been and continues to be as little as possible and as late as possible, and people really will not stand for that any more. This Bill, while welcome, needs to do an awful lot more to tackle the insurance industry.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. The Labour Party will not oppose the legislation. The Minister of State will know that is not the same as supporting the legislation. The legislation should not make any extensive claims as to how effective it will be in making the playing pitch of insurance fairer for consumers. There is a degree of tokenism in the legislation. Of course, the bulk of the insurance reforms that are about to be introduced come from the Central Bank, not necessarily the Minister of State or the Department of Finance, yet it would be churlish of me not to recognise that the Government has the Action Plan for Insurance Reform in place. The jury is very much out on the effectiveness of the measures that the Government has announced and that are central to that initiative. We know that reform of the insurance sector has been snail-paced at best. Over the course of the past few years, insurance companies have continued to raise their premiums year after year and the Government has, frankly, stood idly by and failed to protect customers, businesses and community services in the way it ought to have done.

A prime example of this is the so-called loyalty penalty, or differential pricing. In fairness, I pay tribute to the work undertaken by Deputy Doherty over the past few years in drawing attention to this set of circumstances and the imposition, to put it diplomatically, it has involved for customers and consumers across the country. Efforts are under way to address that in the context of the Central Bank reforms that will be instituted from 1 July, but it has taken nearly three years for the Central Bank and, to a lesser extent, the Government to take action finally on price discrimination across the consumer insurance market. That is what this is. It is clear price discrimination. Of course, we know that the situation relating to the loyalty penalty involves a practice whereby suppliers charge higher prices to existing customers who they believe are unlikely to switch to another provider in order to get a better deal. In practice, it means that after years of staying with the same insurer, one customer's policy might be 30% more expensive than that of a new customer, even if the risk profile is exactly the same. Repeated work by the Central Bank of Ireland has identified that as an issue. It is important that that is on the public record. Credit is due to the Central Bank for undertaking those important exercises.

The so-called loyalty penalty does not impact everyone equally. It particularly effects those who are disadvantaged and older customers who may not have the time, the resources or the knowledge to navigate complex financial products. I am thinking of elderly parents or elderly grandparents, who may be in their mid-70s, 80s, or even 90s. They may live at home alone. They may not have the Internet, or they may not be all that comfortable using the Internet. Yet, the system expects them to fend for themselves and to go into battle against what I describe as "rogue" insurance companies to scour the net and shop around for the best deal available. Not only are these non-switchers - or what used to be termed loyal customers, which should be the term applied to them - being ripped off, but to add insult to injury, they are also indirectly subsidising lower premiums for those regular switchers who are often more financially savvy,

who are capable themselves and are better equipped to begin with to get a better deal given the skills and experience that they might have. This whole issue of price walking and the loyalty penalty is a scam, plain and simple. That is what it is. The Central Bank reforms, which are due to come into effect in July, will help. There is no doubt about that. This legislation complements those reforms, but it should not make excessive claims about what this legislation might achieve in itself. There is no doubt that more transparency is required. The Central Bank reforms, and indeed this legislation, will assist in that regard, especially around the issue of consumer consent for renewals and so on. That is an important issue that will be addressed and that ought to be addressed.

The practice of loyalty penalties is not confined to the insurance sector. It is a practice that is common across the economy. The Government's failure to regulate adequately cartel-like behaviour extends beyond the insurance sector, which is the sector that is at issue here. The loyalty penalty is somewhat endemic in this country. It is a practice that is common across economic sectors. For example, existing customers of gas and electricity suppliers are also charged higher rates than new customers, who often get offered special deals to switch. With prices soaring, every customer should be obliged to be switched to the best available price. Ofgem, the regulator from the UK, has already moved existing customers to the best tariffs available. Their rules require suppliers to provide payment plans on emergency credit for prepaid metres. Similar measures ought to be considered here. Yet there has been no move, from what I can establish, from the regulator or the Government to do this. Particularly in the context of the ever-rising cost of living, this should be an area that is properly examined by the Government and by the relevant regulator. They can also take some guidance from my party, the Labour Party. We published legislation last year. We introduced last year the Consumer Protection (Loyalty Penalty and Customer Complaints) Bill, which would ensure, if passed, that utility companies must offer all their customers the best possible rate and not to restrict lower rates to new customers only. It would also significantly strengthen existing consumer protection legislation. As we know, too many citizens have been at the sharp end of shoddy customer service in insurance, energy and utilities. We recall here many debates and references for example to the behaviour of Eir over the last few years.

This kind of behaviour also extends to the banking sector, as the Minister of State will know. With the rushed exit of Ulster Bank and KBC potentially putting over 100,000 account holders under pressure to switch, this is going to become a bigger issue over the next period of time. Put simply, the system will not cope with the number of closures at one time. Yet again, the cost here will be borne by ordinary people, due to the failure of regulators to regulate appropriately and to take the companies that they ought to regulate into hand in a proper fashion. There is a common pattern here, which is a hands-off approach of it will be alright on the night and waiting until the 11th hour until acting in the interests of consumers. I am mentioning this issue in relation to utility companies and other service providers because there is a pattern right across the economy. This question of a loyalty penalty does not only apply to the insurance sector, but it applies to others as well. It is important to point that out. There is deficiency here in how we regulate.

I want to return to the general point of reform in the insurance sector. A narrative, as the Minister of State will know only too well, was long sown by the insurance sector that the so called compo-culture was to blame for sky-high premiums. Undoubtedly, sky-high pay-outs were part of the problem that needed to be tackled. Excessive high payments were extremely damaging to businesses, to their prospects and to jobs. Yet, this was not the full story. It was

far from it. The Central Bank's successive reports on the experience of Covid-19 proved how premiums still rose even as claims declined. We were promised that the introduction of judicial guidelines for personal injury awards last year would put a stop to runaway premiums. Yet, a recent survey from the Alliance for Insurance Reform showed that premiums for liability insurance for businesses, sport organisations and charities have increased by 16% in that period.

The foot dragging with regard to passing on premium reductions and rebates is simply unacceptable but, given the track record in this country, should we be surprised? We all know that excessive rewards were a problem. There is no doubt about that. There is no getting away from that, but they certainly were not the kind of problems that were presented to us by various insurance sector interests. The scale of the problem was simply not that significant. We know that now from our experience and from research by many organisations, which is important to note.

Nearly two thirds of organisations also had additional accesses or exclusions imposed on their policies since 2019. That is just not good enough. It is deeply unfair. The insurance sector should have no more excuses. It should have no one else to blame. It has to be held to account. We all know, and Deputy Conway-Walsh referenced this, of experiences in our constituencies and across the country of local businesses and community services folding as a result of their inability to get insured. We know the challenges that we have experienced over the last couple of years in the context of Brexit where often specialist insurance providers are not any longer available to insure certain types of activity. That is something we need to be mindful and conscious of. That is having a particular impact on the tourism and leisure sector in my experience. I have dealt with in many cases in my constituency where companies of this nature have only been able at last minute to access reasonable insurance cover to allow them to continue with their businesses. Therefore, competition and access to products is a big challenge undoubtedly.

It is clear that we have a fundamental market failure in that regard in the insurance sector. That is acting as a block and it is holding back Irish society. When there is that kind of market failure, it is imperative that the State steps in, as in housing and healthcare, to ensure that good local businesses, community services and jobs in the real economy across the country can be maintained. For instance, in recent years, my party has proposed the introduction of what we describe as innovative pooled insurance schemes, which are the norm in other EU countries. They would allow community services, such as community-run childcare centres, sports clubs and others to group together under one policy to secure significantly cheaper premiums. We have also called, for example, on local authorities and education and training boards, ETBs, to use their mutual ownership and collective ownership of the Irish Public Bodies Insurance to extend cover to community events and festivals in certain circumstances. That would be necessary if we are to help our vibrant arts and entertainment sector to bounce back after their desperate experience of Covid-19. They do require our support. We need some more lateral and innovative thinking about how we address some of these societal problems in a progressive way and how the State responds to those problems because the reality is that the market is simply not going to do it. It is not profitable enough and they would argue that it is too risky so the State has a function here or an entity like Irish Public Bodies, IPB, Insurance could step in.

We could also put an immediate levy on the profits of insurance companies that have not played ball in the context of regulation and Government policy. We could ring-fence this revenue to give customers a long overdue break on their premiums. It is high time that we had much more progressive thinking on how we do insurance in this country. There is certainly merit in many of the propositions contained in the 66-point action plan that was published by the Government but it is fair to say that the jury is out. There is little confidence, frankly, in the

regulator and in the Government that they will take the insurance industry in hand and make sure it works in the interests of consumers. We know from the loyalty penalty and the dual-pricing scandal that there is no confidence whatsoever in the insurance industry. It is concerned with and motivated by one thing alone and that is profit.

While the Labour Party will not oppose this Bill, we believe much more reform is needed in the coming years. We are happy to work with the Minister of State on progressive reforms he might want to introduce in the best interests of society, the economy and jobs and enterprises across this country. We have proposed some ready-made solutions that I suggest the Minister of State takes another look at. He really needs to fast-track and expedite many of the reforms that have been long fingered and that, according to his action plan, have been identified for actioning next year or the year after. This is an urgent matter. This Bill overpromises in many ways or, at least in the way it is presented, seeks to make excessive claims in terms of its effectiveness and what it aims to do. The reality is that the bulk of the reforms that are about to be introduced that are consumer focused are coming from the Central Bank and not from the Government. We are constantly told, of course, that the Central Bank is the independent regulator and that it makes its own decisions independently of the Government and that is the case. The Central Bank reforms are welcome but the Government needs to do much more in relation to reform of the insurance sector more generally.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I thank all of the Deputies who contributed to the debate, each of whom said they were supporting the Bill and not opposing it which suggests it is non-contentious. I appreciate the comments of all the Deputies opposite and no doubt we will have more detailed discussions on Committee Stage in due course. Some Members said the Bill could do more and that is one of the points we will discuss.

Much of the commentary related to the fact that the Bill itself will not ban price walking but I want to be clear that that is the job of the regulator, the Central Bank. The Department of Finance is not the regulator. The Department of Finance is not the Central Bank. It is the job of the Central Bank to do this work, not the job of the Department of Finance. It is unfair to suggest that because the Department of Finance is not banning price walking, there is very little in the legislation. Deputies said that all we have done is put a timetable in place with regard to reporting from the Central Bank, and that is quite right. That is the job of the Department of Finance. As part of the overall Government approach, the Department's job is to make sure that various State bodies and agencies under its aegis do their job. It is not up to the Department of Finance to do everything here. The subcommittee includes the Department of Justice, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I can tell the House that the Department of Justice's duty of care legislation is at a very advanced stage. I expect it will be before the Cabinet in the very near future. We will see progress on that as this legislation progresses. It is a key element of the insurance reform package.

I want to draw a comparison with the personal injury guidelines which were drawn up by the Judiciary. The same comment could have been made by people as to why the Department of Finance did not draw up those guidelines or commission consultants to do so. We did not do so because it is the Judiciary that makes judgments on these matters when they go into court. The Judiciary drew up the guidelines and the sole function of the Department of Finance was to put a timetable into legislation by which the Judiciary would report. That is all we did in the Department of Finance on those two key measures. The Central Bank had one job to do and

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the Judicial Council had its job to do. All the Department had to do was give them a timetable to make sure the job was done. That is our function in this area, rather than doing everything ourselves. It is good way of working, whereby the relevant State agencies do the work on those areas.

Deputy O'Reilly mentioned a particular issue concerning new drivers and I will make inquiries on that. Everybody accepts that insurance companies should not benefit from State supports. As I said in my opening statement, this matter is still before the courts in certain cases so I am not going to comment on that particular topic. The issue of business interruption claims is still before the courts. While people might like me to comment on it, I am not in a position to do so; nor would it be appropriate to trespass on a matter that is before the courts. When we see the outcome of the court proceedings, we can discuss it at that stage.

Finally, Deputy Nash spoke about non-switchers being penalised and the issue of the lack of availability of insurance in some sectors of the economy. Most people have insurance policies but there are some pinch points in the country where there are difficulties. We are working on each of those, area by area, with the insurance industry and consumer representative bodies. I thank the Deputies for their comments. I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to it progressing to Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee**

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.48 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.51 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 5.48 p.m. and resumed at 5.51 p.m.*

### **Home Heating Fuels: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— it is not possible for the Government to fully insulate all households from every price increase but, nonetheless, believes that the measures announced by the Government to date, including those announced on 13th April, are inadequate and that more can and should be done to support workers and families at this time;

— prices have been rising at a record-breaking pace and the Consumer Price Index increase between February and March this year is the highest monthly increase

witnessed since the Central Statistics Office began publishing the series in 1997, annual inflation is the highest it's been in over twenty years and the prices of many essentials are expected to continue rising in the months ahead;

— these price increases have a greater impact on rural, low-income and older households according to the Central Bank;

— many households, particularly in rural Ireland, depend on home heating oil to heat their homes and the price of this energy source has increased the most;

— two-thirds of households in the West and North West rely on home heating oil to heat their homes, which has doubled in price in the last year alone; and

— some four per cent of households depend on peat as the main energy source to heat their homes, rising to nine per cent of rural households and to one in five households in the Midlands;

acknowledges the need for ambitious climate action that is fair and socially just;

condemns:

— the failure by the Government to take any action whatsoever to tackle the rising cost of home heating oil and the recent proposals announced to ban the sale of turf, at a time when alternative heating options are either unaffordable or unavailable and while in the midst of an energy crisis people are going cold in their homes;

— the determination of the Government to make home heating even more expensive for householders by increasing the carbon tax again on 1st May; and

— that there has been no energy poverty strategy since 2019; and

calls on the Government to:

— scrap plans to ban the sale of turf from September 2022;

— cancel the carbon tax increase due to commence on 1st May; and

— temporarily remove excise duty on home heating oil.

In the teeth of one of the greatest energy crises many of us have seen in our lifetimes, when households are choosing between heating and eating, when energy providers, one after the other, are increasing their prices and when inflation is at record levels - at a 20-year high with more increases on the way - only in this Government could a Minister and a Department be looking in the background at taking away what is for some the only source of heating for their homes. It is pulling the rug from under people without providing alternatives. The greatest frustration in all of this is that once again the Government has been doing things back to front, taking away what is there and leaving people with nothing. This is what the latest proposal seeks to do.

In recent days, I have heard the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, hitting out at misinformation and disinformation on his proposals on the sale of turf. We had a reply to a parliamentary question on 5 April which stated categorically that a regulatory provision will be made to prohibit the placing on the market for sale or distribution of sod peat. The reply went on to state that persons with turbary rights will not be

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permitted to place turf on the market for sale or distribution to others. There was no mention of a draft. There was no mention of any consultation. It was a factual statement that this was happening from 1 September, a matter of months away. This was clearly the Minister's intention. The Tánaiste was quick to say the ban was paused. The Minister was quick to say the ban was not paused and the plan would proceed. The Minister then went on to say, and it was almost as if he were trying to be funny, that he would not be putting grannies in prison for cutting turf. I was not sure what that was about.

The latest is a proposed exemption for communities with populations of 500. It is another completely unworkable suggestion. If the Government and the Minister, Deputy Ryan, want to speak about misinformation and disinformation they should look at themselves first and foremost. It is the Government and the Minister in particular that have caused all of this. They have caused worry and stress, particularly among older people in rural communities who do not know whether they are coming or going with regard to turf. Many who buy turf do so by the bag because they cannot afford to buy any more. Others who cut turf previously and had turbary rights are physically no longer able to save turf and, therefore, they buy it. I am not sure how it would be possible to look at exemptions for certain populations. Would it even be overseen or policed? It is absolutely unworkable.

I notice a change in language in the amendment to the motion tabled by the Government. It has changed it to refer to a regulation to prohibit the sale of sod peat in larger agglomerations. I do not even know what that means. Turf is not sold on a wide scale. It is not a big enterprise. It is not happening. Who are these proposals aimed at? We need absolute clarity this evening. This is why the debate is so important for people in rural communities who do not know what is happening. I do not think "agglomerations" will help the situation. It now looks like the Minister is framing proposals to deal with a situation that does not exist in the first instance. People selling turf are doing so on a small scale for people who need it. They are the only ones using turf today. They are using it because they have no alternative and they rely on it.

The cost of home heating oil is an issue we have raised repeatedly. The Government has done nothing on reducing the cost of home heating oil. This is something that has not been, and is not being, addressed. In fact, the Government will increase the cost on Sunday when it will increase the carbon tax. Much has been made of the idea that the Government is offsetting the cost of the carbon tax. It is simply giving with one hand and taking with the other but this will not help people. We have heard a lot in recent weeks about fuel poverty. We do not know the number of people and households living in fuel poverty. How do we address it? According to ALONE, the organisation for older people, we know that approximately 3,000 people die in Ireland every year due to fuel poverty. They die because they are cold in their homes. That is absolutely incredible in 2022. We know there has been no energy poverty strategy since 2019. We know there was a commitment to establish an energy poverty advisory group. This was recommended in 2016. It has not come to pass.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The initial attempt by the Minister, Deputy Ryan, on the issue of turf was as poorly delivered as it was designed. His latest attempt is premature, daft, unworkable and senseless. These are words from his Government colleagues. I will not repeat what colleagues on this side of the House have said but the sentiment is the same. Those same Government colleagues will have the chance to act on their words when we vote on the motion tomorrow evening.

The Government's handling of this matter has been reduced to a farce. It is another example

of mismanagement from this out-of-touch Minister and out-of-touch Government. There is a failure to prepare, meaningfully engage and identify and support those who might be adversely or worst affected. There is a failure to imagine, never mind deliver, a just transition. It reads like a joke but it is a most serious matter.

We need to move away from burning dirty fossil fuels. The question is how to do so. It has to be managed in the right way. The Government will say air pollution needs to be tackled, and I agree, but if it is the case that the Government has such concern about air quality, air pollution and public health, I might ask why it is so committed to the Energy Charter Treaty, which bestows such protection on the fossil fuel industry and its potentially stranded assets. It is part of the reason we are here. It is because coal providers have rights.

If it is the case that the Government has such a concern about air quality, air pollution and public health, I might ask why, three weeks ago, Indaver Ireland was granted a licence under Government policy to increase the amount of waste it receives at its incinerator in Carranstown in my constituency to 280,000 tonnes per year. This is an increase of 45,000 tonnes per annum, of which 15,000 tonnes will be hazardous waste. What does the Government think this does to air quality? I can make a similar case about the landfill at Knockharley, which is also in my constituency. It was also granted permission under the policy of the Government for a massive, almost fivefold expansion to accept hazardous and non-hazardous waste. If we want to talk about air quality, air pollution and public health, let us have a real conversation.

With regard to this proposal, public health is central but when it comes to public health nothing is worse for health than poverty. People are not protected from poverty if they live somewhere with a population of more than 500 people. To state it explicitly, the Government's proposal will drive people into poverty. It does not have to do so but it will because once again the Government has announced a scheme that fails to support those who need to be supported. It is failing once again to deliver a just transition.

*6 o'clock*

The Government can speak about the environmental need to make this move, and I agree there is such a need. It can speak about the public health need for such a move, and I agree there is such a need. However, in making this move the Government must consider the impact it has on household incomes and people living in or at risk of fuel poverty. Inequity has been a feature of every climate move this Minister and Government take.

It is a damning indictment and insight into the Government's lack of commitment to a fair and just transition that the Minister cannot answer basic questions such as how many people are dependent on turf and where they live. How many of those people live in poorly insulated homes and are on fuel allowance or are otherwise eligible for retrofitting support? How can we support those people as a matter of priority? How many are not eligible and how can we support them as a matter of priority?

The Government's failure is best exemplified in the case of thousands of low-income households living in G-rated homes struggling to make ends meet which are dependent on turf to heat the building. These people are just getting by and there is absolutely nothing but pain for them in this proposal. The Government has no answer or support for them. They will not get a 100% grant for retrofitting because they are not eligible, even if such people could wait for two years. They will not get an 80% grant support for retrofit because they have no disposable

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income to make up the balance. Let us not talk about the €25,000 upfront cost of a deep retrofit.

The Minister and the Government must go back to the drawing board. I call on Deputies across the House to support this Sinn Féin motion.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** It has been a while since I have seen a level of financial hardship so evident, one that is crippling, gnawing at and creating real fear in my constituents. I urge the Minister to listen to what these people in Longford and Westmeath are saying. They are worried and scared. These are people who could already tell us the price to the cent of every item they put into their shopping trolley because of spiralling levels of inflation. They have watched helplessly as prices have continued to rise, putting some of the most basic items beyond their reach.

We are now rapidly approaching a position where the price of home heating oil is beyond the reach of ordinary working families. I cannot be the only person who has seen the return of the drum of kerosene. People no longer look to fill or half-fill their tank but have to fill a drum, and this might get them two or maybe three days of heat for the week. The Government is seeking to ban the use of turf, the only form of heating for so many people in my constituency, and that is wrong. On top of what I have already spoken about, the measure is grossly unfair, unrealistic and, to be frank, devoid of any level of common sense where there are simply no other options.

This morning I heard the Taoiseach speak of the coal industry being the villain, with smoky coal being the target rather than turf. He would want to have a good long chat with his Cabinet colleagues and a similar good long chat with his Government's backbenchers. They are beside themselves running around their constituencies saying one thing before coming here to vote for something else.

I heard a Government representative on the radio this morning talk about a public consultation, reaching out, black markets for turf and wanting people to working together. There are people in my constituency with no other option but to burn turf. They hear very loudly and clearly from the Government that there will be no turf or heat for them. They hear that this Government is committing to compounding that fear and worry. The utter lack of clarity is creating chaos. For those people, this truly will be a winter of discontent without the support they so desperately need.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. The Government's proposed ban is the wrong measure at the worst time. We must introduce climate action measures that are workable, affordable and bring communities with us rather than alienating and punishing people. This is not a just transition. This measure will affect the entire country but it will hit Laois-Offaly hardest. More than a quarter of people in the constituency have no alternative to solid fuel, which in many cases is turf. They cannot afford retrofits to their home because they would have to put up €30,000 for it. Even if they could, there is a waiting list of over two years for that scheme, and the Minister and I know that will only continue to grow.

The number of people cutting turf continues to reduce. I used to cut turf and my previous house depended solely on turf as a fuel. I do not depend on it for fuel in my current house but many people still live in houses that do. In my previous house, the cooking, central heating and heating of domestic water was done using turf as a fuel. There was no other way of doing it.

The numbers of people cutting turf are reducing and that should happen in conjunction with

the provision of practical and affordable alternatives. New homes being built are not dependent on solid fuel and homes in the midlands are being retrofitted but the process is slow and will take time. The Minister knows the reasons, which include labour, money, etc.

The problem right now is that families are being prohibited from using the only source of fuel they have and the Government's proposed ban, which apparently will not apply to communities with fewer than 500 people, is not practical. For example, there is no piped gas in many towns across Laois-Offaly, including Mountrath and Mountmellick. What should people do there? I could name 30 other towns in the same position but I do not have the time. What are the people in those towns supposed to do?

The Green Party continues to conflate, possibly deliberately, the smoky coal ban and turf. We are seeing briquettes with a high carbon footprint being transported from eastern Europe with much more environmental damage caused while we ban very limited local turf cutting. This turf-cutting ban will harm ordinary families with no alternative. We are calling for this ban to be scrapped. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform should halt the planned increase in carbon tax planned for this Sunday. He should also remove excise duty from home heating oil.

There are people who pretend to stand up for rural Ireland who may be critical of our proposal but yet again they have failed to bring any proposal of their own to the floor of the Dáil. They stand for everything and nothing, except their own self-interest. We are making a proposal to give people the space to have a just transition and ensure rural communities can be protected.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I commend my colleagues on bringing this motion before the House. I cannot believe I must stand here to try to convince the Government to help people in dire straits. I cannot believe I must explain the hardship that people are living through. I certainly cannot believe, and I will not believe, that the Deputies sitting opposite in the Chamber are unaware of what is happening outside this building. Perhaps the people coming to their offices are not suffering or perhaps they do not know who comes to their office door. I do not believe that either, to be fair.

In the past three weeks, I have had elderly people in my office who cannot afford to buy heating oil so they go to bed once the evening gets cold. I have had parents who had to choose whether to heat or eat; they do without dinner so their children can be fed and warm. I have had people who own older homes and hoped to retrofit as they are terrified they will not be able to heat those homes next winter but they cannot afford the retrofit process. The grants do not come close to covering that cost.

The Minister does not have to take my word for this. Social Justice Ireland, One Family Ireland and Age Action Ireland have been warning the Government about this for months. In rural Ireland there are thousands of people depending on turf and oil as they try to heat their homes. The majority of these people are not in a position to retrofit their homes so to tax them further and offer no other resource or to threaten to criminalise selling a bag of turf is not only cruel but absolutely insane.

We all agree action must be taken against climate change. We all know we are running out of time. This, however, is not the way to do it. Today on "Morning Ireland", Senator Pippa Hackett referred to the "black market" of turf sales. I really wonder what planet she and her colleagues are living on. Have we ever heard the likes of a black market for turf sales? Using

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this language causes fear and solves nothing. Our constituents need our help in a very difficult time and they do not need to be bullied or reprimanded around turf sales.

I ask the Government to support this motion. In particular, I ask rural Deputies for their support because they know the reality faced by their constituents. I will hold to account the Deputies in south Kildare when I see what they do.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** I thank my colleagues for bringing this motion before the House. People in my constituency of Meath West and right across the country are really struggling now with the cost of living. They believe they are getting very little help from the Government. The rising costs for families are evident every week, with the price of diesel up 46%, the price of petrol up 35%, the price of electricity up 22.5%, the price of gas up 28% and the price of home heating oil up a massive 126.6% in the past year. The price of solid fuels has increased over 20% in the past year. All this means is that older people are staying in bed for most of the day, as it is the only way they can stay warm. Others are choosing between heat, food and paying the rent or the mortgage and families are going to work struggling to put petrol or diesel in the car. These are real people. The only thing staying the same is people's income. This Government needs to act now. Does the Government realise the seriousness of the situation? Does it care enough? There is huge financial pressure on those who can least afford it. I have never seen it as bad. That is why we, in Sinn Féin, are calling on this Government to remove excise duty from home heating oil, to cancel the carbon tax increase which will increase the cost of gas and home heating oil from next Sunday and to scrap plans to ban the sale of turf from September. Turf is the only form of heating that has not increased in price in the last 12 months. It is mainly the well-off who cause most emissions and who are best placed to do something about it, yet most Government policies seem to penalise the poor, like those on burning turf. The importation of briquettes and peat from mainland Europe should be of greater environmental concern than stopping one neighbour from selling turf to another in a cost of living crisis. In a lot of cases, we are talking about older people who are not able to rear the turf themselves and rely on their neighbours to cut it, rear it and sell it to them. What alternatives are there for these people? They do not have money to retrofit their homes. They need 100% grants and even then it will take years. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael might like to blame the proposed ban on the sale of turf on the Greens when in their own rural constituencies, the fact is that without the support of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Greens cannot bring in this ban on the sale of turf. Rural Ireland is watching which way they will be voting on this.

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I move amendment No. 2:

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

notes that:

— the annual rate of consumer price inflation, as measured by the European Union's (EU) Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices, picked up sharply over the course of last year, and stood at 6.9 per cent in March - the highest reading since the series began in 1997;

— the key driver of this increase is increases in wholesale energy prices as a result of the rapid rebound in global demand, and more recently, the war in Ukraine;

— price spikes have also been seen for a range of other commodities, including fer-

tilisers, metals and food;

— global supply chain disruptions and the imbalance between demand and supply that emerged as the economy re-opened have also added to inflationary pressures;

— more recently, as a result of the war in Ukraine and Russia's role in global energy supply, oil and gas prices have risen further and these increases will feed into higher inflation over the coming months;

— pass-through price effects are being experienced in the cost of fuel internationally, and Ireland imports over 70 per cent of the energy we use, compared to an EU total of almost 60 per cent;

— recent measures taken by the Government are targeted to mitigate cost of living increases, and increased fuel and energy prices in particular;

— Budget 2022 contained a large range of measures to protect households from the rising cost of living, including a personal income tax package worth €520 million and a social welfare package of over €550 million, and specifically, there was an increase in the weekly rate of the Fuel Allowance by €5 to €33 a week so that €914 was paid to eligible households over the course of the winter and an additional lump-sum payment of €125 was paid to the 370,000 households receiving the Fuel Allowance in mid-March 2022, with a further €100 again to be paid in April;

— from April all residential electricity customers will see the Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Payment of €200 (including Value Added Tax (VAT)) credited to their accounts, and this measure is expected to cost circa €400 million;

— the National Retrofit Scheme includes specific measures to support householders in taking actions to reduce energy bills, including up to 80 per cent grant funding for low-cost, high-impact measures such as attic insulation;

— a further package of measures, to the value of €320 million, was introduced with effect from 10th March, reducing the excise duty on petrol, diesel and Marked Gas Oil (MGO) by 20, 15 and 2 cent per litre respectively, and these measures are being extended to 12th October, 2022, with an additional 3 cent reduction for MGO;

— there is an €18 million package of emergency support measures for licenced hauliers to address cost pressures arising from current high fuel prices;

— VAT will be reduced from 13.5 per cent to 9 per cent on gas and electricity bills from the start of May until the end of October, and there will also be a reduction in the Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy to zero by October 2022;

— in this context changes to carbon tax rates are having a relatively small impact on current energy prices, with the Budget 2022 carbon tax increase, which came into effect in October last year, adding approximately 2 cents per litre in tax to petrol and diesel; and

— the increase in rates for home heating fuels such as kerosene, gas, and solid fuels was delayed until 1st May, 2022, to mitigate against impacts during the winter heating season, and the May, 2022, increase will add approximately €21.56 to a 1,000-litre fill of

kerosene and 20 cents (VAT inclusive) to a 12.5 kilogram bale of briquettes; and

recognises that:

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

— the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future committed to increasing carbon tax and the Finance Act 2020 provides for a 10-year trajectory for carbon tax increases to reach €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by 2030;

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

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

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

— furthermore, recent analysis undertaken by the Department of Finance using SWITCH has confirmed that the suite of recently announced measures more than offset the carbon tax increases for all income deciles, with the following measures being included in the analysis:

— the lump-sum increase in the Fuel Allowance of €100;

— a cut in the VAT rate on Gas and Electricity from 13.5 to 9 per cent;

— a reduction in the PSO levy of €58.57 annually; and

— an extension of the cut in excise duty of 15 cent for diesel and 20 cent for petrol from 31st August, 2022, to the Budget Day in October;

— overall, in net terms, all households see increases in disposable income, with lower income households seeing the greatest proportional gains, reflecting the progressive nature of the measures;

— the Government has very little flexibility on kerosene from a VAT perspective because it is subject to a VAT rate of 13.5 per cent, which is provided for by way of an historical derogation that allows Ireland to maintain reduced rates to certain supplies under Article 118 of the VAT Directive known as parked rates and cannot go below 12 per cent, and were the Government to reduce kerosene to 12 per cent the saving would

be very small, but there would be a considerable additional cost to the Exchequer (€216 million to the end of October) because all other areas currently subject to the 13.5 per cent rate to this level would also have to be reduced to 12 per cent, as we are only allowed have two reduced VAT rates under EU law, accounting for about 25 per cent of economic activity and, as well as fuel used for heat and light, also include construction, housing, labour intensive services and general repairs and maintenance;

— each year, some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning, and it is estimated that there are over 16,200 life years lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of this form of pollution;

— turf cutting by citizens for use in their own homes is a traditional activity across many peatlands, but measures are required to reduce the emissions associated with burning peat, while respecting these traditions, and no ban on the burning of peat is being proposed, but a regulatory provision will be made to prohibit the sale of sod peat in larger agglomerations while allowing the traditional sale in rural areas; and

— final regulations will be agreed by the Government in the coming weeks which will ensure that, while measures are introduced to enhance air quality, they will not impinge upon traditional local practices associated with sod peat, including localised rural trading and the sharing of turf with family members and neighbours, and this approach will facilitate rural communities to continue to cut and burn sod peat for their own domestic purposes, while also reducing the use of sod peat in urban areas.

On behalf of the Minister for Finance, I welcome the opportunity to respond to the Sinn Féin Private Members' motion on the rising cost of home heating fuels and in particular its view that the 1 May carbon tax increase should be cancelled and that the excise duty on home heating oil should be temporarily removed. I will also address the proposed new regulations relating to solid fuels.

At the outset, I wish to state that I am happy to move the Government amendment to the motion. The Government fully recognises the seriousness of the current inflationary crisis in the fuel sector and the impact that this is having on broader society. However, the causes of the spiralling increases in fuel costs are beyond the control of Government. Therefore, it is not possible, as Sinn Féin has acknowledged in its motion, to insulate fully all households from every price increase.

We are living in unprecedented times. The global and extreme nature of this crisis is not something anybody could have envisaged a few months ago. The energy market is experiencing a perfect storm of global supply chain disruptions and the ongoing war in Ukraine. It is these issues that are driving the current rise in prices and not, as some would have us believe, the tax on energy products. Ireland's taxation of fuel is based on EU law, as set out in the energy tax directive, ETC. This directive prescribes minimum tax rates for fuel with which all member states must comply. Ireland applies excise duty, in the form of mineral oil tax, MOT, to fuels used for motor or heating purposes. MOT is comprised of a non-carbon and a carbon component. The carbon component is also referred to as carbon tax. Kerosene for home heating has a non-carbon component rate of zero. The carbon component is currently €84.84 per 1,000 l.

Deputies will be aware that the programme for Government committed to increasing the

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amount that is charged per tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fuels to €100 by 2030. This measure is a key pillar of the Government's climate action plan to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050. Deputies will also be aware that a significant portion of carbon tax revenue is allocated for expenditure on targeted welfare measures and energy efficiency measures, which not only support the most vulnerable households in society, but also, in the long run, will reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. It is also important to note that the Government has very little flexibility on kerosene from a VAT perspective. This is because it is subject to a VAT rate of 13.5%, which is provided for by way of a historical derogation that allows us to maintain reduced rates to certain supplies under Article 118 of the VAT directive. These are known as parked rates and cannot go below 12%. If the Government were to reduce VAT on kerosene to 12%, the saving would be very small, at €20 per 1000 l, but there would be a considerable additional cost to the Exchequer. This is because we would also have to reduce all other areas currently subject to the 13.5% rate to this level, as we are only allowed have two reduced VAT rates under EU law. As the 13.5% rate currently applies to about 25% of all economic activity and, as well as fuel used for heat and light, also includes construction, housing, labour-intensive services and general repairs and maintenance, it would cost in the region of €216 million to the end of October.

While price trends are driven primarily by global factors, the Government made the decision to alleviate some of these impacts through the domestic taxation of fuel and other measures. Last month, the Government reduced excise duty on mineral oil taxes with effect from 10 March. This provided for a 20 cent reduction in the excise rate for petrol and a 15 cent reduction on auto diesel, with a proportionate 2 cent reduction for the excise on marked gas oil, or green diesel. These measures were VAT-inclusive and set to last until 31 August 2022. This was estimated to cost €320 million. Last week, it was announced that these measures would be extended until 11 October 2022. The Minister for Finance is also providing for a further reduction in the excise rate on marked gas oil which amounts to a VAT inclusive reduction of 3 cent, effective from 1 May until 11 October. The excise reduction extension and the further reduction in the rate applied to marked gas oil will cost an estimated additional €97 million. From 1 May, and effective until 31 October, we are also providing for a reduction in the rate of VAT on the supply of gas and electricity from 13.5% to 9%, resulting in estimated annual savings of €49 on gas and €69 on electricity bills for households. This will more than offset the 1 May increase in carbon tax, and will cost an estimated €46 million. The combined impact of the fuel tax reductions alone is over €460 million. These measures come in addition to the measures in budget 2022 and the February package of measures to alleviate the impact of the increased cost of living that households are undoubtedly experiencing at this time.

Budget 2022 included a personal income tax package worth €520 million for this year, alongside a social welfare package of over €550 million, whilst the February additional package of measures made changes to the value of over €500 million that included an increase in the energy credit to €200 including VAT, estimated to impact just over 2 million households; a lump sum payment of €125 on the fuel allowance which was paid in early March to almost 400,000 households, and an additional €100 payment announced in April; a temporary reduction in fares of 20% from the end of April to the end of the year to reduce the burden on people returning to the workplace and people using public transport, which will impact approximately 800,000 daily users; and a further reduction of the drug payment scheme threshold to €80, which goes beyond what is proposed in Sláintecare and will benefit just over 70,000 families. The working family payment budget increase announced on budget day has been brought forward from 1 June to 1 April. Other measures have included reduced caps for multiple children on school

transport fees to €500 per family post primary and €150 for primary school children, and a reduction in the public service obligation levy to zero by October 2022. Earlier today, the Government agreed to the abolition of public inpatient charges for children.

The evidence confirms that the measures taken by the Government to date are progressive. Recent analysis undertaken by the Department of Finance, using the SWITCH model, has confirmed that the suite of recently announced measures more than offsets the carbon tax increases for all income deciles. In addition, the Government continues to drive public investment in energy efficiency, with an overall investment of €267 million this year, €118 million of which is allocated to making homes of those most at risk of energy poverty, warmer, healthier and cheaper to heat. We acknowledge the waiting list and the need to make further progress in reducing that backlog as quickly as we possibly can.

In response to increasing energy costs, new grant rates have been introduced that will cover approximately 80% of the typical cost of attic and wall insulation. These are very cost-effective upgrade measures that can be deployed rapidly and at scale this year. The typical cost savings from cavity wall insulation are €300 per year on a home heating bill. Cumulatively, the Government has spent approximately €2 billion to date on additional cost of living and welfare supports from budget 2022 to the present.

The programme for Government commits to introducing new restrictions on solid fuel so the environmental and health benefits that have already been brought to our cities and towns under the current low smoke zones can reach every part of the country. This is because, each year, some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning. It is estimated there are over 16,200 life years lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of this form of pollution.

The Government recognises that turf cutting by citizens for use in their own homes is a traditional activity across many peatlands. A balance must be struck between the need to reduce emissions and improve air quality, on the one hand, and respecting these traditions, on the other. It is important to note that no ban on the burning of peat is being proposed but, instead, as the amendment states, a regulatory provision will be made to prohibit the sale of sod peat in larger agglomerations while allowing the traditional sale in rural areas to continue. I understand that final regulations will be agreed by Government in the coming weeks that will ensure that while measures are introduced to enhance air quality, they will not impinge upon traditional local practices associated with sod peat, including localised rural trading and the sharing of turf with family members and neighbours. This approach will facilitate rural communities to continue to cut and burn sod peat for their own domestic purposes while also reducing the use of sod peat in urban areas.

In conclusion, the Government is deeply conscious of the negative impact that the rapid rise in consumer prices is having on society. Everybody in this House is aware that the reason for this significant inflationary pattern is because of matters completely outside the control of this Government but we have responded in the way I have outlined. Therefore, I ask the House to support the amendment the Government has put forward.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Carthy, who is sharing time with Deputies Funchion and Conway-Walsh.

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**Deputy Matt Carthy:** For the purposes of clarification, let me be clear that Sinn Féin supports measures that protect public health. We support measures that protect our environment and deliver climate action. Where we differ from the Government is that we insist that such measures are fair, workable and credible, concepts that are alien to this coalition. In fact, at the heart of this Government's approach is an inherent unfairness.

We now have an all too predictable cycle. Someone in the Government, usually the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, decides that the way to address a problem is by making the lives of ordinary people more difficult and then, when the Opposition points to the fact that such a move is counter-productive, we are accused of being populist. All the while, we have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies, as we have seen in the past week over the turf issue, running around their constituencies crying that they themselves are opposed to the moves, as if they were detached from the fact that it is only through their consent that the Government can proceed. When those same Deputies have an opportunity to make a stand, like tonight, they run for cover.

It is like a wilderness across the floor of the Chamber. They are nowhere to be found, avoiding the debate before they meekly return to the Chamber to cast their vote and then quickly scurry back to their constituencies in the hope their voters do not notice the duplicity. Where are the backbenchers tonight who have been telling us and their constituents that they support everything in the Sinn Féin motion? Where are those Ministers who were conveniently leaking that they were passionate and forceful on this issue at Cabinet? Where is the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, tonight? He told me in a radio debate on Sunday that he was looking forward to this debate. What happened since? Maybe we can get clarification on that.

The motion is essentially about people being able to heat their own homes. Some, and it is a small minority, burn turf. All of the evidence shows that that minority is getting smaller because people move from turf when they have a credible, affordable alternative. However, as usual, rather than ensure that people have that alternative, those in the Government see fit to give them a kicking. They demonise those who have a different life than they do and they insinuate that those who use turf are responsible for public health issues for which they are not culpable, in the same way that they blame those who have no option but to drive to work for climate change while turning a blind eye to the multinational corporations that are actually responsible for the bulk of emissions. How ironic that during the period when Government Ministers have been at sixes and sevens on whether families can heat their homes with a turf fire, approval was granted to yet another data centre that will actually use about the same amount of electricity as entire counties. Of course, they voted against a moratorium on data centres when they had the chance because every time a proposition comes before this House that would make a positive climate impact but would face up to corporate interests, the Government shirks away. Yet, time and again it is willing to stick the boot into ordinary workers and families who have no alternatives and through punitive actions - this is crucial - undermine public support for climate action and public health measures.

For those who use turf to heat their homes, in the vast majority of cases the only available alternative is to use their home heating oil central heating but the cost of home heating oil has more than doubled in the last year. The Government, despite all of the rhetoric from the Minister, has not done a tap, not a single thing, to help ease the burden in regard to home heating oil. What does it intend to do now? It plans to increase the cost of home heating oil next week. If there was a semblance of fact around Government assertions that the turf ban is about public health, what it would actually be doing, rather than increasing home heating oil costs further, is supporting this motion and removing excise duty entirely during this cost of living emergency.

This is a comprehensive motion before the Dáil. In a nutshell, it calls for the Government to scrap plans to ban the sale of turf, to cancel the carbon tax increase due next week and to remove excise duty temporarily on home heating oil. I was hoping to use this opportunity to plead with the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael backbenchers but they are not here. I do not know if they are in their offices rather than the Dáil bar but if they are listening, let me say this: if they want to make a genuine stand for their constituents, for those hard-pressed workers and families who have been squeezed to the absolute maximum, then they will come in here and reject the pathetic amendment the Government has put forward and support in full and with enthusiasm the Sinn Féin motion, rather than random leaks to journalists and a pretence that somehow they are on the side of the ordinary people who have borne the brunt of this Government's mismanagement.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I welcome the opportunity to speak. I recently undertook a cost of childcare survey, with parents sharing their experiences. I raise that because I was somewhat taken aback when talking about that topic by how many people responded to talk about how much they are struggling in general with the cost of living and, in particular, they referenced the area of trying to meet the rising cost of home heating fuels. It is very difficult. We have had several debates in this Chamber in regard to the increased costs but it is genuinely very difficult for many families and individuals, and sometimes the individuals get lost in that argument.

Perhaps many people will not associate turf cutting with the constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. However, just like every other constituency, people in this area are outraged at this stage in regard to the response and the attitude coming from the Government, in particular, as has been referenced, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. It is very difficult to know what exactly is going on. First, turf cutting is out, then it is in, but only in certain circumstances. It is very difficult to know exactly what is the position. Other colleagues have referenced the irony and hypocrisy of having briquettes come in from Germany, Latvia and other areas when people are being penalised for burning turf.

What we need is a situation where there are credible alternatives that people can afford. Nobody is against retrofitting their home or changing to the more modern heating systems that we see in some of the new builds, such as air to water systems and so on. People welcome that and they would love to be able to do that in their homes but, unfortunately, it is totally unaffordable for them. There are already huge waiting lists attached to some of the schemes in operation and the grants do not go far enough for people, even in terms of windows, doors and those basic things that people want to replace. That is really where the focus needs to be rather than on this constant penalisation. That will not work. Deputy Carthy made a point about people having driving to work. We need to promote and fund credible alternatives but the crucial part is that it needs to be affordable for people. People will change. They want to change but it needs to be affordable.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** The Minister knows this is wrong. He knows it is the wrong thing to do and so do his fellow Deputies and Ministers. It is disgraceful they have left the Minister on his own in here this evening and have not even come in. They and councillors have taken to the airwaves throughout country, trying to detach themselves from this. It speaks to the absolute chaos in Government. In terms of going back to constituencies and to people in rural Ireland saying it was the Greens who made us do it, they need to grow up and own this.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has said he will change it, and you can see him backtracking.

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People in rural Ireland do not trust the Green Party, Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael and they have very good reason not to. People in rural Ireland have done more to address climate change than anybody else. They have done that through natural heritage area, NHAs, special protection areas, SPAs, special areas of conservation, SACs, and leaving their land as a public good. They were promised for years they would be compensated for that. They know Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party have turned their back on them, and the Minister knows it.

The Minister is now telling rural people to trust the Government and that it will only do it for the towns with more than 500 people. It just does not wash. It is disgraceful to think we are here in this day and age and are saying to people who are absolutely put to the pin of their collar that they can no longer cut turf or buy bags of turf when they need it most. Who will police all of this? It is the National Parks and Wildlife Service, our new landlords in rural Ireland.

The Government has lost rural Ireland, rural voters and rural dwellers. This is just another nail in the coffin. People are more than willing to address climate change and to play their part, but telling them in this day and age that they cannot cut turf is beyond belief. The Government parties' councillors and Deputies know it. They need to own it and stop hiding behind the skirt tails of the Minister, Deputy Ryan.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** We know the spike in the cost of living is hurting households throughout Ireland as inflation has surged to a 22-year high of 6.7% and looks set to continue its increase. We see the cost of fuel, food, housing and basic services is now out of control. Everyone is feeling the pinch, most of all those who are already struggling to make ends meet. The horrendous war in Ukraine has undoubtedly added to this crisis, but many of the reasons underlying this spike are structural in nature, and measures such as the untargeted €200 energy stipend the Government provided for earlier this year are not the answer.

We say the Government response to the cost-of-living crisis simply does not go far enough, but we also believe the measures proposed by Sinn Féin in this motion are not the answer either, and I will set out why. Instead, we in the Labour Party believe Ireland needs a pay rise. What does that mean? It means ensuring we can put money back in the pockets of those who need it most, that people's incomes will go further, and the pay they are currently getting will be able to keep up with the necessary expenditure they have. It means implementing an effective universal pay rise and increasing the minimum wage but also targeting the enormous costs now faced now by so many households, such as costs of education, childcare, housing, health and transport. Ireland needs a pay rise because all of us meet people every day whose income is simply no longer enough to keep up with the rising price of commodities and the basic services that they need. We all hear from constituents living in genuine fear that they will not be able to continue to keep their homes, heat their homes or put food on the table. We need a co-ordinated response to this.

Addressing the cost-of-living crisis means taking progressive measures to make people's pay go further and adding value, not undermining important investments in our future, such as in the area of climate action. We know what is at stake. We have all heard the chilling prognosis of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, and we know the solutions to the existential threat of the climate emergency are available to us. Our task as legislators is to implement them and to do so without delay.

I want to speak specifically about the Government plans on the sale of turf and peat. This has not been handled well by Government. We have seen endless mixing of messages, confu-

sion and lack of clarity. As the Minister has said, the final regulations have still not been agreed by Government. We are debating today in a vacuum. Indeed, a debate is going on in the public domain in a vacuum because we have not seen what is to be in the detail of the regulations. It is welcome to hear that a fair balance will be struck to ensure the rights of those who are reliant on peat burning for their heating on a small scale will be met. The Minister has pointed out that a balance will be struck between the need to reduce emissions and improve air quality and respecting the traditional activity of citizens' turf cutting for their own use in rural areas. That fair balance would be welcome but we have not seen the detail of it. We are conscious the Government needs to do more to support people, especially those in rural Ireland who are dependent on peat for home heating.

In recent weeks, we have seen some dangerous equivocation between large-scale commercial mining and smaller domestic use. However, people's genuine fears and concerns about heating their own homes are not unfounded and our call is now to fast-track applications for retrofitting by prioritising households that are currently reliant on turf for home heating. Furthermore, we call on Government to explore the possible creation of a temporary band with a higher income threshold for accessing the fuel allowance, even at a reduced rate. This change would also widen access for households to the warmer homes scheme. Many of us hear of households that are missing out on that scheme and the fuel allowance by a mere handful of euro above the current eligibility rate. We cannot afford to maintain the *status quo* and we cannot afford to leave people behind. I ask that the Minister commit to fast-tracking retrofitting applications for such households.

I acknowledge the considerable importance of the issue of air pollution, and indeed the pandemic experience of the past two years has brought into sharp focus the importance of respiratory health and the need for measures to improve air quality. Nearly 20 years ago, the introduction of the smoking ban was an important health policy milestone, and we know that approximately 7,000 deaths have been prevented due to the reduction in passive smoke inhalation brought about by that progressive law. By contrast, we are still failing in our public health approach on air pollution from the burning of solid fuel. We know from estimates available to us that approximately 1,300 people die annually in Ireland due to the effects of air pollution from that burning of solid fuel. That is four people every day. The World Health Organization has described air pollution as the world's single biggest environmental risk. For public health reasons, as well as for climate reasons, we must phase out the burning of these materials.

My colleague, Deputy Kelly, began the process of introducing a nationwide ban on smoky coal in 2015. Despite subsequent attempts to make it happen from Opposition, some within Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have unfortunately resisted further measures on that policy. I am old enough to recall the days in the 1980s when you could see the pollution in the air in Dublin as a result of the burning of smoky coal. Anyone who remembers that will know the considerable improvements we have seen in our air quality as a result of progressive measures to tackle that.

However, the attempts to resist introduction of policies on air quality improvement have resulted in a sort of phony urban-rural war unfortunately being whipped up by some backbenchers in government. We need to move past this unhelpful narrative because we know that for the health of both urban and rural households and communities that we need to phase out the burning of smoky coal, peat and wood that has not been dried properly in tandem with providing real supports for people of the sort I have outlined in terms of accelerated retrofitting and expanded access to fuel allowance. We need an all-island strategy on air pollution in recognition of the contribution made by the importation of smoky coal from Northern Ireland. I hope Sinn Féin,

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as well as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, will reflect on this as we approach the assembly elections next week in the North.

On the climate emergency, I have already referenced the recent IPCC report. Those of us on the red-green left know the need for measures to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergency and drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It is why we in the Labour Party have supported, with some reservations, Government retrofitting plans and the carbon tax. It is also why we cannot support any further delay on an increase in the carbon tax.

This is the second motion Sinn Féin has tabled in two months which has sought, at a minimum, to scrap carbon tax increases. With such a focus in parliamentary activity, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Sinn Féin as a party is not serious about climate action. The evidence is clear. Properly targeted carbon taxes can help in reducing emissions and in redistributing wealth to ensure polluters pay. Therefore, the Labour Party has called for new, targeted carbon tax credits to accompany the carbon tax, combined with targeted increases in fuel allowance eligibility and social welfare payments. Over time, the credit could be phased out as homes are retrofitted and renewable energy generation increases.

Carbon tax is clearly not the only mechanism to tackle the climate emergency - far from it - and neither is it the only reason for an increase in the cost of fuel. The same can be said for mining sod turf for commercial sale. We need other measures. We must ramp up retrofitting, promote active and sustainable transport and build our infrastructure to ensure electric vehicles are a real option for people living in more remote areas. We also need targeted financial supports for households on lower incomes, for renters living in poorly insulated homes and for people locked into dependence on unsustainable fields. Equally, we need ring-fenced carbon tax revenues to complement our investment in a just transition.

Therefore, to the drafters of this motion and to those in government seeking to undermine climate policies, a just transition does not mean delaying action until we have passed the point at which climate disaster has become irreversible. Under that model, we would see the catastrophic consequences of inaction weigh worst on those who have the least. It would be a false economy in the truest sense of the term. A just transition presents immense opportunities and it can provide for a genuine redistribution of wealth throughout the country. We are awaiting the launch of the national consultation on the national hydrogen strategy. I have called for this before. A green hydrogen strategy has the potential to enable Ireland to be a leader in decarbonising heavy industries and in addressing long-standing energy security concerns, which have been brought into sharper focus by the terrible war in Ukraine. We can be a leader in the generation and export of clean energy and create clean and decent jobs for workers. We can do this through enhancing our wind energy capacity and through our retrofitting adaptation and carbon capture policies, as well as through the green hydrogen approach.

Just as we did during the Covid-19 pandemic, we must trust the science. The mantra when we hear about climate change is that we must be honest about the nature of this crisis. A carbon tax and an end to the large-scale commercial sale of turf must form part of our national strategy to incentivise climate-friendly behaviour and to fund the necessary infrastructure to aid in the just transition I spoke about. We know polluters must pay, but that argument does not exempt us all from responsibility. Lending our voices to constructive proposals is a better use of parliamentary time than seeking to convince constituents that delaying climate action is the answer to their problems. The Dáil and Seanad are set to use three time slots this week to debate if we should do away with the albeit modest gains we have made for climate action. This would not

be a good use of our time or of the platforms given to us by those who elect us. Therefore, I would prefer these opportunities for constructive debate, and I hope colleagues on both sides of the House will adopt that strategy too.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I thank Sinn Féin for moving this motion. It is an important discussion and I was hoping we would get some clarity on the issue of the turf ban. Nothing but confusion has been generated in the media by Ministers and Government representatives in the past fortnight. It has fuelled fear for many people in rural Ireland regarding what is going to happen to their ability to burn peat for fuel this winter. Looking at the Minister of State's proposed amendment, there seems to be no real clarity as to what is happening. The final regulations are still to be agreed. Therefore, I wonder what the past two weeks have been about. Ministers said there would be a ban, and then that there would be no ban, that grannies would not be arrested and people would still be able to sell turf to their neighbours and to family members. I was hoping for clarity here but, unfortunately, we have not been presented with it this evening.

I was also hoping that the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications would be here. It is important he listens to this debate, understands the impact the lack of clarity and the resulting confusion has had on people, and listens to the constructive suggestions being made by the Opposition regarding this issue. I found the past couple of weeks incredibly frustrating, and not just because much angst and worry has been caused to many vulnerable people and those struggling with the cost of fuel. I have also found it frustrating as an environmentalist because important messages on air pollution and health, carbon capture and storage, and biodiversity have all been lost in this debate. With the Green Party in government, the hope was we would see some progress towards addressing the environmental challenges we face. What I am seeing now, however, is a lack of ability to convey the message about these issues, to communicate properly with people and to listen to them. It is like death by a thousand cuts to the environmental message. I find that not only frustrating but incredibly concerning.

This aspect concerns not just the turf ban. We also saw it regarding the carbon tax. I refer not only to the Government's inability to convey that message properly and to be honest and truthful with people about what the carbon tax was, how much was going to be taken in and where it was going to be applied. The Government also failed to protect people and to assist them to meet their climate change and energy needs in a way that could be done in balance with our environmental requirements. That has caused significant problems and has done untold damage to our ability to weather the environmental storm we are experiencing now and that we must continue to weather and address. That is unfortunate.

The fundamental issue underpinning all this is that when the Government is making decisions and developing its policies, it is not doing it in the manner of a just transition. This is the key element. I suggest that not only the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications but all Ministers making major policy decisions in this area should print out copies of the just transition principles, stick them beside their desks and look at them to see if they are ticking the boxes every time they do something. I refer to checking whether they have considered rural communities, vulnerable communities, minorities and workers. Will the measures they are taking be done in conjunction with communities and will they assist communities? This is a critical facet and it is a major failing. I would like the Government to move away from just using the words "just transition" as a catchphrase thrown into debates, conversations and media presentations. Instead, it should work to take on board the just transition principles and their meaning.

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I ask that the Minister read the Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2021. I introduced it last year to establish a just transition commission. It is an excellent Bill, and I am not boasting on my own behalf because it based on a Bill written by Deputy Eamon Ryan in 2018. I updated that proposed measure to include just transition principles and what that would really mean. Therefore, I ask that the Minister for Finance and other Ministers read that Bill, because it is important. The definition of “just transition” is “a transition that ensures the economic, environmental and social consequences of the ecological transformation of economies and societies are managed in ways that maximise opportunities of decent work for all, reduce inequalities, promote social justice, and support industries, workers and communities negatively affected, in accordance with nationally defined priorities, and based on effective social dialogue”. It is wordy, but it is important and something that must be taken on board. Ultimately, it means this Government cannot leave people behind and that those least able to take the climate action, pollution and land-use measures we need them to take are supported to do so. Those people should be listened to and supported, but this is not happening.

Taking the proposed turf ban, let us ask what we would have seen being suggested by the Government if a just transition had been applied to that policy. What would the resulting policy look like? The first thing we would have seen would have been a coherent policy. I am talking about one developed as part of a consultation process, based on data and evidence and properly communicated to people. It is clear this has not happened. This process has shown a complete lack of respect from this Government and the Minister for people living in rural communities. I refer to the fear and confusion caused. It is not acceptable, justified or warranted. If some forethought had been put into this it could have been avoided. I note the manner in which the different Government parties are fighting on the airwaves at the moment to object. Some Fine Gael backbenchers are online at the moment talking about how this should not go ahead. That is wrong. They are part of a Government and need to show leadership in this. They need to work together. It causes confusion and creates angst for people. It is completely unnecessary.

In respect of a just transition, the measures taken need to be fair and need to make sense to people. One day this week in the *Irish Independent* we had the headline “Fuel rationing on cards as public told energy efficiencies are now urgent”. The next day in the same paper, we saw “data centre in Meath that will use enough energy to power the whole of Kilkenny [city]”. That does not make sense at all. When the Social Democrats brought forward the motion last year for a moratorium on data centres, this is why. We knew what was coming down the road as did the Minister. Everyone knew. The Government failed to prepare and plan for it and we are now facing the results.

We need people to be helped, which means targeting those who are most vulnerable and least in a position to upgrade their homes and helping them with retrofitting. A pilot programme was developed for the midlands to do just that. In 2020 there was a proposal for 750 retrofits to be done on local authority houses in that area. As of last November, 100 had been done, with 12 in Roscommon. It is just not good enough, quick enough or deep enough. It is not going to help people. We cannot say we need people to reduce their energy use and move away from these fuels when the whole power of the State cannot retrofit more than 100 properties over the course of two years. Every time we ask these questions we are told there is Covid. Now there is the Ukraine crisis. As a witness at the climate committee told us recently, the Government does not have the luxury of dealing with one crisis at a time any more. It needs to be able to deal with multiple crises. I ask that it puts focus into doing that.

I am glad we have had this opportunity to debate matters. The Government needs to grow up when it comes to this issue and actually support people and show some leadership. It should stop the infighting. Its policies should be evidence based and properly thought out and it should stop with the kite-flying in the media. All that does is cause difficulties for people.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** The glaring visual tonight is the absence of the Minister, Deputy Ryan. That is a big mistake on his part. Most of the measures listed in the motion are to do with the Department of the Minister, Deputy McGrath. However, the question the whole country is discussing is that of ending turf cutting. We will be talking about carbon tax again tomorrow. It is a massive issue that my party spent a lot of time studying. I have to say Deputy Bacik of the Labour Party is completely wrong on it. There is not a heap of evidence to show that carbon tax is the right thing to do or that it alleviates the climate disaster - quite the opposite.

I hope Sinn Féin will accept the People Before Profit amendment to the motion in the spirit in which we are trying to address this issue. It is entirely possible for two different things to be true at the same time. That might come as a surprise to some Deputies. It might surprise climate deniers and it might even surprise the Minister. We have a global climate catastrophe on our hands yet some people need to continue to use fossil fuels to survive in their homes and to move around. Both things are true at the same time. It is absolutely true the climate crisis is worsening. This week we are likely to see record temperatures in the Indian continent that will kill thousands of people. Records elsewhere will be broken and in some cities and regions temperatures will exceed the ability of human habitability. It is true that this year again will be among the warmest on record and floods, droughts and storms will destroy lives, crops and biodiversity. It is also true that any policy we take to deal with this can either address the systemic nature of the causes of climate change or not. It can hinder rather than aid the fight against climate change.

The Minister must bear with me because this is important to say. We need to stop burning turf. It is more carbon dioxide intensive than coal or oil. It is a potential pollutant in the air. However, if we examined the areas in which deaths happen from poor air quality, they are more likely to happen in bigger cities where traffic is severely congested and air quality is extremely compromised. I represent Dublin South-Central, which is consistently reported in Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, findings as having the worst air quality in the country. I represent many older and vulnerable people in that constituency who have chronic respiratory conditions and cannot even access SEAI grants or other State helps. By and large they do not burn turf but they are subject to the burning of some illegal fuels and mostly to traffic congestion. Nevertheless we will add turf to the list of things we have to move away from burning and extracting wholesale.

We also need to stop driving petrol and diesel cars. We need to stop burning gas to heat homes. We need to stop building data centres that consume vast quantities of water and energy. What is the point of banning turf cutting and then facilitating the building of liquified natural gas terminals throughout the country? We need to do all of this urgently and immediately. How we do it is not just a question of tactics. How we do it will determine if we can succeed in stopping a climate catastrophe and reducing emissions. We will debate the carbon tax tomorrow. I see the Government's turf policy is very much in the same category: an emphasis on personal, individual behaviour while ignoring the systemic causes that drive emissions up.

I reject utterly the idea that turf burning is a cultural or uniquely Irish thing which must not be upset or challenged. That is nonsense. If we were to call out what is behind that idea, it is

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straightforward climate denial. It is no accident that the Deputies who have consistently denied the facts of climate change resort to this mystical cultural argument to defend the continued burning of turf. We could argue that coal is as much a cultural aspect of the lives of people in Poland, Germany or Spain. It is a building block of much of Britain. It is the foundation of the trade union movement not just in Britain but for working-class organisations across the globe. Does that mean those regions get a free pass to continue burning it? No, it does not.

How we stop using or burning turf is critical. If by September the State cannot show the households relying on turf a scheme that will fully compensate them financially and another scheme that will ensure their homes do not freeze and are fully retrofitted to the highest degree in readiness for that change, we have no business proposing such a ban or pretending even that we understand what we mean by just transition. We have seen with Bord na Móna that Government Ministers refer to just transition this and just transition that although they are utterly ignorant of what it means or should mean.

I will finish with a warning to the Green Party and others. When they support policies and actions that allow, as this has, political and vested commercial interests to rail against the impact of the policy on vulnerable households or communities, they do absolutely no good to the fight against climate change. They give succour to and shore up the arguments of deniers and sceptics and drive away ordinary people from the fight against the biggest single crisis facing humanity. This is the case with carbon taxes on ordinary people and it is the same with banning the burning of turf. We must translate climate action into policies which win people to the urgency of the fight. In this case, that starts with saying we need to make this change and this is how we will make it while we help those who are most affected by it.

*7 o'clock*

That is why I ask the Government to take our amendment seriously and prioritise for retrofitting those households affected by any restriction on turf burning.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We are experiencing a climate catastrophe. I often think from listening to debates in this House that this has not dawned on people enough. To quote the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Working Group III report, there is a "rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all". We are in a biodiversity emergency and experiencing the sixth mass extinction event on this planet. We are also experiencing a cost-of-living crisis. Half a million people are in fuel poverty and must choose between heating and eating. All of these crises are rooted in a capitalist system of production for profit rather than production in the interest of ordinary people. It is in the interest of the latter that we must avoid the climate catastrophe and stop the biodiversity crisis. We need action to address all of these. It must be rooted in the idea of eco-socialist change and eco-socialist policies that put people's needs and our planet first.

The science is crystal clear: Ireland bogs are the richest in Europe, and bogs are incredibly good carbon sinks. Peatlands cover 3% of the world's surface but store 40% of all carbon in the soil. They store twice as much carbon as all the forests in the world. They are a treasure trove of biodiversity in this country, and burning them poses a threat to public health. They are the equivalent of Ireland's Amazon, so we have to stop mining peat. We have to stop mining our bogs. Incidentally, we also have to stop importing mined peat. There is no reason to continue with that when we are stopping its sale here. However, we must do all this in a way that ensures ordinary people are protected. Our amendment would expand the turf-cutting compensation

scheme to all those with turbary rights, giving a grant to immediately meet the difference for people who face buying more expensive fuel if they are unable to buy turf. There should be upfront retrofitting of people's homes at no cost to ensure quality insulation.

All this can be done, but two questions must be posed. First, why has the Government not had a genuine just transition? Second, why is Sinn Féin's motion not calling for it? Why not call for what needs to be done according to the science and protect people by September? Why call for the postponement of urgent action instead of demanding that the Government do everything to protect people? It can be done. It is a question of political will and resources. It is about putting people and our planet before profit.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I am sharing time with Deputy Tóibín.

I have been listening to what has been said. The first thing that comes to mind is the phrase "mining of turf". I never heard that phrase before and wonder where it came from. The burning issue of the day is turf. What are we going to do about it? The proposal made by the Minister is that we stop the sale of turf. I live in the constituency of Galway East, where towns such as Tuam, Loughrea, Gort and Athenry have social housing. In the social houses are Stanley 8 ranges that heat the water and radiators and cook the food. If, tomorrow morning, the local authority were told it had to replace all the heating systems with heat pumps, how long would it take to do so, and at what cost? One would not find enough heat pumps in this country or maybe in the rest of Europe to do what needs to be done. If we believe we can do it in the next 12 months, we are actually in cloud cuckoo land. What we need to do is very simple. Let us be reasonable about it. We need to phase out the use of turf and smoky coal. We have dithered on it for a long time. However, I guarantee, as a person who has come from the construction industry, that if the Government wants to replace the Stanley 8 turf-burning cookers around this country, it will take ten years. One cannot bring in something to stop the sale of turf to the people who rely on it – those who buy the 100 yards and the spread and use the turf to heat their houses for the winter and do all that needs to be done with it. The problem is that we are not putting the plan in place. We are having a knee-jerk reaction by announcing something without a proper plan. Through the warmer homes scheme, for all it is doing, and despite the cost of oil, we are still putting in oil-fired boilers instead of heat pumps. This is being funded by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland right now, in 2022. It is madness.

We are going to have another fiasco like the one we had with the peat. We banned peat milling. We are now importing peat from elsewhere in Europe and causing more carbon dioxide emissions through the decision we made. There has been no planning. Really and truly, we need to proceed in a way that will work for people, the country and the environment. We have a certain amount of time to act, but bringing in a law to ban the sale of turf to neighbours, friends or family members is absolutely cuckoo and has to stop.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. However, there is an irony that is not lost on people in that Sinn Féin Deputies voted last year in favour of the climate action Bill, which paved the way for the carbon tax and the turf ban.

I have an image in my mind of Deputy Paul Murphy leaving Dublin in search of a turf mine with a speech in his pocket calling turf miners around the country to action. Unfortunately, Aontú is the only party that voted against the climate action Bill last year, which Bill was the start of many of these issues. One of the first things the Taoiseach did when he assumed office was demote the Department of Rural and Community Development and lump it in with the

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Department of Social Protection. He left poor old Deputy Ring without a Ministry, which was a big crisis for the then Government. Also, there was no senior Minister for the west of Ireland at the time. Sligo, Mayo, Galway, including Galway East, Roscommon, Clare, Limerick and Tipperary are without a representative in the Cabinet. This is a Dublin-centric Cabinet and Government. The weight of Government Deputies in the capital is incredible and is deciding the direction the Government is going in this matter. Ireland is incredibly lopsided and getting worse. Dublin is overheating. Right now, a third of the country is a sprawling commuter belt. People are commuting from Connacht, Munster and Ulster to Dublin to work. Much of rural Ireland is being depopulated, especially of its young people. The average age in Balbriggan is 30 while the average age in Killarney is 43. Since rural Ireland is being left out, young people have no option but to go to the sprawling commuter belt to get a job and raise a family. The actions of this Government, particularly of the Green Party, the tail that is wagging the dog in the Government, are incredible. The Government, like the country, is completely lopsided. It is way out of touch, especially with rural Ireland.

Does the Minister of State realise rural Ireland is on its knees? Utility bills are going through the roof. Gas bills are coming in at €600 and €700 and it costs well over a grand to fill an oil tank for the home. It is more costly for people in rural areas than urban areas because they do not have the public transport. They rely on their own cars to get to work or the shops. People in rural Ireland are far more likely to use oil than gas for home heating. Home heating oil has increased in price radically by comparison with other fuels in recent times. Many homes in rural Ireland are older homes that do not have the insulation necessary to keep in the heat. People are living from overdraft to overdraft. Just at this time, the Green Party, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil think it is a good idea to delete a heat source from their homes. What planet is the Minister living on, given that he thought that in the middle of an energy and cost of living crisis it would be a good idea to delete a heat source from people's homes? It is absolutely incredible.

Turf is the only source of fuel for many homes in this country. It heats the radiators and stoves on which families cook food. Families are completely dependent on it. The idea that the Minister would stop a son or daughter providing turf to a mother or father, or to a person who had put €300 or €400 into the credit union to buy turf to keep his or her family going through the winter period, is incredible.

I also heard the Green Party Minister talk about the fact that burning wet turf and timber is as dangerous as burning coal in terms of respiratory illnesses. Who in their right mind burns wet turf and timber in rural Ireland? Does he think they have no cop-on at all? People dry it out every year, and when it is nice and dry they decide to light it.

Most of these homes are in rural areas and are one-off houses. The particulate levels are well dissipated by the time they come into contact with other people. There is a chasm between the Government's understanding of what is happening in rural Ireland and people's experience. Dublin Ministers and Deputies living in a concrete jungle - in a city full of pollution - are pointing fingers at rural Ireland for being the cause and source of the damage that is happening. It is an incredible situation.

At the same time, that same Government is supporting the Mercosur deal which sees wide elements of the Amazon being felled so that beef can be brought thousands of miles into this country. That has a far bigger impact on the environment than anything produced in this country. At the same time, massive data centres are being opened in this State which suck in the electricity of half a county.

Rural Ireland cannot understand what is going on with this Government. A mother and father cooking on a range using turf they got from their son cannot understand how the Government can favour other policies yet damn those families who are trying to survive. I ask the Government to not just put out statements to say it had strong words with the Green Party Minister today. Rather, I want the Government to put the idea to bed that a generation comprising mostly older people coming to the end of their lives are expected to go without the necessary fuel sources to live and are instead expected to find investment from somewhere to radically retrofit their homes.

The Government talks about retrofit figures in the country. The retrofit figures on annual basis are paltry. Last year there were only 18,000 retrofits and ten deep retrofits in the State. The Government cannot on the one hand take away the fuel source of a community and on the other provide nothing in return.

Debate adjourned.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** The Select Committee on Justice has completed its consideration of the Sex Offenders (Amendment) Bill 2021 and has made amendments thereto.

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss greater resources for the regional ambulance service in the south east; (2) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the proposed new core funding model for ECCE-only early years facilities and Montessori schools; (3) Deputies Mark Ward and Gino Kenny - to discuss the imminent closure of the Clondalkin Equine Club; (4) Deputy David Stanton - to discuss the need to ensure that every prospective student in east Cork has a secondary school place for the 2022-23 school year; (5) Deputies John Lahart and Jim O'Callaghan - to discuss combating violence in Dublin City centre; (6) Deputy Brian Stanley - to discuss the future of the mental health facility Erkina House in Rathdowney, County. Laois; (7) Deputy Matt Carthy - to discuss the Government response to European Commission observations on Ireland's draft CAP strategic plan 2023-27; (8) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss publication of the Bill to provide for a directly elected mayor with executive functions for Limerick City and County Council; (9) Deputy Holly Cairns - to discuss the unwillingness of HSE children's disability services managers to meet with the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for disability; (10) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to discuss the latest published revised draft Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy, LSMATS, 2040 report; (11) Deputy Joe Carey - to discuss the need to develop short-, medium- and long-term plans to address the severe over-crowding at University Hospital Limerick; (12) Deputy David Cullinane - to discuss discharge of raw sewage into the Mahon at Bunmahon on Monday, 18 April, in a popular public use area; (13) Deputy Brendan Griffin - to discuss the ongoing bed shortage at West Kerry Community Hospital in Dingle; (14) Deputy Neale Richmond - to discuss the need for public health nurse services in the Dublin 18

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area with the Minister for Health; (15) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the need to include private bus operators in the youth travel scheme and other fare-reduction initiatives; and (16) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the delay in the investigations into the cremation scandal in Cork University Maternity Hospital.

The matters raised by Deputies Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, Joe Carey, Mark Ward and Gino Kenny, and Matt Carthy have been selected for discussion.

### **Home Heating Fuels: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Claire Kerrane on Tuesday, 26 April 2022:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— it is not possible for the Government to fully insulate all households from every price increase but, nonetheless, believes that the measures announced by the Government to date, including those announced on 13th April, are inadequate and that more can and should be done to support workers and families at this time;

— prices have been rising at a record-breaking pace and the Consumer Price Index increase between February and March this year is the highest monthly increase witnessed since the Central Statistics Office began publishing the series in 1997, annual inflation is the highest it's been in over twenty years and the prices of many essentials are expected to continue rising in the months ahead;

— these price increases have a greater impact on rural, low-income and older households according to the Central Bank;

— many households, particularly in rural Ireland, depend on home heating oil to heat their homes and the price of this energy source has increased the most;

— two-thirds of households in the West and North West rely on home heating oil to heat their homes, which has doubled in price in the last year alone; and

— some four per cent of households depend on peat as the main energy source to heat their homes, rising to nine per cent of rural households and to one in five households in the Midlands;

acknowledges the need for ambitious climate action that is fair and socially just;

condemns:

— the failure by the Government to take any action whatsoever to tackle the rising cost of home heating oil and the recent proposals announced to ban the sale of turf, at a time when alternative heating options are either unaffordable or unavailable and while in the midst of an energy crisis people are going cold in their homes;

— the determination of the Government to make home heating even more expen-

sive for householders by increasing the carbon tax again on 1st May; and

— that there has been no energy poverty strategy since 2019; and

calls on the Government to:

— scrap plans to ban the sale of turf from September 2022;

— cancel the carbon tax increase due to commence on 1st May; and

— temporarily remove excise duty on home heating oil.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

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

notes that:

— the annual rate of consumer price inflation, as measured by the European Union’s (EU) Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices, picked up sharply over the course of last year, and stood at 6.9 per cent in March - the highest reading since the series began in 1997;

— the key driver of this increase is increases in wholesale energy prices as a result of the rapid rebound in global demand, and more recently, the war in Ukraine;

— price spikes have also been seen for a range of other commodities, including fertilisers, metals and food;

— global supply chain disruptions and the imbalance between demand and supply that emerged as the economy re-opened have also added to inflationary pressures;

— more recently, as a result of the war in Ukraine and Russia’s role in global energy supply, oil and gas prices have risen further and these increases will feed into higher inflation over the coming months;

— pass-through price effects are being experienced in the cost of fuel internationally, and Ireland imports over 70 per cent of the energy we use, compared to an EU total of almost 60 per cent;

— recent measures taken by the Government are targeted to mitigate cost of living increases, and increased fuel and energy prices in particular;

— Budget 2022 contained a large range of measures to protect households from the rising cost of living, including a personal income tax package worth €520 million and a social welfare package of over €550 million, and specifically, there was an increase in the weekly rate of the Fuel Allowance by €5 to €33 a week so that €914 was paid to eligible households over the course of the winter and an additional lump-sum payment of €125 was paid to the 370,000 households receiving the Fuel Allowance in mid-March 2022, with a further €100 again to be paid in April;

— from April all residential electricity customers will see the Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Payment of €200 (including Value Added Tax (VAT)) credited to their accounts, and this measure is expected to cost circa €400 million;

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— the National Retrofit Scheme includes specific measures to support householders in taking actions to reduce energy bills, including up to 80 per cent grant funding for low-cost, high-impact measures such as attic insulation;

— a further package of measures, to the value of €320 million, was introduced with effect from 10th March, reducing the excise duty on petrol, diesel and Marked Gas Oil (MGO) by 20, 15 and 2 cent per litre respectively, and these measures are being extended to 12th October, 2022, with an additional 3 cent reduction for MGO;

— there is an €18 million package of emergency support measures for licenced hauliers to address cost pressures arising from current high fuel prices;

— VAT will be reduced from 13.5 per cent to 9 per cent on gas and electricity bills from the start of May until the end of October, and there will also be a reduction in the Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy to zero by October 2022;

— in this context changes to carbon tax rates are having a relatively small impact on current energy prices, with the Budget 2022 carbon tax increase, which came into effect in October last year, adding approximately 2 cents per litre in tax to petrol and diesel; and

— the increase in rates for home heating fuels such as kerosene, gas, and solid fuels was delayed until 1st May, 2022, to mitigate against impacts during the winter heating season, and the May, 2022, increase will add approximately €21.56 to a 1,000-litre fill of kerosene and 20 cents (VAT inclusive) to a 12.5 kilogram bale of briquettes; and

recognises that:

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

— the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future committed to increasing carbon tax and the Finance Act 2020 provides for a 10-year trajectory for carbon tax increases to reach €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by 2030;

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

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

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

— furthermore, recent analysis undertaken by the Department of Finance using SWITCH has confirmed that the suite of recently announced measures more than offset the carbon tax increases for all income deciles, with the following measures being included in the analysis:

- the lump-sum increase in the Fuel Allowance of €100;
- a cut in the VAT rate on Gas and Electricity from 13.5 to 9 per cent;
- a reduction in the PSO levy of €58.57 annually; and

— an extension of the cut in excise duty of 15 cent for diesel and 20 cent for petrol from 31st August, 2022, to the Budget Day in October;

— overall, in net terms, all households see increases in disposable income, with lower income households seeing the greatest proportional gains, reflecting the progressive nature of the measures;

— the Government has very little flexibility on kerosene from a VAT perspective because it is subject to a VAT rate of 13.5 per cent, which is provided for by way of an historical derogation that allows Ireland to maintain reduced rates to certain supplies under Article 118 of the VAT Directive known as parked rates and cannot go below 12 per cent, and were the Government to reduce kerosene to 12 per cent the saving would be very small, but there would be a considerable additional cost to the Exchequer (€216 million to the end of October) because all other areas currently subject to the 13.5 per cent rate to this level would also have to be reduced to 12 per cent, as we are only allowed have two reduced VAT rates under EU law, accounting for about 25 per cent of economic activity and, as well as fuel used for heat and light, also include construction, housing, labour intensive services and general repairs and maintenance;

— each year, some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning, and it is estimated that there are over 16,200 life years lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of this form of pollution;

— turf cutting by citizens for use in their own homes is a traditional activity across many peatlands, but measures are required to reduce the emissions associated with burning peat, while respecting these traditions, and no ban on the burning of peat is being proposed, but a regulatory provision will be made to prohibit the sale of sod peat in larger agglomerations while allowing the traditional sale in rural areas; and

— final regulations will be agreed by the Government in the coming weeks which will ensure that, while measures are introduced to enhance air quality, they will not impinge upon traditional local practices associated with sod peat, including localised rural trading and the sharing of turf with family members and neighbours, and this approach will facilitate rural communities to continue to cut and burn sod peat for their own domestic purposes, while also reducing the use of sod peat in urban areas.

- (Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform).

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I thank Sinn Féin, in particular Deputy Kerrane, for bringing forward this very important motion and giving us the first formal opportunity to discuss on the

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record of the Dáil the proposed criminalisation of the sale of turf for supply. One would swear to God it was some sort of an illegal drug the way we are talking about it. I never thought the sale and supply of turf would come to this. I would like the Minister to look around him. He was very welcome to Kerry this morning. I said it to him today and will say it again, any time a Minister comes to our county we welcome him or her with open arms.

The Minister should look around him. Where is the support for this? The backbenchers in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil know that this will be their death knell and final nail in the coffin because they are losing rural Ireland. The Green Party does not come into this equation at all because this is about what Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are going to do. The only thing for them to do is to back the Sinn Féin motion and say that this will not be accepted in any shape or form. The people have had enough.

If the people who went before us heard us, as legislators, discussing this issue they would ask how it had come to this or ask what had gone wrong with our politicians. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is the Minister for reintroducing wolves to rural Ireland, shorter showers, car pooling and everyone walking or cycling to a village to get into a car that would not be there in the first place. He is a Minister who has his foot firmly placed in his mouth from early in the morning until late at night. At this stage, he and his party are an embarrassment to the environmental movement in Ireland. They are doing more harm than good.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for giving us the opportunity to talk about this issue. I have no personal gripe with the Minister, but the Government has annoyed and upset many people in rural Ireland over the past fortnight. What has been done is unfair. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, must now realise that what he is trying to do to the people of rural Ireland is blackguarding. He is here now. He has tried to blackguard the people of rural Ireland.

People can die of the cold as well as because of bad or smoky air or whatever else it is called. However, they are more likely to die of the cold this winter due to the cost of fuel and everything else. This is the time of year when people take out a sleán and go to the bog. The Minister must realise that China, Russia, Poland, Romania and the USA are digging mountains of coal at the present time. We are all under the one sky, whether the Minister realises that or not. The Minister is focusing his attention on poor people who go to bogs in places like Fybagh, Reaboy and Gneeveguilla or the bogs in Barna. The Minister is trying to stop those people from cutting a bit of turf and selling it to their neighbours, something they have traditionally done. The Minister is trying to take away their traditional rights and culture. He is wrong and should not be hurting ordinary hard-working people in rural Ireland who want a bag or box of turf. With the power he has, what he is trying to do to people is a disgrace.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I thank the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, for coming to the House. The State pension is €13,100 per annum. The minimum wage is €21,840 per annum. People have to pay for groceries, house and car insurance and the price of a car. People in rural Ireland can barely live on what they have at the moment.

I spoke on radio during the week with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins. He mentioned the €2 billion the Government will spend on energy grants for people in Ireland, but he forgot to mention that that is only for ESB and gas. I was accused of not knowing what I was talking about. I had to remind the Minister of State that 67.8% of the people in County Limerick rely on oil and solid fuel to heat their homes. They are the people who elected him and Deputy

O'Donovan to come up here and look after them in a time of crisis. They are the people who Deputies Niall Collins and O'Donovan will go to looking for votes. They sent them up here to get them fairness until there are alternatives. They have the likes of the Minister drawing a line across it and saying that we should get rid of turf, solid fuels and coal, and tax everything out of existence. If that happens, the 70% of people in County Limerick who rely on these fuels and have no alternatives will suffer but everyone living in areas with gas and public transport will actually make a saving. That is on the Government Deputies who are present, and every other Deputy from Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. When Deputies Niall Collins and O'Donovan go to the doors in County Limerick, that is what they will hear from the 70% of people in the county who are affected. They asked the Deputies to represent them but they have not been doing so. I will be watching which way they vote on this.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on the motion which addresses such a significant issue. As of now, do we know whether the sale of turf is banned? As far as the Taoiseach was concerned earlier today, it is okay to sell it this year. It is a case of kicking the can down the road as far as he is concerned. Of course, he will be gone from next year so he does not care. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who is now present in the Chamber, came out last week and said that grannies would not be arrested for burning turf. Does he dream up this nonsense and turn it out of his mouth for the craic?

This Government has no idea what is happening on the ground. Its Deputies are frantic. Today they are saying they had a robust meeting of backbenchers. They are all in deep trouble in their constituencies and they know it. They will get it hot and heavy. They are on the ground and going around in a bubble, just waiting for the next nod-and-wink grant aid announcement so they can lay claim to taxpayers' money and glorify their part in the allocation. The groups involved tell me they are insulted by such claims as it is the groups themselves that are working their butts off to get the grants in the first place.

I refer to the lack of interest shown by the Taoiseach in the House this afternoon when we raised the issue of the struggles that farmers, fishermen and ordinary mothers and fathers are going through thanks to this Government. All he gave was a smirk and sarcastic comments that have no place in the Dáil. We have constituents coming to us to ask how they will be able to pay the ever-rising cost of daily living or whether they should pay to heat their homes or to put food on the table. The past couple of weeks have made this island a laughing stock, with the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announcing what he dreamt of overnight and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies jumping up and down, frantically trying to hide from being behind this shameful announcement. Those Deputies are completely guilty of what went on during the Easter break. I heard a so-called expert stating on RTÉ Radio 1 last Saturday morning that wet turf is dangerous. Where did RTÉ find this comedian? No one living in rural Ireland burns wet turf unless he or she is crazy. The good people of rural Ireland would never do the likes of it.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** It appears the panic light finally lit up in the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil headquarters when they realised they had crossed a line with the Irish people, who are absolutely fed up with the nonsensical and detached policies the Green Party is imposing on us in rural Ireland morning, noon and night. The Green Party is acting as if it is the conscience of the country. It is high time for the rural Deputies in Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael to stand up for their constituents. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has no right to dictate to people on how they should heat their homes. In my county, 38% of people are dependent on fossil fuels, mainly turf. These are not just elderly people. They are families with no other source of heating. How dare the Green Party try to create such hardship? When I heard about the ban, I thought it was a

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late April fools joke. It is a joke. Limiting it to villages with a population of 500 or more is still a joke. It is not acceptable. We will continue to burn turf in rural Ireland whether the Minister likes it or not.

I want to make the Minister and Sinn Féin aware that I and my Rural Independent Group colleagues have tabled an amendment to this motion. Our amendment calls on the Government to provide an explicit commitment that it will ensure the sale, marketing and distribution of turf at voluntary or commercial level will be permitted permanently. We are not giving up our traditions for the Minister's vanity project that is going nowhere. We want this to be permitted permanently. We do not want it to be kicked down the road by any Government or party. The Government must make a firm and permanent commitment to the people of rural Ireland. That is what we are seeking.

The amendment also calls on the Government to investigate the possibility of categorising turf use as a protected cultural practice under such instruments as the Council of Europe framework convention on the value of cultural heritage for society, also known as the Faro Convention. I raised this issue with the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, through a parliamentary question. To the best of my knowledge, one year later I have not received a response. The Government thinks it can do what it likes and that it is not accountable to us as politicians and fellow Deputies, or to the people of rural Ireland, but it will not get away with this one. It is not happening - not now; not ever.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank Sinn Féin. I will be supporting the motion. I, along with colleagues here, have fought consistently to raise matters relating to housing, health and climate change on the floor of the Dáil but we were laughed at. I am no climate denier and I am not here to demonise the Green Party. We have to make fundamental changes in the context of climate change but the absence of leadership and the divisive manner in which that is being tackled fills me with despair. I absolutely despair that it has become a divisive conversation. I never agreed with carbon tax. It is a divisive tax that punishes the poor while letting the big polluters off the hook. What the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has done here, aside from creating a communications fiasco, is even worse in the sense that he has divided people from each other under the guise of a climate change action when what we really need is leadership, unity, solidarity and to get a message across that we are in it together. We should have learned from Covid that we cannot split and divide. We have to get a message across that we need transformational change. That is not done by making an announcement that people will not be allowed to use turf from September.

Of those in my constituency, 23% or 25% use turf. What provision has been made in respect of those people? The debacle of various backbenchers and other Deputies going on radio programmes to speak on this is appalling and unacceptable. It is setting climate change way back. The Government is doing this at a time when energy prices are going through the roof. We have heard the figures. I looked them up. The price of home heating oil rose by 58.5% between February and March and by a further 126.6% in the 12 months to March 2022. I do not have enough time in my few minutes to quote all the other statistics. The Minister knows them well. On top of that, average rents in the county from which I come, outside the city, have increased by 19%. I ask the Minister to listen to these figures. Houses and rent used to be cheaper outside the city. Rents in the county increased by 19% from 2020 to 2021. In Galway city, they cannot rise any more, but they still rose by 8.8% in a short quarter.

On top of that, the Government's amendment to the motion cynically refers to the number of

deaths per year as a result of air pollution. I welcome that the Government is beginning to look at things like that but it has included that statistic in a very cynical way in this context. None of its amendments have ever referred to the number of people who die each year from poverty, bad housing or being left on hospital trolleys. Dr. Hickey in Sligo has said at least 300 deaths every year are directly related to the person having spent two or three days on a trolley. In my city, people are being left for seven or eight days on a trolley and, furthermore, they are without visitors, but that is an issue for another day.

What should we do here when we are faced with the existential threat to the planet of climate change? Should we go down a divisive road of telling the turf users who make up 23% of the people in my county that they cannot use it in September; they can sit and freeze? Should we tell them that turf burning will have to stop at some stage, outline the way that will be done and show them what we are going to do for them because they will help us with our climate strategy? Should we keep on with these idiotic debates where we vote for or against something and the Opposition divides up in different ways, with the Labour Party telling us one thing or Deputy Tóibín, for whom I have the greatest of respect, proudly stating he did not vote for the climate action Bill? We are facing an existential crisis and we need leadership and transformational action but that is sorely lacking.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing it forward. One issue that must be recognised, as mentioned by Deputy Martin Kenny, is that in the case of many social housing developments, including, for example, in Tuam and in different parts of counties Galway and Roscommon, ranges and stoves are installed and people are getting €1,300 per year to heat those homes. The councils are not going to have the heating systems in all those properties changed by next September. Many of the people living in them buy either a plot of turf or a few trailer-loads of turf from someone.

It is necessary, first, to understand turf. I will not deny I am a bogman. I was on the bog this morning, where I met and talked to a few people. There is an attitude that the way this is being handled is like a bully in the schoolyard taking it out on the small children. People feel they are being targeted while, at the same time, 7,000 tonnes of coal are being burned in Moneypoint to keep the lights on. I am not saying that does not need to be done. I know we are under pressure. Six artic loads of diesel or oil are being used to keep the generators going but we are talking about people burning a bit of turf. A transition is needed and we must resolve this issue. Nearly every Fianna Gael and Fianna Fáil Deputy from around the country has taken part in radio station discussions and agreed with Opposition Deputies that this cannot happen. However, when a vote is called or whatever, they still will run into this House and do the same thing.

We need to resolve this issue. During the Covid pandemic, we were told to use one bottle and then another bottle to clean our hands. Let us say we have a peat briquette in one hand and a sod of turf in the other. What is the difference? The Government has said a peat briquette is okay. Ministers will say that people in UCD and other places have done tests on this, but I have done my own tests. If something is allowed to season, its moisture content is brought down. I backed the proposal by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on reducing the moisture content to below 25%. I understand he is leaving it at that. He needs to work with the industry over the next few years to resolve this issue. On top of that, clarification needs to come rapidly. What happened, however, was we had a one-line statement on turbary rights and, hey presto, that was that.

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There are ten different ways in which people can own a bog. There are fee simple rights, for instance, and acquired rights. What about the people who historically took a plot of wet turf and used it, whether they lived in a town of more than 500 people, in a city or wherever? There are people with turbary rights who live in cities. The understanding of this issue is complex. I have fought many a day with the people in the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, but, in fairness to them, they have a fair knowledge of what went on and the different types of ownership in bogs. Lisnageeragh Bog covers 3,000 acres on one side of the road, which the people in the NPWS worked to preserve. On the other side of the road are 100 acres, where people cut their bit of turf. What about the people who gave up their bog and were told by the NPWS they would be given turf? By the way, the State pays at the moment to take turf to people's houses. What about the people who were asked to take money and buy turf somewhere? What about those who moved to relocation sites under a licence? Does that amount to a turbary right? No, it does not, but all that was given was a one-line statement on turbary rights.

Since 2020, the price of home heating oil has gone from 43 cent a litre to approximately €1.30 today. The price of gas has gone up by 45% to 50%. People cannot just knock off one light and we cannot tell them they have to stop using turf in September. We need a just transition. In saying this, I am not going against the Government. I am trying to work with it. The Turf Cutters and Contractors Association, TCCA, is willing to work with it. The one thing the Minister must do is come down off the high horse when it comes to the September deadline. What is needed is for him to work with the industry to ensure that in larger urban areas, the moisture content is brought down and the peat briquette is made sound. Whether with timber or peat, the moisture must be brought below the 25% level he requires. That is achievable if it is done in that way. We do not have to complicate it by talking about this town having 100 people, that one having 500 and the one with 50,000 being a no-go area. The Government needs to introduce something whereby, in the case of a population over 5,000 or 10,000, as with timber, there is a requirement that the moisture content be at a certain level.

People seem to think we in rural Ireland are gorms who go out and cut and burn a tree and split the chimney liner to make sure we do harm. That is not done. The wood is seasoned and the same is done with turf. I spoke to a person today who has turf in his shed for two years to let it season. I guarantee the moisture level of that turf is below that of a peat briquette. There needs to be rationality and common sense brought into this discussion. Above all, we need to hear from people who know a bit about it. I have listened to stuff in here tonight that would make you vomit if you come from a bog. I have listened to the BS that came out of some people about mining turf. By the Lord Jesus, we are hearing about mining, above all things. A lot of people are talking about bogs who know nothing about them.

I came from the bog, grew up in it and lived in it. I am proud to be from it. I can tell the Minister now that he needs to sit down and talk to his backbenchers and others. We will work with him but the bottom line is that the machines were out today in every bog in the country cutting turf. He cannot tell people next September that they cannot buy that turf. It is cut and it is done.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** He needs to study up on this and work with people. He can get to where he wants to go but he must bring the people with him, not have them kicking against him.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, on this Sinn Féin motion on the rising cost of home heating fuels and to respond to some of the issues that were raised in the debate. Sinn Féin has expressed the view that the May carbon tax increase should be cancelled, excise duty on home heating oil should be temporarily removed and plans to regulate the sale of turf should be scrapped. I have listened carefully to the debate this evening and will take this opportunity to remind Deputies of the rules governing energy taxation in Ireland and to highlight the importance of carbon tax to Government policy on climate action. I also will reiterate some of the measures put in place by the Government to mitigate the impacts of price increases.

Many contributors spoke about the pressures on people, whether in rural or urban Ireland, in dealing with the cost of living and rising inflation in recent months. We all get that and want to work on it. The initiatives brought forward by various Ministers have seen more than €2 billion of taxpayers' money being used to take the pressure off people and reduce their costs. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, went through some of those initiatives earlier. We recognise that they do not alleviate every pressure or cost for people and families throughout the country, regardless of where they live. There is no one denying that. We want to work continually on this issue and respond as best we can.

I compliment some of the speakers tonight. However, comments about rural Ireland being on its knees are not fair on rural areas. I was in a part of Kerry today where 2,500 jobs have been created by one company, Fexco. Every part of rural Ireland has stories like that. There are parts under pressure, just as there is pressure in some urban areas, but the constant debate in here about how rural Ireland is dying or on its knees is not fair on our rural areas. There are many parts of rural Ireland that are thriving and I want to work with Departments to enhance and develop them. I ask Deputies not to keep talking down our own country. People in those parts of rural Ireland have ambitions and want to thrive. They want to avail of Government schemes, create jobs and do well. They do not want to be insulted in here by being told their areas are dying. That will not help them to attract the investment they need from any Department, whether in jobs, education or anything else. Deputies should not continue to insult rural Ireland. We accept that some parts need extra help or need to be regenerated.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Who insulted rural Ireland?

**Deputy Damien English:** Let us not generalise. There are many urban areas that also need regeneration. It is welcome that capital expenditure funding of €10 billion is available to be channelled into rural and urban regeneration throughout the country to enhance different areas and allow them to go on and develop. There are some parts of the country that have been neglected for 30 or 40 years and investment is needed in them. However, for Deputies to come in here constantly and say in these debates that rural Ireland is on its knees is an insult to rural areas.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Government insulted them.

**Deputy Damien English:** Deputy Healy-Rae did not say it. Others, who live in urban Ireland, did. We need to be clear about this. There are people here talking about cutting turf who I would say never were on a bog. I can tell them, with the back problems I have, that I have spent time on a bog. I know all about it. Some Deputies have that experience but there are plenty of people speaking here who probably never were on a bog, footed turf and brought it home but

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who claim to be experts just because this issue is popular.

Let us have a real and proper conversation about how we can achieve a just transition over time. It is what the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, wants to do and we are working with everybody to achieve it. Let us not exaggerate what is being proposed. It is not about banning the cutting or saving of turf. It is about managing and regulating its sale in certain urban centres and other areas. Let us be clear about that.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** On a point of order, that man to one side of the Minister of State came out a week ago and said he would ban from 1 September the sale and the supply of turf.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Deputy, no one interrupted you when you were speaking.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** No, but the Minister of State cannot say that. It is a lie.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We will have one speaker.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** No. The Minister of State should correct what he is after saying now.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Only one speaker at a time, please.

**Deputy Damien English:** Deputy Healy-Rae-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, said he would ban turf. Why is the Minister of State now standing up talking-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Resume your seat, Deputy. You may not speak twice.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Why does the Minister of State not answer for himself?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** Deputy, resume your seat.

**Deputy Damien English:** If I speak fast, I know we can read fast and listen fast. What I said is that nobody has said we are banning the saving or cutting of turf.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** That man there said it.

**Deputy Damien English:** No. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is after speaking about what I said. What I said to him was that we are looking at regulating the sale of turf, not stopping the cutting or sale of turf. The Deputy should check the record of what I said before accusing me of saying something wrong.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** No. I am not talking about the Minister of State at all, but he should not cover for the Minister. It was the Minister who said it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We will have one speaker at a time. I call on the Minister of State to proceed.

**Deputy Damien English:** Going back to the various parts of the motion that relate to fuel tax, it is important to remind the House that the driving forces behind the current energy prices

are generally outside of the control of the Government, and most reasonable people understand and accept that. We have to work within that and try to reduce the cost pressures on people. This point has been discussed at length in recent weeks. I have made it clear that there are limitations to what the Government can do in its response, but we will certainly try to channel taxpayers' money to ease the pressure in that regard. We have said many times that the final retail price of fuel is determined by a number of factors, most of which are global phenomena and out of the Government's control. Market dynamics have driven up the pre-tax cost of kerosene dramatically in recent months. No one is denying that. It is clear for anyone to see. It is also clear that taxation of energy products is not behind the current prices and their increase.

As mentioned earlier, kerosene is subject to mineral oil tax, which is comprised of a non-carbon and a carbon component, known as carbon tax. Kerosene for home heating has a non-carbon component rate of €0. The carbon component is currently €84.84 per 1,000 l. Consequently, if we were to temporarily remove excise duty on kerosene, we would in effect undermine our carbon tax measure as the Government would come under pressure to remove carbon tax on all fuels and, before we knew it, there would no longer be a coherent response to probably the biggest medium-term challenge we face, which is climate change. Anybody living in Ireland, rural or urban, wants us to play our part to tackle climate change and save and preserve rural Ireland. Let us be fair and honest about that. We know they do, but they want it done in a just way that is fair to everybody. They want us to play our part to protect rural Ireland the way we know it, live in it and enjoy it, for our generation and many generations ahead. We need to remember that in these discussions.

Carbon tax is fundamental to our achieving our climate change strategy of halving emissions by 2030 and reaching net zero no later than 2050, and it is critical, in the Government's view, that nothing is done to endanger that strategy. This also explains why the Government opposes cancelling the carbon tax increase due to commence on 1 May. However, we have brought in other measures to deal with the consequences of that and to make sure that that carbon tax does not put added financial pressure on anybody who cannot afford it. That is why the measures were announced in recent weeks.

The Government has also made clear the restrictions it faces with VAT on kerosene, which is at a special parked rate of 13.5% and cannot go below 12%. In this regard, the House should also note that the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, wrote to Commissioner Gentiloni on 10 March and outlined the various actions he had taken to mitigate the cost of energy for households and businesses to date. He acknowledged the importance of the energy and tax and VAT directives, in particular the framework they provide for a consistent application of these taxes across all member states. However, he outlined the limitations of the changes to annexe III to the VAT directive insofar as they specify that reduced rates may be applied only to gas and electricity and, therefore, that other fuels remain outside the scope of the reduced rates. In this context the Minister asked the Commission to consider allowing member states to respond to the crisis with greater flexibility than is permitted under the current directives.

On 23 April, the Commissioner wrote to all finance ministers regarding the energy crisis, responding to points the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and his European counterparts had raised. The Commissioner highlighted the current flexibility provided by EU directives, including the newly agreed amendment to VAT rates. The Commissioner also indicated that the Commission does not envisage any further revisions of the EU taxation framework to respond to the current crisis. Therefore, there is very little room for significant changes on the VAT side regarding kerosene.

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In summary, it is necessary to respond to the current energy price dynamics, and in this regard the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, outlined earlier what has been done to date to try to deal with those dynamics and alleviate the pressures. However, our response cannot be at the expense of climate action policy, and I think most people would agree with that. It is a matter of taking away some of the financial pressure. In the long run the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them and to develop and to create our own energy not only for ourselves but also for export. We will achieve this through the progressive decarbonisation of Irish society and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

As for other actions, we heard earlier the list of measures the Government has taken to mitigate the impact of increased fuel prices from the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath. I remind Deputies that the measures taken by the Government have been proven to more than offset the May increase in carbon tax, and they do so in a progressive manner that reaches those most in need. Significant enhancements of the fuel allowance will protect those most vulnerable to energy poverty, while the reduced excise rates on auto fuels, reduced VAT on energy bills and the €200 utility credit will mitigate impacts across society.

As for turf, as Members of the House heard earlier, the Government recognises that turf cutting by citizens for use in their own homes is a traditional activity across many peatlands. The burning of large quantities of turf, however, is associated with harmful levels of particulate matter emissions. These emissions can have a considerable public health impact. Therefore, Government policy will look to address these public health concerns while respecting local traditions in personal use of turf for home heating. That involves cutting and saving of turf. To be very clear, no ban on the burning of peat is proposed, but instead a regulatory provision will be made to reduce and prohibit the sale of sod peat in larger clusters of urban settings while allowing the traditional sale in rural areas and use by families there. That is respected. It is a matter of finding a way to plot a course through this. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, wants to work with us all to guide us through that and to reduce the harmful effects where such fuels are used in large urban centres. We can all see the benefits of the reduction in the burning of coal in many of our urban centres. We all know and recognise that. The question is how we can build on that initiative to protect the greater public health for us all.

I assure the House that the current energy price crisis remains an immediate priority for the Government. Our response to date has been comprehensive and immediate. While many of the forces dictating the current situation are outside of our control, the Government will continue to use the policy responses we have to mitigate the impacts on businesses and consumers and to take the pressure off many people living in both rural and urban Ireland. We must, however, remain committed to the policies which are critical to meeting our obligations on climate action. The carbon tax is a key pillar of Government policy to transition to a decarbonised society. The policy of ring-fencing carbon tax receipts for welfare supports for those at risk of energy poverty also ensures that this transition is done in a just and progressive manner. Similarly, the policies proposed on turf cutting are part of our broader commitments on climate action and to improve air quality for everybody. Accordingly, I do not accept the motion before the House and present the Government countermotion for consideration.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis of fuel supply insecurity and price hikes, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, wants to ban the sale of turf from September. Since that came out, it has been one long fiasco after another. After showing complete disregard for the 9% of rural households in this country who depend on turf to heat their homes, it quickly

went to the Minister making outlandish and dismissive statements like “we won’t jail your granny” and unworkable suggestions relating to population limits. All this shows a strange disregard for the reality of the situation so many people face. There are people in Tipperary choosing between heat and food. That is where we are in 2022, and that is on the Government’s watch.

No matter how much the Minister, Deputy Ryan, wants everyone to make the transition immediately, the Government has made it impossible for many. I have spoken to many people across Tipperary who would like to have their homes retrofitted, but that is out of their reach, and the coalition is to blame for that. It failed to plan properly and instead rolled out schemes that discriminate based on people’s level of income. It is plain wrong, and now it wants to ban turf, which is the only fuel that has not gone up in price with inflation. The price of home heating has increased the most, and the Government would not cut excise on it. Instead it wants to add the carbon tax. Far more people live in energy poverty than receive the fuel allowance, yet at a time when there is an immediate crisis the Government would prefer to see them with fewer choices available to them.

Of course we must take steps to ensure that people live with proper air quality and a good environment for future generations. Sinn Féin supports that, no matter what the Government and some in the Opposition who spoke earlier want to spin. We are not climate deniers, but the Government is going about this backwards. It is undermining the climate action message with a fixation on punitive measures. The Government should have identified those who are dependent on turf and at risk of fuel poverty and supported them to transition by prioritising them for schemes like retrofitting or putting electric cars within their reach. This Government has not even established how many people are in energy poverty here because it has not lived up to its commitment to do so in the 2016 strategy to combat energy poverty. Sinn Féin will bring forward a Bill to address that in due course. I call on the Government, especially its backbenchers who are conspicuous by their absence this evening, to scrap plans to ban the sale of turf from September 2022, cancel the carbon tax increase due to commence on 1 May and temporarily remove excise on home heating. I call on the Government Deputies who have called foul over this to stand by their recent commitments and support this motion.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The vast majority of people who use turf as their main fuel are those who are in poorer circumstances across the country. They live in rural Ireland and do not have many options. They, more than anyone else, need retrofitting grants that are an awful lot bigger than those the Government is offering. They cannot afford to retrofit because they do not have €25,000. Retrofitting costs €50,000, with the Government providing €25,000. Where will they get the other 50% or €25,000? The Government is now telling these people they can no longer burn turf. It is unbelievable that the Government can screw things up to such an extent. It steps into one big pothole after the next. Every time it seems to come up with a solution for something, it finds a way of screwing it all up. There is no need to go down this route. The Government should concentrate on ensuring it can provide adequate options for people. If people had options, they would embrace them. Instead of doing that, the Government is taking out a big stick and beating people up because they happen to live in rural areas and turf happens to be the most convenient and cheapest fuel they can find.

Most people who burn turf have a bog close to them. They can hire someone to get a couple of hoppers of turf or cut them themselves during the summer. They can get them home and put them in their shed. Turf is a fuel that is immune to wars or turbulence across the world because it belongs to people and they have access to it. That is what seems to be missing and people do

not recognise that. The Government does not seem to understand why people in predominantly rural Ireland are so angry about this. They feel it is an assault on something they, their families and everyone belonging to them have done for so long. It was there when their backs were to the wall. Prices are increasing for everything, including the other fuel option for people, namely, oil. Prices for oil firing are going up all the time, as are electricity prices and the price of everything else. However, turf is the fuel people own and the Government is saying it will ban it.

I just cannot believe it. I understand that the green movement is an international movement. I understand what it is about but I cannot believe there can be such short-sightedness in trying to develop alternatives for people. Why on earth did the Government go down this route? What is wrong that people cannot see the common sense of doing the right thing for everyone? Doing the right thing means the Government should provide for the people who have the lowest income and the least choice before taking out a stick to beat them up, yet the Government continues to do that. It needs to withdraw its amendment, support our motion and get rid of this stupid nonsense that is going on here tonight.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** As Sinn Féin has acknowledged previously, and acknowledges in the motion, the Government cannot do everything when it comes to the cost of living and, in particular, the energy crisis that households right across this State face. However, there is a glaring anomaly in relation to rural households, the vast majority of which rely on home heating oil and nothing else to heat their homes, and the reduction and removal of excise duty.

The Minister went to great lengths to tell us about the difficulties in relation to reducing VAT. He spent from October last to April telling us that VAT could not be reduced. Eventually, we heard it could be reduced. That has not happened for home heating oil, which has to be reduced. The same applies to the many rural households that rely on turf. Many people, of whom I am one, do not necessarily enjoy going to the bog. We go reluctantly. Many members of the generation before us are much happier to go to the bog and actually enjoy it. A previous speaker stated there is a kind of mystic belief for people when it comes to bogs. It is so much more than that for our older generation. I am thinking of my nanny who is 90 years of age. She would go to the bog tomorrow before she would go anywhere in the world. The bog means so much to that older generation. Turf cutting is being phased out and turf is not going to last forever. New homes are being built without chimneys. Young people do not have the same interest in going to the bog. It is going to phase out naturally. That should be allowed to happen.

It is not unreasonable for people in rural communities and for those of us on the Opposition benches to ask for alternatives to be put in place before the Government takes away the only source of fuel that rural households have. That is a reasonable ask from Opposition parties. All of us, including people in rural communities, want to play our part when it comes to climate action. Everyone wants to do their bit. However, for rural communities it is more difficult to play that part because the alternatives are not there. We do not have the same options when it comes to public transport. In many cases, it simply does not exist. We have not had the same options as regards changing home heating. People have to have money in their pocket if they want to take up the grants the Government has made available. That, in the first instance, is an immediate problem.

There are various views in the House on the carbon tax increase. Again, the difficulty for those of us who live in rural communities is that there are no alternatives. The carbon tax is almost irrelevant for people who have a lot of money. They can buy an electric car and upgrade

their house without having to think twice about it. From Sunday, the Government is piling a carbon tax increase on people who do not have that disposable income. They cannot afford the alternatives. They will be the people who will make the difficult decision not to turn on the heating. They will contribute to the 3,000 people who die in Ireland every year due to fuel poverty. It is a great stain on our State in this day and age that this is happening.

With respect, I wish Members on the Government benches would stop talking about the cost-of-living package in the budget last October, which was months ago. They keep referring to the social welfare increases that are now totally irrelevant. There were no social welfare increases for two years. People who are on those higher social welfare rates have incomes of approximately €50 a month below the minimum essential standard of living, MESL, which would protect them from poverty. None of our social welfare rates do that. There has also been a consistent over-reliance on the fuel allowance. There is no link to the fuel allowance and people who are at risk of or are living in fuel poverty. People get the fuel allowance if they get a certain number of payments. That is it. There is no link between the fuel allowance and fuel poverty. It does not exist.

Government Deputies also spoke about allocating to households that are at risk of fuel poverty. How can the Government do that when it does not know who is in fuel poverty? We do not have the data. The Government did not meet the commitment outlined in the strategy in 2016 to look at those houses that are in fuel poverty. That is the first step. As a Deputy said earlier, we have not said what needs to be done in relation to action for rural communities. The first thing we have to do is identify households that are experiencing fuel poverty or are at risk of it. We have to prioritise them for retrofitting.

We heard that energy upgrades would be deployed rapidly and at scale. Where are they being deployed rapidly and at scale? The warmer homes scheme has a waiting list of two years to get a home retrofitted. That is only if someone receives the fuel allowance, which is allocated to a small number of the population.

On turf, the Government has to consider what it is asking people to give up. People rear their turf and when they put it in the range it heats every radiator in the house and the water. People can cook breakfast, dinner and tea on the range. The Government has to consider what it is asking people to give up.

This motion has been brought forward in good faith by those of us who come from rural communities and know the impact this fiasco over the past two weeks has had. It has caused worry and stress, particularly to our older generation who deserve far better. I ask the Government to reconsider its position on the motion.

Amendment put.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** A division has been called. In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), it is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

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## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Transport Policy

87. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he is considering extending the 10-year rule for taxis in view of the fact that vehicles were underused for the duration of the pandemic; the other actions he intends to take to support taxi drivers who are struggling with high fuel and running costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21009/22]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I ask the Minister for Transport if he is considering extending the ten-year rule for taxis in view of the fact that vehicles were underused for the duration of the pandemic; the other actions he intends to take to support taxi drivers who are struggling with high fuel and running costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

*8 o'clock*

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The regulation of the small public service vehicle, SPSV, sector, including vehicle age limits for SPSVs, is a matter for the National Transport Authority, NTA, under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

In this regard, the Deputy should be aware that the NTA has extended vehicle age limits several times since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, with standard age limits for taxis and hackneys now waived through to the end of 2022, thereby ensuring no operator exits the industry simply because of the need to replace a vehicle. The authority's extension of age limits was an emergency measure of a temporary nature, taken in recognition of the particular challenges posed by the pandemic and was specifically aimed at ensuring that no operator would be required to change their vehicle while passenger demand remained low due to Covid-19.

More generally, the ten-year rule was recommended by the 2011 taxi regulation review and came about following a public consultation on vehicle standards for taxis, hackneys and limousines held that year. It was adopted in recognition of the need to strike a balance between achieving standards that offer the customer confidence, comfort and safety, and allowing industry members to operate successfully, cognisant of the fact that the replacement of a vehicle is an operator's single largest cost. There is no consideration being given to amending these age-related rules now or at any time in the future.

On the rising cost of fuel, I recognise that this is a significant challenge. The Deputy will be aware that the Government announced on 9 March a temporary reduction in the excise duties charged on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil. Excise duty was reduced by 20 cent per litre of petrol and 15 cent per litre of diesel. These reductions, which were due to finish at the end of August, will now be extended until budget day in October at an additional cost of €80 million.

With regard to fares, the NTA is actively engaged in a review of the maximum fare order that sets the maximum fares that may be charged by the driver of a taxi in respect of a journey undertaken in the State. The current applicable order has been in effect since 1 February 2018. Just yesterday the NTA launched a public consultation on this that will run until 27 May.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The Minister just said that there is no intention to consider changing the ten-year rule now or at any stage in the future, which is a very big statement to

make. It is as firm a “No” as one might ever get but I think there is a real case for reviewing it at this point in time. We have had two years with a lot of cars laid up. Cars are maintained to a very high standard. This is not 2011, it is 2022. In the context of trying to manage a transition across the whole of the taxi industry towards electrification, we are not going to do that in the next couple of years and there is a real possibility that if taxi drivers are forced to renew really good vehicles next year or the year after, they will not be in a position to go for an electric vehicle and will go for petrol or diesel. However, if the Department phased it out on a more gradual basis, we might achieve the transition more quickly. Has the Minister considered that or will he look at it as an option?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** While I do not want to be too dogmatic in my response, at the same time these measures were introduced during Covid, correctly to my mind. We are now coming out of it, touch wood and please God, and it is appropriate to return to those standards. We have extended the grants that we introduced for the electrification of the taxi fleet because that will bring real benefits and will help people to make that switch.

It is important to look at some of the statistics on the SPSV fleet. There were some 21,000 SPSVs before Covid and that has dropped to 18,946, 85% of which are less than ten years old. Some of the 15% that are more than ten years old are related to the fact that the age restriction was lifted during Covid but there are also some vehicles that have a longer licensed age. Before Covid, about half of the vehicles were five years old or less but that has now dropped to 35%. There is an issue here. SPSVs do a very large amount of mileage and there is an issue if the vehicle is ten, 11 or 12 years old. It is an issue for the customer as well as for the driver. There are much higher costs associated with running older vehicles and it makes sense to go back to the ten-year rule.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I ask the Minister not to close the door completely and to consider an alternative transition. I do not have those figures on the breakdown of vehicles by age but it is certainly something that should be considered if it means that taxi drivers can transition to an electric vehicle more quickly. They have had a couple of years out of action and if they have a vehicle that is now approaching the end of its limit in terms of the ten-year rule, they might not be in a position to transition to an electric vehicle now. However, they might be in a position to do so in the near future if the rule is extended.

There is also concern in relation to the consultation on a rule that all taxis must be able to take credit card payments. While over 90% of taxi drivers already do, there are concerns. Taxi drivers need a commitment to get paid. They are very concerned that at 2 a.m. on O'Connell Street or somewhere else, they will pick up a passenger who will not be in a position to pay, with an excuse being made about a credit card payment. Will the Minister provide assurances in the statutory instrument that there is an obligation on passengers to pay their fare?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Absolutely, there is an obligation on passengers to pay their fare. There are real benefits to card payments and a lot of customers have moved to them because of Covid. I use a lot of taxis myself and I am surprised that there are still a good number of drivers who do not accept cards. That must be restricting their customer base at this stage because it is so common now for people not to use cash in their day to day lives. Certainly, however, customers have to pay their fare and the outcome of the consultation process must reflect that. That said, we are right to move towards cards in every cab. It is what the customer wants and it can also provide a better payment system for the drivers as well but they do have to get paid.

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## Statutory Instruments

88. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the reasons for the ongoing delay in signing the statutory instrument to give effect to changes in the regular wages scheme for CIÉ workers; when the signing of this statutory instrument will be finalised; if he can give reassurances to CIÉ workers that have retired since June 2020 or will retire shortly that any improvements agreed will be backdated and paid to them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20970/22]

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** In June 2020, CIÉ workers in the regular wages pension scheme voted to accept changes to that scheme. Since then, I have asked the Minister and his Department the same question on at least a dozen occasions that I am asking today. When will the Minister sign the statutory instrument to give effect to those changes in their pensions?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I thank the Deputy for her question and for the opportunity to update the House on the status of the CIÉ regular wages scheme.

As many Deputies are aware, the CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the regular wages scheme and the 1951 superannuation scheme and issues relating to these schemes are primarily a matter for the trustees, the CIÉ Group and its employees. That being said, I understand that the CIÉ group is actively engaged in introducing changes to both schemes aimed at rectifying a significant deficit that currently exists in order to meet the statutory minimum funding standard required by the Pensions Authority.

A ballot of the members of the regular wages scheme on a proposal by the Workplace Relation Commission, WRC, took place in June 2020 and was carried by 83% of those who voted. The proposed changes were agreed by the trustees of the scheme, the employees and the CIÉ Group following extensive and prolonged engagement between all parties.

Following this process, CIÉ prepared and submitted draft statutory instruments to my Department to give effect to the proposed amendments, to establish a new defined contribution scheme, and to consolidate the existing statutory instruments comprising the main scheme. These changes involve significant amendments which are necessary to address the minimum funding standard requirements.

As the Deputy is aware, there are a number of steps involved before a statutory instrument can be made, including the statutory consultation process which took place and ended on 28 February 2022. Officials in my Department are reviewing the submissions received and processing some minor textual edits through legal advisers. I expect that this due diligence will be completed shortly. Thereafter, a report and the final statutory instrument will be submitted to me for consideration. I must also consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, as required under the transport Act.

On the Deputy's query regarding backdating of benefits for those who have retired or are due to retire shortly, the draft statutory instruments provide that benefit improvements will apply retrospectively from the date of the ballot in June 2020. I reassure the Deputy that the Department is working to finalise the statutory instruments as expeditiously as possible.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I acknowledge that the ballot took place in June 2020 and that the changes were agreed by the workers, but this is the end of April 2022. Why is this important? It is because it says a lot about how, at senior levels, the Department and the State view bus

drivers, train drivers and transport workers generally and about the priority they are afforded. They will get an increase of €30 a week in the pension from a meagre €130 to €160 and they will get an increase in their lump sums of €20,000. This will make a huge difference to their lives. My father worked in Dublin Bus, which was then called CIÉ, for 40 years and retired on a pension of £16. Thanks be to God it has improved hugely but it is still meagre compared to what the Minister will get and compared to what I will get. The lack of urgency with which we are dealing with this says a great deal about how the Department and the State treat some of our most front-line workers. We saw how important they are to society during Covid. When will the Minister sign the statutory instrument that will give effect to these increases?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I expect to do so in the next couple of weeks. There will be no one happier than me to be able to do so. I do not believe that in the Department or, certainly, in the political system there is any reluctance or any desire for delay. I agree with the Deputy that we have to value, protect and provide for all our transport workers, especially as the ballot went through. We should honour the result, and I have every intention of doing so. We had to go through the public consultation process. It is very close to completion. It then has to go to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. There will be no delay on our part. I expect we will have it completed in the next couple of weeks.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I am sorry for labouring the point but it needs to be laboured. In early 2021, the Minister told me, and it is on the record, that he hoped to have this statutory instrument signed by the third quarter of 2021. It is now the second quarter of 2022 and there is no sign of it being signed. I hope I do not have to explain to the Minister or to anybody else who has any sense of how workers survive and thrive after many years in a job what that increase would mean to them on a daily basis. I get regular inquiries from bus workers and train drivers as to when they will get their pension increase. I hope the Minister understand this.

As an aside, there should be a bit more urgency about how we deal with retired workers. I have made this point to the Minister of State, Deputy English, with regard to a Bill I have before the House. Many of these workers will die much younger than those of us who do white-collar work precisely because they do blue-collar manual work. Statistics show their life expectancy is not as high as that of other groups of workers. I plead with the Minister to deal with this with some urgency and give us reassurance that all of the payments will be backdated for those who have lost out so far.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am happy to give this reassurance. With regard to the issue that it is not in sight, it will be done in this quarter. It is in the absolute final stages. I would have preferred to have had it earlier but we have to go through the statutory process and get all of the regulatory measures in place. This has been pretty much completed. It will be signed I expect, unless there is something untoward or unexpected. It will be there. We do need to provide for these pensions and provide the increases that have been agreed. I look forward to signing it and getting it introduced within the next two weeks.

## **Electric Vehicles**

89. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the way that he intends to build a second-hand electric vehicle, EV, market here; if he has examined the barriers posed by Brexit in the context of importing second-hand electric vehicles; if he is considering introducing a scrappage scheme for older more polluting cars; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [21010/22]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** How does the Minister intend to build a second-hand electric vehicle market here? Has he examined the barriers posed by Brexit to importing second-hand electric vehicles from Britain? Is he considering introducing a scrappage scheme for older, more polluting cars in rural areas? Will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Electric vehicles are the most prominent transport mitigation measure in the 2021 climate action plan. There is an ambitious target of 945,000 electric vehicles on the road by 2030. This is challenging but indicates the scale of the transformation needed.

I am acutely aware that the cost of electric vehicles remains an issue for many consumers and that supply chain issues globally have also proven difficult. These have been exacerbated by international events. For these reasons our policy measures are being kept under continuous review. The Department convened the electric vehicle policy pathway working group to produce a roadmap to achieving the 2030 electric vehicle target. This group considered a variety of regulatory, financial and taxation policies to accelerate electric vehicle adoption including scrappage schemes. The group concluded that a general scrappage scheme would entail significant additional costs and not necessarily deliver the desired objective in terms of net carbon emissions. However it concluded that niche markets scrappage schemes could potentially play an important role, such as in the small public service vehicle sector that we mentioned earlier. The recommendations of the group were approved by Government and as a result the key range of supports to support the transition to electric vehicles will continue until at least the end of this year.

These measures include purchase grants for private car owners and taxi drivers, vehicle registration tax, VRT, relief, reduced tolls, home charger grants, favourable motor and benefit-in-kind tax rates as well as a comprehensive charging network. These are among the most generous suite of measures available across Europe and they have collectively contributed to an increased take up of electric vehicles in Ireland in recent years to more than 55,000, representing a growing share of the overall market for new vehicles.

An implementation group has been established to progress the recommendations and consider further potential measures. This group will report on its progress to Government in later this year. In addition, work is under way to establish the zero-emission vehicles Ireland office as a matter of priority. This office will co-ordinate the implementation of existing and future electric vehicle measures and infrastructure. Our objective is to develop and refine cost-effective, targeted policy supports over the coming years.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I appreciate some movements and changes were made to the schemes last July on the back of the work of the group the Minister mentioned. It took away some of the particularly offensive elements of the scheme, for example, the price cap was reduced. Much more needs to be done. The trickle-down economics approach is that those who can afford electric vehicles can get them now and the people who actually need to have electric vehicles, those who are car dependent and will be car dependent in future, can get them at some stage in the distant future when those who have means are ready to move on. With regard to the State showing leadership on this, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, indicated a commitment on State procurement. Is there a commitment that the State will procure electric vehicles at any time in the near future? Will the Minister give us an update on this in the first instance?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will begin with the wider point. The supports did evolve, with regard to very expensive cars being excluded from the grant scheme. It will continue to evolve. As electric vehicles become much more commonplace we will need to look at targeted supports, consider the issue of social justice in how we do it and support the likes of the second-hand market. We are looking at measures to develop and promote the commercial fleet as a way of doing this because they tend to trickle down not in the trickle-down economics way but through being sold on after three years. This will start to provide a second-hand market. We have a real problem because of Brexit in that the traditional second-hand market we got from the UK has been cut off because of Brexit and for no other reason. The wider context is important. This will continue to evolve. Supports will be more targeted as electric vehicles become more commonplace and the need for the original flat grant for everyone to get the market built up changes to one where we want to have targeted supports.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Across the political spectrum there is a commitment to try to deliver as much of this as quickly as possible. The committees dealing with transport and climate have heard from the industry and various stakeholders. The industry tells us it needs fleet cars and State cars to be electric vehicles. It needs to turn them over as quickly as possible after a couple of years to generate the second-hand market. We hear from importers that Brexit has been a significant problem. That could be addressed if the Government looked to offset the impact of Brexit with some sort of support for second-hand EVs. There are people who are or were in the business of importing or procuring second-hand EVs and the Minister knows as well as I do that the entire supply chain has completely closed. It has left the process very difficult. The Government must look at this in a real way.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is complicated and we must be careful not to create further inequality if the cars coming in are only for the very wealthy, for example. There is a wider global supply chain issue and the car supply process is currently broken for a variety of reasons, including the war in Ukraine and other factors. We are not seeing the usual delivery of either electric or other vehicles. In that context, the market for second-hand cars has experienced a sharp increase in prices. We must be sensitive and careful in looking at what is happening. We can look at the UK and Brexit matters but the better approach was suggested by the Deputy, which is getting the State involved. An Post is an example. It did not have a small intervention but rather it had a massive change in its fleet, creating a body of light cargo vehicles or vans that could then be moved to the second-hand market. That is a better approach because the State would get a benefit and the second-hand market would also develop. That would fall to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, but it is the best way to develop that kind of second-hand market.

## **Road Tolls**

90. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the urgent need to remove the Dublin Port tunnel toll to reduce carbon emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21140/22]

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I am glad to see both the Minister and Minister of State here. This is something I certainly cannot be accused of being populist about. In the past week we have heard all about turf and carbon emissions. In the life of this Government but also in my previous role as head of the Irish Road Haulage Association, I have been asking why the bar-

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rier has not been removed from the Dublin Port tunnel. It is a toll barrier, despite trucks being able to use the tunnel for free, and it causes an extra 40,000 litres of fuel to be expended into the atmosphere daily, equivalent to 10 million litres per year. Will either the Minister or Minister of State indicate the Government view on the urgency of removing this toll barrier to protect the lung health of people in Dublin?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Under the Roads Acts, 1993 to 2015, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned and, therefore, matters relating to the day-to-day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls, are within the remit of TII. More specifically, the statutory power to levy tolls, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into agreements with private investors are vested in TII under Part 5 of the Roads Acts.

TII has advised that for operational and safety reasons it is essential that barrier control be retained at the toll plaza. It does not follow that removing the toll would lead to a reduction in carbon emissions. On the contrary, TII is concerned that, on the whole, removing the tolls would lead to an increase in congestion as more cars would be incentivised to use the tunnel. This would result in an increase in fuel consumption and an increase in carbon emissions. Increased levels of congestion in the vicinity of the Dublin Port tunnel would negatively impact the freight and logistics sector.

The tunnel has facilitated the removal of heavy goods vehicles traffic away from Dublin city centre and in so doing has improved the overall environment, air quality and road safety in the city. The road safety improvements have been beneficial for vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians. Moreover, the tunnel has delivered benefits to Irish road hauliers, providing a reliable connection between Dublin Port and the motorway network.

The tunnel opened to traffic in December 2006. The toll plaza equipment and the control system software date from the design period in the years prior to the opening. TII has confirmed that it intends to go to tender on an upgrade of both the tolling system software and hardware and it aims to implement the upgrade later in 2022 and 2023. This will result in quicker barrier movement and speedier throughput of vehicles, reducing delays at the barrier and increasing the overall reductions in CO2 emissions coming from tunnel usage.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I must express my frustration and exasperation at such a rote answer written by civil servants who as Deputy Fitzmaurice said earlier just do not know what they are talking about. There is no toll to be paid by trucks and there is no suggestion that by removing the barrier, the tunnel would be free for use by all vehicles. Newer technology, such as that used on the M50, would mean the truck would not have to stop at a barrier and the extra torque, which currently leads to a litre of fuel being used and emissions going into the atmosphere, would not need to be expended. It is the stopping and starting of the truck that expends the litre of fuel.

There were many benefits mentioned by the Minister but none makes any sense. An extra 40,000 litres of fuel are being used, with emissions going into the atmosphere, but an Environmental Protection Agency report indicates World Health Organization safe levels are being exceeded. We are paying fines to the EU for exceeding limits. Does it not make sense to the Green Party Minister to remove the toll barrier, which would prevent all I have mentioned?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and I have spent much time in recent months trying to consider various measures to support or help the haulage sector. We will continue to do so at a difficult time. Included in this we examined whether we could remove the restrictions on the tunnel. The Deputy is correct that trucks do not pay tolls but we considered whether we could remove the barriers altogether so there would, in effect, be a free-flowing system.

My recollection of discussing this matter in advance with civil servants is that it is not about a failure to collect a toll but rather the safety management of the tunnel, which is their primary concern. At certain times of the day there are many trucks using the tunnel and they must be managed so that too many vehicles are not queuing within the tunnel. They must ensure the traffic is spaced out and does not exceed safety limits. That is the primary reason. It is one of safety, control and management of the tunnel.

There is a concern that if the tunnel was barrier-free there could be an increase in its use by private cars. That is why that element was in the answer. It is primarily a safety or traffic management concern. Both the Minister of State and I are examining every solution to help hauliers. In the end we must heed safety advice from civil servants and experts for fear that an accident would lead us to rueing the day we did not.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Again, it is not about helping hauliers but rather the 1,300 people that we have heard said all week die due to lung health issues caused by carbon in our atmosphere. Here we have 40,000 litres of extra fuel being expended every day, amounting to more than 10 million litres per year, and that could be prevented.

There are tunnels all over the world that are not managed by toll barriers. Is the Minister telling me it is beyond the civil servants to look at other models around the world to find a solution so we do not expend an extra 10 million litres of fuel per annum? He is considering banning turf on the basis of lung health concerns. I am talking about N<sub>2</sub>O emissions into an atmosphere already congested with carbon. Is the Minister telling me the best they can come up with is that it is a safety concern? No toll barrier is used as a safety mechanism for a tunnel that I am aware of in any part of the world and I have been in most countries in Europe where these tunnels are.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Every tunnel and road has different characteristics but this tunnel has its own characteristics. We lead all the trucks around the M50-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Is the Minister saying the lung damage caused by an extra 10 million litres of fuel being used is acceptable?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan):** We cannot start an exchange of views.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** No. In every way, we must look to improve air quality and traffic causes some of the pollutants that affect lung health. The effect tends to be more localised.

This tunnel, access to the port and management of that port have certain characteristics that are required to be managed in an organised way. There are deep tunnels all over the world and each has different characteristics as to why they might need management. Having looked at this - having pressed and tried with all the will we could muster - the line came back that we must accept from the experts managing the tunnel. For the safe operation of this tunnel-----

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**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I would like a report on what they have looked at.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will quite happily provide further background from my Department.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Road Network**

91. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Transport the current status of the proposed upgrade of the N25 national road between Midleton and Carrigtwohill, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21022/22]

126. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will provide additional support to allow the proposed upgrade of the N25 national road between Midleton and Carrigtwohill, County Cork, to proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21021/22]

**Deputy David Stanton:** Will the Minister outline the current status of the proposed upgrade of the N25 national road between Midleton and Carrigtwohill? He will be aware, of course, that Cork County Council and his Department had agreed that this should be a very important upgrade, so much so that they have spent €1.2 million on a feasibility study. I think €1.2 million has been spent so far on a feasibility study. Perhaps the Minister can let me know if that figure is correct, and where he plans to go with it now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 91 and 126 together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding regarding the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with TII under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2015, and in line with the national development plan, NDP, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the NDP.

In the new NDP launched in October 2021, approximately €5.1 billion is earmarked for new national roads projects to 2030. This funding will facilitate improved regional accessibility and will also support compact growth, both of which are key national strategic outcomes in the national planning framework. The funding will provide for the development of a number of national roads projects, including the completion of projects which are already at construction stage and those close to it, as well as the development of a number of others. The N25 Carrigtwohill to Midleton project is included in the list of projects to be evaluated for potential prioritisation during the period covered by the NDP.

Due to the fact that the greater portion of the NDP funding for roads projects becomes avail-

able in the second half of the decade, there is a constraint on the funding available for new projects this year. However, most national road projects in the NDP will continue to be progressed in 2022. Projects such as the N25 Carrigtwohill to Middleton road, which do not have the required funding to progress this year, remain part of the NDP and will be considered for funding in future years. With regard to the current status of the preparatory work on the project, I am advised by TII that technical advisors have completed their assessment of the route options for the N25 project and have determined the preferred solution. Improvements to crossings over this busy section of the N25, to improve safety and enhance active travel, are being considered as part of the scheme. Given funding constraints, it will not be possible to progress the project to design and development of the business case this year. The delivery programme for the project will be kept under review for next year and considered in terms of the overall funding envelope available for the national roads programme.

I am aware that the Deputy raised this issue on Leaders' Questions. I think he was concerned that the Department had not responded to him. I wanted to find out about that and went into it in some detail myself. Indeed, I happened to have a meeting with TII today, where we discussed this and other projects. There are a number of projects - around eight - on the NDP which are not proceeding with further funding this year. That does not mean that they will not proceed in the future. We have a particular problem with the cost inflation that is happening now. We will not be able to build a fraction of the roads projects that are at various planning stages. It is important that we manage our budget and funding, and do not create false expectations in that regard. In respect of two of those projects, namely, the N24 from Kilkenny-Waterford towards Cahir and the N4 Longford to Mullingar, we agreed to complete and conclude some of the work there because those projects had not come to a final preferred route selection. It was unfair, particularly with the likes of the N24 project, where there might be six route corridors where land would be frozen, and people and farming and those looking to build housing would be affected, and so on. It was agreed to complete those projects to the final stage to get them to the same stage at which this particular section of roadway is, where there is a preferred route. I have looked at the red route - the Deputy obviously has detailed knowledge of it - that runs parallel, in effect, to the existing dual carriageway which would be converted to a local road system. I will come back to the Deputy on the detail. I have looked into it in quite some detail and I know the area well. It is one of those roads. We are going to have the problem that with cost inflation in road construction and with the huge number of projects that are at various stages in the planning process, we will not be able to build everything immediately. We should be open and honest about that.

**Deputy David Stanton:** There are a few issues that I wish to draw the Minister's attention to, and ask questions about. First, is he aware of the local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, project and the plan to build thousands of houses and housing units close to the railway line at Water-Rock? Is the Minister aware that the road infrastructure that he has spoken about is not up to standard, and that TII has objected to the housing close to the railway line because the road infrastructure is not up to standard? One half of the Government is not talking to the other. I understand that over €4 million has been made available through LIHAF. That project may not happen. Some €1.2 million has been spent already on the road project that may not happen. There are people whose houses are on that preferred route. They have not been contacted or notified yet as to whether or not their houses will be bought or taken from them. It is a mess. In addition, is the Minister aware that there are 30,000 car movements per day on a very dangerous road?

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**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am aware. I said that I looked, in real detail, at the project. There is significant housing development planned. There is controversy in that regard not just in respect of the housing development, but also in respect of retail developments in that area. We have to be careful here because it was the subject of a court decision. The national Planning Regulator has been very specific in raising certain concerns about the nature of some of the planning in this corridor, and how it might lead to further increase in the volumes of traffic in the area induced by long-distance retail shopping. It is complex. There are safety issues. When I met with the chair of TII today, I said that we need to look at all options in terms of how we address safety concerns not just on this section of the N25. The N11 is another example that we are looking at currently, where there are slip roads onto dual carriageways, which were state-of-the-art when they were built, but are now coping with very difficult circumstances. I will be honest. The concern I have, when I look at some of the developments in the area, is that we may be looking at further induced traffic, which would actually exacerbate some of those problems.

**Deputy David Stanton:** For the Minister's information, the development to which I was referring is in a different place. It has nothing to do with this particular land.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is not that far away from it.

**Deputy David Stanton:** It is. It is on the other side of Carrigtwohill. It is west of Carrigtwohill. It is not between Carrigtwohill and Midleton. That is what I am talking about. The LIHAF project is at risk.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I know that.

**Deputy David Stanton:** The developers tell me that the development of thousands of houses may not go ahead. TII has objected to the development. It has written to me and told me that the road is unsafe. It has asked the local authority to carry out safety measures on that roadway which could cost millions of euro. Could the Minister not allow this route to progress to make the road safer and to allow the housing development to go ahead? Housing is the biggest crisis that we have at the moment. Is the Minister aware that for the last 12 years, one of the largest industrial sites in Munster has been frozen because the road access is totally inadequate at Ballyadam? There is a proposal to open it up, which is not going to work either. It is going to drive more cars into Carrigtwohill, which already has cars being driven into it because of the inadequate nature of the road infrastructure. This whole thing came as a bolt out of the blue to the local authority last December. It was not expected. A lot of money has been spent on this project and on the LIHAF project. That is all at risk now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will go back to the point about not creating false promises. There is an issue in terms of the fact that we have a roads programme that is the length of one's arm and beyond, and a budget which, this decade, will not be able to deliver a fraction of it. That is before we look at the examples of these additional roads projects which are not at as advanced or developed stages as others. Therefore, it is difficult. If we were to give the false promise that we can provide all the housing and address all the issues, in my mind, it would not be an accurate assessment of what is happening. There are other developments in the area. I have heard what the Deputy has said about TII's view on how we could develop housing around the upgraded rail line and the much better services it will provide. They will provide real potential route options to take some of that traffic off the road and to actually really develop around the rail system. I believe that will be an investment that can transform the area, help reduce the volume of traffic and improve safety on the adjacent roads.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Is the Minister aware that the road is already at capacity?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am.

**Deputy David Stanton:** That is the reason TII has raised issues with respect to its concerns regarding the operational safety of the national road network. It is located in an area considered for a future national road scheme. The proposed development could prejudice plans for the design of this scheme. However, it will not allow the scheme to go ahead. It is a catch-22. It is objecting to the housing development because the road is not to be allowed. It will not allow the road to go ahead, so the housing development cannot go ahead. It is a mess. It came out of the blue last December with no warning. I have written to the Minister twice about the issue and I have met him personally in the corridor to discuss it. I have received no response from the Minister or his Department. When I was Minister of State, I always ensured that any Deputy or Senator got at least an acknowledgement. That did not happen, where I was concerned, in this case. I got no acknowledgement from the Minister's Department, no letter back to me and no invitation to the Minister's office to discuss it.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** That is why I was concerned. I apologised at the time.

**Deputy David Stanton:** The Minister did apologise.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** My understanding is that a reply was sent.

**Deputy David Stanton:** It was not.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will have to go back and double-check that. I will continue to engage and, as I said, to look at those safety issues and look to see are there ways in which we can address some of them without necessarily having the full road scheme, which I do not believe would be able to get the budget within the constraints that I see ahead of us for the next ten years. Yes, we do want to address those safety issues and see if that can be done in an alternative way.

I will go back and double-check but my understanding is that there was a reply. If there was not, I will find out why it was not sent.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Is the Minister happy that the work done to date may be wasted? He is talking about managing budgets. He is now telling me that this may not happen for years without giving any indication. Can he in some way let the people on the route know whether or not their houses will be subject to a CPO? The route has been identified but it is very wide. There has been no contact with the people and it is not definite yet. I cannot find out and I cannot tell my constituents whether their house is going to be taken from them this year, next year or the year after. That is very unfair. There is a lot of uncertainty. A lot of money has been spent already and a lot of effort made by the local authority, local councillors and everybody else to get this right and, at the very last minute, without any warning, it was pulled.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** As I said, we are very clear that we are not saying that road will never proceed. However, it does have to be within an overall budget and Transport Infrastructure Ireland will have to assess how it will manage and deliver projects, so it has not completely gone to waste and it could well be used.

My understanding of how this process works is that the CPO only comes in at the very later stages, when it gets through planning and through the various stages at Government, tendering

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and the other processes, and when there is a clear idea about those CPO arrangements. I do not believe that, at this stage, the CPO process would start for houses along the route because it is so far away from those sort of detailed tender and post-planning arrangements that this is not when the CPO process would apply.

*Question No. 92 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Haulage Industry**

93. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the status of his engagements with truckers in relation to the rising cost of fuel which is pushing businesses to the brink; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19652/22]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I want to ask about the Minister of State's engagement with the hauliers. The rising cost of fuel is impacting hugely on all of us but we are talking about businesses that are on the brink. I would like to have a statement in regard to what has been done for them but, beyond that, what are the plans to ensure we keep an absolutely necessary cohort in the economy up and running?

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I thank the Deputy for the question. The European and global oil markets are currently volatile due to the conflict in Ukraine exacerbating pre-existing market shortages, primarily of diesel. This has caused a spike in the price of crude and of refined products on the retail market.

The Government is fully aware of the significant financial impact that rising fuel prices is having on the haulage sector and has been engaged with sectoral representatives in that regard. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and I met the IRHA on 10 December 2021 and again on 10 February 2022 to discuss the issue, as well as the need for the heavy goods vehicle sector to make progress towards decarbonisation. With the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine however, fuel prices escalated further. We met the IRHA again in that context on 9 March last. Recognising that this sudden increase in fuel price was a problem in particular for the licensed haulage sector, on 15 March 2022, the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I proposed to the Government an emergency support measure, namely, the licensed haulage emergency support scheme. The scheme will provide support of €100 per week for eight weeks for each eligible heavy goods vehicle, HGV, authorised on the licence of a road haulage operator as of 11 March 2022. The scheme is being administered by the Department of Transport.

In addition, the Government has provided for an excise duty reduction on mineral oil taxes with effect from 10 March. This saw a 20 cent reduction in the excise rate for petrol and a 15 cent reduction on auto diesel. These measures were VAT-inclusive and were proposed to last until 31 August. On 11 April, the Government extended the period of the reduced rates out to budget day. This measure is a benefit to all citizens and businesses to mitigate the impact of recent fuel price increases. However, it should be noted that the causes of these increases are not within the control of the Government and are being directly influenced by external factors, including the Ukraine crisis.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We all accept there are factors beyond the control of the Government. We came out of Covid and we had the issues of Brexit, which impacted on the supply chain and are impacting us all greatly, and this was then followed by a huge global crisis, in par-

particular a European crisis, with the war in Ukraine. With regard to those factors the Government has control over, are we looking at an extension of the €100 payment? I know many hauliers have spoken about the fact they do not believe the diesel rebate scheme is fit for purpose. Is that going to be looked at? We are then back to the question we have all had over many months in the House, which concerns the possibility of room for movement in regard to VAT specifically in regard to hauliers and fuel.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** We all accept there are external factors here. The Government can do so much in regard to cushioning people from the rising cost of fuel but there is also a strong recognition from the Government of the importance of the haulage sector, in particular for our essential supply chain. That is why I, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Government moved in regard to this scheme, which is being processed at the moment and the deadline for that is 29 April. We also have the diesel rebate scheme, which was introduced back in 2013, extended by the Minister for Finance and then, in 2020, due to concerns around Brexit, extended further. This is going to be constantly reviewed. I and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will continue our engagement with the haulage sector because we know how vital it is in regard to the supply of essential goods across the country and beyond.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The Minister of State said it herself. It is about ensuring we can move the essential goods we require because we need to keep the show on the road. I will go back to the point that it is the future plans. Are we looking at extending the €100 payment and what other factors are we looking at? Are we going to properly look at the diesel rebate scheme and update it? On the wider question of VAT, is there any room for manoeuvre? Beyond that, if the Minister of State has time to deal with this, are we any further on in regard to resolving the issue of work visas for people who came here looking to work as truck drivers, given there were ongoing issues?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** We have to acknowledge the work that is ongoing within the Department in regard to the current €100 per week scheme. Those in the haulage sector are applying for that. It is going to run for an eight-week period and it will be reviewed thereafter. As I said, we will continue our engagement, as we have done, with the Irish Road Haulage Association and the wider sector in regard to the needs around logistics and the supply chain, as well as working on the ten-year road haulage strategy. We are also working with the Department of Social Protection around recruitment and with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment on work permits. Significant work has happened around the work permits and also in regard to the diesel rebate scheme. As I said in my earlier contribution, there have been reductions in excise that will not only benefit road hauliers but wider business as well in regard to the rising cost of living.

*Question No. 94 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **Public Transport**

95. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department plans to provide free public transport to refugees who are arriving in Ireland from Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20887/22]

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I would like the Minister to comment on his plans in regard to Ukrainian refugees; their access to free transport and public transport in general; how his De-

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partment is operating on the ground with Ukrainians where they are, particularly those in reception centres, and where they are going to be for the short, medium or long-term; and what his plans are to ensure their time there is not as challenging as the first few weeks have been so far.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** In line with the whole-of-government approach, my Department and the National Transport Authority have been working on practical and meaningful responses to the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis. From the beginning of the crisis, newly-arrived Ukrainians have been able to avail of free travel from their port of entry to the end destination on any public service obligation or Local Link service. Indeed, many commercial bus services similarly offer this assistance in getting people to a safe location.

I was delighted to announce last week the provision of emergency public transport services to refugees housed in rural or isolated locations to ensure better access to our local communities. This will be achieved through an acceleration of network improvements identified through the Connecting Ireland public consultation, including additional stops, route modifications and more services with the aim to increase connectivity. Areas such as the Ring of Kerry will avail of such improvements, in practice catering for both existing demand as well as responding to the increased pressures on services where the local population has grown after the humanitarian crisis.

Additional bus services will also be deployed to cater for those housed away from the existing public transport network. The NTA is examining options to provide transport from the Earl of Desmond hotel, where many refugees have been accommodated, to Tralee town. Such measures will provide better access to a range of amenities, employment opportunities and to onward public transport connections to larger centres.

A community transport fund is also being established to support occasional travel requests. This will be operated by the Transport for Ireland, TFI, Local Link offices and will enable our Ukrainian guests to join in the many activities that are available in our towns, in particular activities focused on youth, integration, culture and education. Collectively, these endeavours aim to support integration of our Ukrainian guests into the local communities that are hosting them. We will keep the issue of transport provision under review as this situation evolves.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** As one of the three most senior people in government, I need to outline to the Minister the experience I am having on the ground in respect of transport and other areas as well. We have children who cannot get to school places. If they get a school place, they are not able to get to the schools. We do not have a co-ordinated response on that which is a problem today. The remedies the Minister has outlined will take a few weeks to roll out or be delivered and that is being optimistic. However, we have problems today.

There are social protection schemes but we do not have means to get these people into Intreo centres. We are having to organise Citizens Information staff to visit reception centres to talk to people. We have health issues. We do not have access to primary care. GPs are unable to take people on. Certain schools are not taking people. The Minister talks about a whole-of-government response but we are not seeing that on the ground. I am not trying to score points here. This is the reality I am experiencing.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It is a huge challenge and it was always going to be such for Ireland and every other European country. We are not alone. We have taken in some 25,000 people. The State we heard today is housing 16,000 to 17,000 people. There are real challenges in that

because there are stages. Someone might arrive at Dublin Airport, Rosslare Port or another port and stay in Citywest for a period, then transfer to another location. There is a significant management task in this.

There is a large percentage of primary school children, in particular, but also secondary school children. Accommodation, education and other services have to be matched. It has to be recognised that for a family a hotel bedroom may not be the optimal. At the same time, congregated settings in this instance may be something that is very good and give people a sense of community and helps them get their feet on the ground.

I know that my colleagues, especially the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, and his Department are absolutely flat out. They are giving their all to make sure we have enough accommodation and working with the Minister for Education to make sure we match schooling and with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, to match health services. That is not easily done when 25,000 people-----

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

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----are arriving within a short number of weeks but our goal is absolutely to make sure that it is an integrated all-of-government response.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** This is a monumental challenge. I have not even mentioned accommodation because that is the greatest challenge of all. However, in terms of managing what is happening on the ground now, the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, has been very receptive to my representations and I commend him on that but we need experienced State officials. I am thinking of community welfare officers and people who work in Citizens Information offices who could be a regular presence in the reception centres, be they hotels, decommissioned religious centres or whatever the case may be and are able to point these people in the right direction. They are able to point them to local transport and Intreo centres and solve the problems that exist on a day-to-day basis. This is a small ask but it has to be put in place. I beseech the Minister to bring this back to Government. The local authorities do not have the competency for this. They do not have competencies in social protection, transport, education or health. I am worried with the community fora being put in place that they will not have the adequate skills to meet the challenges.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Cabinet discussed this at length earlier. The experience on a smaller scale but similar in terms of the need to give those integrated connections, from Syrian refugees arriving, is that local authorities can play a role, especially where they combine with the community, voluntary and other sectors. They have a key role in it. There will be a real role in terms of the director of services in particular within local authorities working with the community and voluntary sectors to provide exactly that sort of guide, connections and real quality information as people settle to whatever varying time they stay. I accept the Deputy’s point. We need that level of engagement. We are committed to providing it. Local authorities will have a role working with the community and voluntary sectors.

*Question No. 96 replied to with Written Answers.*

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## Transport Costs

97. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to ensure that there are appropriate youth travel public transport fares available for 16- to 18-year-olds across all types of public transport modes in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20701/22]

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** What steps is the Minister taking to ensure there are appropriate youth travel public transport fares available for 16- to 18-year-olds across all public transport modes in Ireland? I note a significant reduction for under-24s was introduced and I want to ensure that goes to all youths in the country.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I recognise the importance of incentivising our young people to use public transport to establish sustainable habits from an early age. Setting public transport fares at appropriate levels is a key element to achieving this objective. The Deputy will be aware that a suite of measures is being introduced by Government to help with the rising cost of living, including a 20% average fare reduction on public service obligation, PSO, public transport services until the end of 2022.

Currently, on all PSO public transport services, child fares are available to young people aged between 16 and 18 when paying with a personalised Leap card. For those paying with cash, the child fare is only applicable to those under 16. As such I strongly encourage those in the 16- to 18-year-old bracket to apply for their personalised Leap cards, which can be done easily on *leapcard.ie*. Further, the NTA previously introduced a single flat fare that allows those 18 and under with Leap cards to travel any distance on Dublin Bus, Luas and all DART and commuter rail services within the Dublin area for 80 cent. This represents a 20 cent reduction on the previous Leap fares.

From 9 May, the child fare rate on PSO services will reduce even further to 65 cent for the remainder of this year, due to the introduction of the 20% average cost-of-living fare reduction. Child Xpresso fares and child cash fares will likewise benefit from the 20% discount. Leap fares in Dublin are also included in the 90-minute fare initiative, enabling children to transfer to another mode of public transport without incurring additional costs within 90 minutes of initially tagging on.

The NTA is working hard to ensure that appropriate fares are available for young people on our PSO services. Paired with the significant increase in investment in vehicles and infrastructure, we continue to make public transport a more attractive means of travel. Finally, with the ongoing roll-out of BusConnects across Dublin and regional cities, it is intended that passenger fares will be further streamlined and rationalised as part of this process.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** The Minister said quite clearly that when someone forms the habit at a young age of using public transport, it will extend into later life. The introduction of the fare reductions recently has not been well publicised but it is a significant decrease in public transport fares of 20% for everybody, but a 50% reduction for under-24s, which seems to have gone under the radar a bit. We need to publicise it and get people back on to public transport because of the emissions and congestion associated with transport.

However, advances are being made in transport and that is why it is so important to get young people on to and using it now. I look to measures such as the DART+ extension and

expansion and the significant investment in BusConnects, Connecting Ireland, the rural bus system and the expansion in Cork, Galway and Limerick rail. I note the article today about new stations in Moyross and Ballysimon.

*9 o'clock*

They are all important additions to the public transport network and that is why it is so vital we get young people on the system and that we encourage them onto it.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** From 9 May, these 19-to-23-year-olds, those who are 24 and under, will also be able to avail of 50% discount fares across all services, including city, intercity and rural services. The NTA is working to assess deployment options in this regard. A working group is working with the commercial bus operators to see how this could also be rolled out into the commercial sector. Therefore, a range of measures is being undertaken, particularly for younger people and those who can access Leap cards. I refer as well to the young adult card. This is on top of the general 20% reduction in fares, which started on 18 April last outside the greater Dublin area. It will proceed inside the greater Dublin area from 9 May. I hope this combination of measures will have the effect of getting people back onto public transport as we come out of Covid-19 and that we see those numbers using the services begin to grow.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** The importance of the Leap card cannot be underestimated. It is a simple and easy process to pick one up. We must, however, also explore more integrated ticketing. I note there are also plans to enable people to pay for their tickets with a credit card, and that makes perfect sense. In some cases, though, anomalies exist in fares across the rail network. It may possibly be the case with the bus network as well, but I am more familiar with the rail network. I recently investigated one such anomaly where people in Greystones were being classed as zone 6 for travel into Dublin city centre. I discussed this issue with representatives of the NTA. I am glad they agreed with my analysis of the situation and that Greystones has now been reduced to zone 5. It has resulted in a significant decrease in rail fares for people from Greystones travelling into Dublin city. A similar problem exists with the fare from Wicklow town. I studied that and it also seems quite excessive. There is an opportunity now for us to examine rail fares. I understand there are separate rail ticketing systems, but we must address these anomalies in the system and get more people back using public transport.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I am glad the NTA saw the sense of what Deputy Matthews was saying about that trip. I happened to use the DART to Greystones a good few times recently for various reasons. Not only is it good value in that regard, but it is also probably one of the most spectacular train journeys in the world as one comes out of the tunnels through Bray and Killiney heads. This is not the only location where this issue has arisen. In Mallow, we studied a situation and extended the scope of those areas covered by the metropolitan rail service. The Deputy is right to cite Limerick. There is potential to create a metropolitan rail network in the city, where a series of stations would be connected. A new station in Moyross, for example, would provide the potential to transform the way Limerick develops and the way public transport is seen. This should be the case across all our cities. I happened to visit Cork last week, where I considered the transport plans there in the context of BusConnects Cork. Integral to that endeavour is the new ticketing system to ensure we get exactly what the Deputy mentioned regarding having an integrated network. I refer to designing our bus networks to connect to our rail system and local links. That is all in train, if the pun may be excused.

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## Public Transport

98. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if he will raise with the Minister for Social Protection and the National Transport Authority the difficulties faced by those with free travel passes in using privately operated bus services, especially in rural areas in regions in which Bus Éireann has withdrawn or curtailed its services; if he will support the extension of free travel to all bus services licensed by the National Transport Authority regardless of whether they receive Public Service Obligation funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20975/22]

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** We have had much discussion about rural Ireland today, but my question concerns bus services in rural areas run by private operators and how accessible they are to users of the free travel scheme. About five years ago, the National Bus and Rail Union, NBRU, warned that the significant cuts then being made to services would lead to many areas being neglected and there are now many areas where private operators do not accept free travel passes.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The free travel scheme is a non-statutory scheme administered by the Department of Social Protection. It is available to people aged 66 years or over permanently resident in the State, and to all carers in receipt of carer's allowance. The scheme is also available to certain people with disabilities and people receiving certain welfare-type payments. The fundamental principle of the scheme, as originally envisaged, was to utilise spare capacity on public transport services which operate, in any case, with or without eligible persons, but there are also strong social benefits from providing this service to people.

As the Minister for Transport, I am responsible for policy and overall funding for public transport; however, I am not involved in the day-to-day operational matters of the public transport operators, including those related to the operation of commercial bus services, their fare structures or the acceptance of free travel passes. Furthermore, the NTA also has no direct involvement with the free travel scheme on commercial services. While all public service obligation, PSO, transport services, including rural Local Link services, provide free travel to eligible pass holders, my understanding is that only some commercial operators provide the service. Those private bus companies that have chosen to opt into the free travel scheme are reimbursed for carrying non-fare paying passengers at a discount to reflect the fares foregone nature of the scheme.

Any assessment regarding new private operators seeking to enter the scheme or extending the scheme to all bus services licensed by the NTA would ultimately be a matter for the Department of Social Protection. Such determinations would need to be cognisant of likely cost implications. Since 2019, approximately €95 million in Exchequer funding has been allocated annually to operate the free travel scheme. Any decision to potentially extend the free travel scheme to include more privately-operated commercial bus services, including those operating in rural areas, would require significant levels of additional State funding to implement and operate. This must be a matter for discussion between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** This is exactly my question. I wish to know if the Minister will raise this issue "with the Minister for Social Protection and the National Transport Authority". People in rural Ireland are facing difficulties in respect of their free travel passes not being accepted by some private bus companies. To reiterate, this is more disadvantaging of the people of rural Ireland. Those who live in our cities are likely to be able to catch a Bus Éireann bus, a Dublin

Bus, a Luas or a DART and those who qualify for the free travel scheme will have their passes accepted on all those services. There are, however, chunks of rural Ireland where the services do not accept the free travel pass. The Government itself has stated a limited number of private operators accept the free travel pass. Again, there is a need for some joined-up thinking in this regard. Will the Minister raise this issue with the Department of Social Protection and the NTA and try to resolve the difficulty?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will, but as part of an integrated assessment and modernisation update review, including how we are providing school public transport. That aspect must also be reviewed and improved. I refer as well to how our PSO system is working. The many supports in place during the Covid-19 pandemic helped us to get through those difficult times. We now need to undertake a complete review of our PSO services. We will be doing that in a context where we are also introducing many more bus services, particularly for rural Ireland, in the Connecting Ireland programme. A whole range of funding requirements is needed in that context. There is a need to encourage as many private operators as possible to provide concessionary travel for those eligible, but also to provide new services. It is about getting this right. It must also be recognised that we have introduced fare reductions for those aged under 24, and, indeed, for everyone. This is about the best use of resources to maximise public transport, especially in rural areas.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** There is a degree of discrimination here because in parts of rural Ireland people have no choice but to avail of privately-run public transport not supported by the PSO levy. Many people find they cannot access this great scheme providing free travel for people aged 66 and over, and others, as the Minister outlined, such as carers or those with disabilities, etc. The problem is they cannot access the scheme. Therefore, surely this is a form of discrimination against them. I ask the Minister to attempt to close this loophole that leads to discrimination by opening discussions with the Department of Social Protection and the NTA and considering honestly the difficulties faced by some people in rural areas of the country where it is not possible to use free travel passes on bus services. Regardless of whether they are availing of PSO funding, those operators should be made to accept the free travel passes, or some scheme should be brought in to cover the provision of free public transport for every person entitled to it.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I agree. In any budget discussions, ultimately the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is going to have to help cover the costs here. As I said, in any Government at any period in time there are myriad desires, to pay for childcare, to improve our education and health systems and so on, and also to improve and increase the provisions for public transport, particularly those who are dependent on it and do not have alternatives. The answer is “Yes”. That has to be in the balance of also providing additional services, PSO services and fare reductions such as those we mentioned earlier on. It is getting the balance right between that mix of things. That is what we would seek to do.

*Question No. 99 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Airport Policy**

100. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure that his Department officials urgently engage with their counterparts in the Department of the Taoiseach and the board of the City of Derry Airport to provide financial assistance to the air-

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port utilising the shared island fund. [21017/22]

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The City of Derry Airport is a really important resource to the people of the north west of Ireland. Some 40% of the passengers who use the airport are from Donegal, flying to Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London Stansted and other locations across Europe. The Irish Government has not funded this airport for about a decade now. It is an absolute disgrace. This has to be sorted out. Will the Minister work with the Taoiseach to do so?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the Deputy for his question. The shared island fund is allocated by the Department of the Taoiseach to approved collaborative North-South projects that implement the Government's investment commitments and objectives on a shared island as set out in the programme for Government and the shared island dimension of the revised National Development Plan 2021-2030, including the Government's commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement of January 2020.

There is no Government undertaking to provide financial assistance to City of Derry Airport. Under the New Decade, New Approach agreement the Government committed to conducting a review of the viability of air routes from Dublin to Derry and from Cork to Belfast, which has been progressed by my Department in consultation with officials in the Department of the Taoiseach. I and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, are considering that review in consultation with Government colleagues, and the Government will continue to engage with the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government as appropriate and with stakeholders in the north-west region on this exercise.

As the Deputy knows, the regional airports programme supports regional connectivity to the north-west region. We have a PSO air service between Donegal and Dublin. I know the Deputy is very familiar with it. This marks the Government's commitment to ensuring continued connectivity to the region for the next three years. That commenced on 26 February. Also in line with the Government's commitment to regional balanced development, that Donegal-Dublin PSO air service supports the growth of the economy through tourism, supporting the region, providing really critical travel needs to those travelling to Dublin for medical and other important appointments. This review is ongoing within our Department. I and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will be working with the Department of the Taoiseach and my Government colleagues regarding the other services.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Donegal Airport is a superb airport in west Donegal, no doubt about it. Just to outline geography, there is a reason 40% of the passengers in City of Derry Airport come from Donegal. It is only half an hour from my home in Buncrana to get to City of Derry Airport while it is about an hour and a half to west Donegal. That is the reality. In the Inishowen Peninsula, Letterkenny and Finn Valley people use City of Derry Airport. For a very large section of Donegal they use Donegal Airport.

Derry is the fourth largest city on the island with 500,000 people in the region. The Irish Government has removed funding now for a decade. The Minister of State has given me a more hopeful response today, I must say. In recent responses to parliamentary questions, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was refusing to even meet with a cross-party delegation of councillors from Donegal, Derry and Strabane. The Taoiseach was recently in Derry. He said to councillors at a meeting that the shared island unit may well be a source of income. Will the Minister of State work with the Taoiseach on the basis of that assurance and try to solve this

conundrum for us?

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** As I said, what I and the Minister have committed to doing is conducting that review around the viability of those air routes between Dublin and Derry, and Cork and Belfast. We are working with the Department of the Taoiseach in respect of that. It is also important to say that the City of Derry Airport is already in receipt of funding support from Derry City and Strabane District Council and has received funding from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Department of Transport in the UK, including most recently a £3 million grant announced by the Northern Ireland Executive last month. The Deputy can be assured that the work is ongoing. The Department of the Taoiseach is involved in this as well and there will be a governmental decision with the Department of Transport in respect of these routes.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** What makes it more important is that we have been heartbroken by what has happened with the A5. We were supposed to have a motorway. There is no direct rail connection from Derry and the north west of Ireland. There is no direct motorway connection and no direct air connection. It is a mortal sin what is happening to us. We have been waiting for this motorway. There is no connection. If we have an air connection from north Donegal and County Derry, the entire county, and west Tyrone, it means people can get not just to Dublin but to the world via Dublin Airport. This is about equality of access. Someone can travel half an hour to an airport, fly to Dublin and connect to nearly anywhere. There is certainly massive connectivity to the world. Tourists coming into Ireland can fly to Dublin Airport and connect to Derry. The Minister of State can see how crucial this is. We have let this go now for ten years. I appeal to the Minister of State. She knows about geography, representing a county like Galway. We need to get access into Derry and north Donegal, equality of access for our people to the rest of the country.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** I thank the Deputy. Again I want to say that as part of the programme for Government regional connectivity is absolutely critical. There have been limited funding resources even around the regional airports programme and there are lots of requests to come in under that, including for the City of Derry Airport. To be very to the point, there are limited resources. Particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic we wanted to try to support our regional airports as much as possible in the midst of a crisis. I can say to the Deputy that the review is currently under consideration and I and the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, are working with the Department of the Taoiseach and will be looking at those routes as well. They will be under active consideration.

## **Transport Policy**

101. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to decarbonise last-mile deliveries in town and city centres and in particular to use smaller and lighter vehicles, including e-cargo bikes and trikes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20702/22]

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I want to ask the steps the Minister is taking to decarbonise last-mile deliveries in town and city centres and in particular to use smaller and lighter vehicles including e-cargo bikes and trikes, and if he can make a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** As in passenger transport, enabling the freight sector and businesses to avail of cleaner and more efficient delivery alternatives will be necessary to re-

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duce Ireland's transport emissions and meet our climate goals. Currently, heavy goods vehicles account for around 20%, and light goods vehicles for 18% of national transport emissions. In the coming months, my Department will publish a ten-year strategy for the haulage sector. The Government's aim is to develop a strategy that will focus on generating efficiencies and improving standards. This strategy will include considerations on the decarbonisation of last-mile deliveries. Work on the strategy is ongoing with a plan for further consultation with the public and stakeholders in the coming months.

While emissions reduction for our HGV sector has particular challenges given that low-emissions technology remains in development, electrification is a realistic option for last-mile deliveries in our towns and urban centres. Our Climate Action Plan 2021 targets 95,000 electric vans in use by 2030. In that regard, the cross-departmental electric vehicle policy pathway working group will consider the regulatory, financial and taxation policies to help achieve this target. For urban commercial journeys, the Government will also continue to promote greater sustainable mobility by encouraging the use of e-cargo bikes. The public sector will have an important role in leading and encouraging businesses to make this shift, and a number of local authorities have already introduced e-cargo bike pilots for local businesses that are proving popular. I would also note in particular the example of An Post's efforts in attaining zero emissions delivery status in our major cities. These examples demonstrate that shifting to cleaner last-mile delivery options makes sense for business and will help to make our urban centres safer and healthier. All of these measures will continue to be supported by the enhanced investment we are making in walking and cycling infrastructure across the country.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I welcome that. The Minister of State has identified that there is a ten-year strategy and that it will incorporate parts of the last-mile delivery concept. I will quote some figures from the World Economic Forum, which refers to the increase in online shopping and the demand for e-commerce. The forum estimates that the increase will result in 36% more delivery vehicles in inner cities by 2030 and that, as a consequence, emissions from delivery traffic will increase by 32% and congestion will rise by over 21%. The Minister of State quite rightly pointed out the importance of reducing fossil-fuel emissions and of the transition to electric vehicles. The noise of vehicles travelling around our urban centres must be considered. There would be a negative impact on air quality. We have been discussing air quality a lot in the past two weeks. There is also a road safety aspect. Couriers work hard. They work long hours and are under a lot of pressure, but having so many large vehicles in our urban centres and residential areas creates a safety issue.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** Much really good work is happening across some of our local authority areas. There are pilot schemes in place. Dún-Laoghaire Rathdown County Council is piloting cargo bikes for businesses. It is a six-month cargo-bike pilot scheme. Cork City Council has the cargo bike library. In this regard, some €45,000 has been provided by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with the aim of establishing a cargo bike fleet library. Businesses and community groups will be allowed to borrow a bike for six months as part of a trial scheme to determine whether a cargo bike could be used daily. Dublin City Council has a pilot for e-cargo bikes for businesses. It was launched late last year following the success of the Dún-Laoghaire Rathdown pilot. A similar scheme was launched by Fingal County Council.

It is important that we acknowledge the leadership shown by An Post. It has over 1,000 electric vehicles, including 155 e-trikes. An Post is the first postal service in the world to attain zero-emission delivery status in all the major cities.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I thank the Minister of State. She is quite right to point out the good work being done by An Post. Any Deputy who sits on the north side of Leinster House 2000 building will note that a courier company operates there. A 40-foot truck arrives on one of the evenings in the week and all the parcels and packages in it are decanted into smaller vehicles, including e-bikes and e-trikes, like An Post vehicles. This shows that there is willingness to do what I propose. It also makes economic sense. Economic sense underlines this a lot.

The trial of cargo bikes or e-bikes is a great idea. Anybody who has ever tried an e-bike will have noted how much it could extend his or her commuting distance. That has genuinely positive impacts for how all of us will travel. If we can provide safer infrastructure, I have no doubt that the take-up of e-bikes and e-scooters will result in benefits not only in haulage and distribution but also in general transport.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** The EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme focuses on optimising logistics. This is all part of what we are looking at through the ten-year haulage strategy. The programme is called SENATOR and the aim behind it is to create a new urban logistics model for enhancing city sustainability. The project will develop a smart network operator as a control tower supported on an ICT platform that will work as a support tool for decision-making, integrating and the planning of logistics operations. These are the ideas we are looking for in the public consultation on the ten-year haulage strategy. It is for the industry to come forward with its ideas so we can integrate, consider schemes, run pilots and determine what works. We call on everyone in the supply-chain sector to feed into our ten-year haulage strategy. That will lower emissions, but also improve efficiencies within the sector.

## **Public Transport**

102. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport if a reduction in Expressway bus fares, such as on route 40, Tralee to Cork, and route 51, Limerick to Cork, can be considered as part of the cost-of-living package to facilitate the large population of students that commute along these routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21070/22]

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** The 20% reduction in the cost of bus fares made a meaningful difference to the cost of living for many travelling daily to college or work. However, it is not available on every bus service. Some communities have only the express bus available to them. Is there a way in which communities served only by express buses will have an opportunity to avail of the cost-of-living measures?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The Government is strongly committed to helping to combat the cost-of-living rises experienced throughout the country. As part of the suite of new measures being introduced, a 20% average fare reduction on all PSO public transport services is being made available nationwide until the end of the year. The discounted fares will benefit the hundreds of thousands of people across the country who use PSO public transport every day. The Government allocated €54 million in Exchequer funding to provide this measure; however, this funding does not include an extension of the scheme to commercial operators, such as the Expressway services from Cork to Tralee and Cork to Limerick referred to in the Deputy's question.

Bus Éireann Expressway is a commercially run business that operates in competition with private, commercial operators in the licensed bus market. As such, decisions related to fares are

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made directly by the company itself. However, in recognition of the importance of incentivising young people to use public transport, I was delighted as part of budget 2022 to secure funding to provide for the introduction of a young adult card, YAC, on both PSO and commercial services. This exciting initiative will entitle anyone between the ages of 19 and 23 to discounted travel costs and to increase the level of discount over and above the current student discount level to an average of 50% across all services, including city, intercity and rural services. The discount will initially be made available on all subsidised PSO bus, rail and Luas services next month. It will then be broadened to include commercial operators, such as Expressway, later this year. Intensive work is under way with representatives from the commercial bus sector, the National Transport Authority and the Department to devise a mechanism to implement and expedite the deployment of the YAC in the commercial bus sector. I hope to have arrangements in place before students return to third level education after the summer break to ensure they can avail of the initiative. It is important to establish sustainable travel habits if we are to meaningfully reduce our transport emissions and reach our climate objectives.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Reducing the fare is a huge help in making public transport more attractive. Establishing a pattern of using public transport from a young age is so significant. It really adds to the benefit.

I acknowledge the 50% reduction. It is very significant, much ahead of the 20% reduction. It is important that it be available to students as soon as possible. Many of them are finishing up college at the minute. It is important that the ticket be available to them when they return, or at least before the summer. What steps are being taken to have the 50% reduction in place, especially for those who have not been able to avail of any reduction? The 20% has been available to some students but not others. Can the latter be prioritised in the roll-out of the 50% reduction?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The key is to deliver it before next September to benefit those going to college. It is equally important that young people travelling to work benefit. However, the return of college is the deadline by which we have to have the reduction in place for the commercial operators. Included in this is Bus Éireann.

It is a matter of differentiation. Ideally, we would prefer to apply the reduction to every bus service straightaway but there are characteristics of commercial operations to be considered. We do not set the fares. We do not monitor, regulate or check in respect of cash and other fares of private operators, so it is not as easy to apply the reduction. We can and will do it with regard to the youth travel card, however. It will be done in the September timeframe to allow those going to college at that time and young workers to avail of it. There is a working group established with the commercial operators to deliver it in a timely manner.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Is mór an ní é go mbeidh laghdú 20% ar na ticéidí bus, go háirithe ar cheantair cosúil le Baile Bhuirne, Baile Mhic Íre, Gleann Fleisce agus a leithéid, áiteanna nach bhfuil an bus eile ar fáil dóibh agus nach bhfuil ach an express bus ann. Molaim é sin agus is maith an ní é. Bheadh sé tábhachtach é sin a thabhairt ar aghaidh chun cinn go tapa, go háirithe nuair a bheidh na daltaí ag fillleadh ar an gcoláiste i dtreo deireadh an samhradh.

Can the Minister outline who will be involved in that consultation group, how quickly it will be up and running and how will he ensure that services such as the No. 40 Ballyvourney and Ballymakeery service is in place as well as the Cork to Limerick service? As the Minister knows, these areas do not have alternative services for which people can avail of a discount.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** The working group includes three representatives from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, two further representatives from the commercial sector and a representative from my Department. It is up and running. I appreciate the Deputy's support. We are make sure that, in particular in areas like Ballyvourney, where there is nothing but a Bus Éireann service, that people can avail of lower fares.

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## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Ambulance Service**

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Minister of State. The issues I wish to raise are intertwined. I have raised previously the need for a proper ambulance in Carlow with the Minister. While I appreciate having the opportunity to speak to the Minister of State again, the last time I was here I was told Carlow was second on a priority list for a new ambulance base. My understanding is that is true, but that refers to the south east. I have since found out that there is a national list and I am finding it very difficult to find out where Carlow is on that. The HSE estates unit is committed to land at Kelvin Grove for a new build, which is important. I want to find out about the capital plan and funding for drawings or design. Is there an update on that?.

As the Minister of State is aware, a few months ago I was fortunate to bring the Minister of State, Deputy Jack Chambers, who was visiting Carlow, to the ambulance base to see the need for a new building. I have also had a virtual meeting with the Taoiseach and meetings with national ambulance management with responsibility for the area. Nobody is in any doubt that we need a new ambulance base. However, in the meantime we need a major refurbishment of what is there. I have also extended my support to HSE to find a place to rent. Do we need to consider finding a place to rent at the moment? The premises the ambulance paramedics are currently in are not suitable. I am totally committed to resolving this problem because it is a very serious issue for Carlow.

I will provide a small explanation of why this is so important to me. The ambulance base is in a prefab which is part of a delivery unit that used to belong to St. Dymphna's Hospital. There are no training facilities or canopy over the vehicles. The store is beside an adjacent methadone clinic which has created an additional risk for the staff. The staff are professionals and deserve to be treated as such. Would a service in the private sector be kept open under such circumstances? I do not know. There is an extra €10 million in the budget this year. What is the situation regarding capital projects? Kelvin Grove is a HSE site and, therefore, I believe the project should move forward more quickly. I ask for an update on that.

I also want to ask the Minister of State about discussions regarding understaffing in the south and the current recruitment process. What is the update on that? The Minister of State is aware, given her remit regarding the elderly, that recruitment seems to be an issue. Covid showed up

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the great work our health care staff and ambulance paramedics do in calling to people's houses. They work 24-7. It is important that enough staff members are in place. I want to know the updated position on that because it is important that every area is staffed.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank the Deputy for the question. She has raised this issue many times. I welcome the opportunity to address the House, on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, regarding ambulance resources and services in the south-east. Since 2016, the National Ambulance Service, NAS, including in the south-east region, has undergone significant reform and modernisation involving the prioritisation of investment in new service developments, including increased manpower and fleet and improved technology. Since the end of 2016, NAS staffing resources nationally have increased from 1,744 in December 2016 to 2,049 at the end of January this year, an increase of 305 whole-time equivalents, WTEs, representing over 17% growth in staff over that timeframe. I do not have a specific breakdown for the south-east area.

It is the case that ambulance services across the country are experiencing a very high demand for 999 services for patients and last year saw a record of over 366,000 emergency ambulance calls. Delays in patient transfers at hospitals, caused by extremely busy and pressurised emergency departments, are currently presenting a particular challenge for the NAS in meeting emergency response time targets. In response to these challenges, this year an unprecedented €200 million has been allocated, including €8 million for new service developments. This funding will be invested in capacity building, as well as increasing staffing within the hear and treat service in the National Emergency Operations Centre, NEOC, which advises lower acuity patients of appropriate alternatives to hospital transfer. Overall, the funding for new service developments will allow for the recruitment of 128 additional WTEs.

In addition, Government investment in the NAS has meant that 80 paramedics graduated at the end of 2021 from the NAS college BSc paramedic studies programme. A further 200 student paramedics are currently enrolled in the college on various stages of the programme. The Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is pleased to note that the NAS 2022 recruitment programme for paramedics, student paramedics and intermediate care operatives was launched at the end of last month.

Turning to infrastructure in the south-east and the particular questions the Deputy raised regarding her constituency, the NAS last year completed a detailed prioritisation assessment for all ambulance stations in the southern region. As a result of this assessment, a new ambulance base in Carlow has been confirmed as being the second highest priority for the NAS in the south east. That will answer one of the Deputy's questions. It is not for the whole of Ireland, but rather the south east. The NAS is working with HSE estates in planning a future replacement for the current facility. A greenfield site has been identified and is under consideration. Capital funding for the project will follow in accordance with overall prioritisation planning and I can confirm that the Carlow ambulance base is progressing through the various stages outlined in the public spending code.

Finally, I can advise that a new five-year NAS strategic plan is currently being finalised by the HSE. This plan, elements of which have been funded in budget 2022, will facilitate a strategic organisational redesign and continue to focus on key priorities. Regarding the Deputy's other question, the 2022 capital plan is under final review and has not yet been published. Therefore, it is not appropriate at this time to outline or comment on any of its specific details.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive answer. I welcome the increase in the number of ambulance paramedics. I can speak on behalf of the crew in Carlow in terms of the excellent work that is being done across the country. All have done marvellous work. It is important that Carlow is not forgotten and that there are enough staff in the south-east region, including paramedics. The Minister of State might try to come back to me with an answer on that. It is of concern. Carlow needs a new ambulance base. We have a duty of care to our ambulance paramedics who do an excellent job. The funding that goes into this type of work through the HSE, the capital plan and the Government is vital because the services are vital for people. I know how hard all those in these services work. I know the Minister of State will keep me updated and provide replies on some of my questions she has been unable to answer tonight.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank the Deputy. Everybody in Carlow can rest assured that the county will not be forgotten as long as she is in the House. As I stated, she has raised this issue on so many occasions and I know how important it is. I can assure the House that the Government remains committed to resourcing the National Ambulance Service across the country, including in the south east.

As I have outlined in the limited time available to me, the NAS is currently undergoing a multi-annual reform programme which is prioritising investment in new service developments, including increased manpower and fleet, and improved technology. This has involved significant investment on the part of the Government. For instance, the €200 million being allocated to the NAS this year represents an increase of no less than €30 million on the allocation for 2019. This funding is facilitating an increase in paramedic staff numbers to target capacity deficits and is also being invested in the progression of the development of alternative patient care pathways. These include “hear and treat” and “see and treat” services that are designed to manage low-acuity calls in an integrated manner and often mean that an emergency department attendance can be avoided for these patients.

It is important to acknowledge the work that has been done. We have had 80 new paramedics trained this year and there are more being trained up. We often hear about a lack of different definitions, especially in the context of the Department of Health, whether it is psychologists or psychiatrists or whatever else, but the way to address the issue is to start at third level. I know it takes a few years for the students to come through as trained paramedics but it will be really welcome when they do. I will pass on the Deputy’s questions to the Minister.

### **Hospital Overcrowding**

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this important issue for discussion. On 21 April, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, recorded a figure of 126 patients on trolleys awaiting admission at University Hospital Limerick, UHL. That was the highest number of patients on trolleys ever recorded at any hospital in Ireland. Of the patients, 65 were in the emergency department, with the remaining 61 in ward overflow areas. The number was triple the next-highest figure on the day, recorded at St. Luke’s General Hospital, Kilkenny, where 40 people were awaiting admission. Today, the INMO recorded a figure of 113 people on trolleys. Last January, a figure of 111 people was recorded. That was a record at the time. There is a serious bed capacity shortfall in the mid-west region. We simply do not have enough beds and the pressures associated with Covid-19 have exacerbated the problem.

Figures of 126, 113 or 111 patients awaiting admission were never previously recorded.

In the past two years, 98 additional new beds were provided at UHL. In the past decade, more than €100 million has been invested by successive Governments in delivering key infrastructural projects at the hospital. In 2015, a €40 million critical care block providing 12 intensive care beds, a 16-bed high dependency unit, a 16-bed acute cardiac care unit, a step-down cardiac facility and a day cardiology unit was delivered. In 2015, a €24 million state-of-the-art accident and emergency unit was opened. Early in 2020, a €21 million 60-bed modular unit came into use. Funding of €43 million was recently approved by the board of the HSE to deliver 96 new beds at UHL and it is anticipated construction will commence next year.

Despite the provision of this extra capacity and the recruiting and funding of additional consultants, doctors, nurses and medical staff, UHL still experiences the worst overcrowding of any hospital in the State. These overcrowded conditions are dangerous for patients, as well as the doctors, nurses and staff who work extremely hard in the most challenging of environments. There is a need for a collective and immediate response from the Government and the HSE to take control of this extremely serious situation. There is a need to immediately bring into place a short-term, medium-term and long-term solution to this serious issue. HIQA carried out an unannounced visit to UHL in recent weeks and its report is awaited.

To the credit of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, he visited Limerick last February and spent two days engaging with patients, medical personnel and the executive management team. I understand he received a presentation from hospital management in respect of the need to provide an elective-only hospital in the region. I strongly support the proposal to build an elective-only hospital to cater for patients outside of UHL. It is my understanding that UHL has had discussions in the past year with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, UPMC, which has 40 hospitals globally, including five sites in Ireland. An elective-only hospital needs to be prioritised for the mid west ahead of any other region because of the shortage of beds in the system. I understand that 83% of patients in UHL are there for emergency care, while the remaining 17% require elective procedures.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the issue raised by the Deputy. I am replying on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly. I thank the Deputy for the constructive way in which he outlined the situation and acknowledged that €100 million has been invested in the past ten years. More capacity has been put in place but UHL still recently recorded the highest ever number of patients on trolleys, at 126. I have answered questions on this topic in the Dáil and the Seanad and I have discussed it with the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, who is acutely aware of the issue. As the Deputy stated, the Minister travelled to Limerick and spent two days there. He is aware of the situation.

I acknowledge the distress that overcrowded emergency departments cause to patients and their families, as well as front-line staff working in very challenging conditions in hospitals throughout the country. We are seeing a welcome reduction in the number of Covid-positive patients in hospital, with current numbers less than a third of the peak numbers seen in late March. However, the ongoing presence of Covid-positive patients, the continued requirement to provide separate Covid and non-Covid pathways and staff absences due to Covid are continuing to put pressure on the capacity and operation of hospitals, including emergency departments, across the health system.

University Hospital Limerick has reported that it is continuing to deal with record volumes

of patients attending the emergency department. The hospital recorded a 10% increase in attendances in the first quarter of the year compared with the same timeframe in 2019. In the short term, UHL is working to ensure that care is prioritised for the sickest patients. As part of its escalation plan, additional ward rounds, accelerated discharges and identification of patients for transfer to UL Hospitals model 2 hospitals are all under way.

University Hospital Limerick was included in the independent review of unscheduled care conducted in 2019. The quality and patient safety team at UHL has developed a number of quality improvement pathways to ensure the recommendations of this review are enacted.

The Department of Health continues to work with the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund to identify ways to quickly improve access to care, including through increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services, providing virtual clinics and increasing capacity in the public hospital system.

It is accepted that a key part of the solution for Limerick is additional beds. The new 60-bed modular ward block at UHL is a significant step in addressing this, and provides modern, single-room inpatient accommodation with improved infection prevention and control capabilities, as well as patient flow throughout the hospital. This follows two separate rapid-build projects which delivered 38 beds under the Government national action plan in response to Covid-19.

Medium-term plans for Limerick include provision for a 96-bed ward block at UHL. The evaluation of tenders received has been completed and the awarding of a works contract was approved by the HSE board on 25 March 2022. The capital and estates department of the HSE will now be engaging with the successful bidder. It is anticipated that it will likely take 24 months from commencement to complete the construction phase, with a further eight to nine weeks required to equip and commission the new block for use by the hospital. In the longer term, the plan for UHL, and nationally, is to enable more patients to be seen in the community wherever possible.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I thank the Minister of State. The Sláintecare plan recommends that three elective-only hospitals be built - one each in Dublin, Cork and Galway. Given the continuous overcrowding at UHL and the compelling case that has been put to the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, by the executive management there, Government policy clearly needs to change. Priority must be given to delivering an elective-only hospital for the mid-west. I want to establish what the Minister’s position is on the provision of that hospital. It is of critical importance that it be prioritised and that every effort be made by the State to fast-track its delivery. I have sought an urgent meeting with the Taoiseach and the Minister and I understand that request is with the Taoiseach’s private secretary. When the Minister of State reports back on this debate, will she raise this issue with the Taoiseach and the Minister?

The HSE and the Minister need to examine an enhanced role for the model 2 hospitals in Ennis and Nenagh and for St. John’s Hospital. There is a need to build additional bed capacity at Ennis General Hospital by adding new wards and extending the opening hours of the medical assessment unit and the minor injuries unit, which was recently refurbished at a cost of €2 million. Private hospitals played an important role during the Covid crisis and their services should now be contracted to cater for elective patients at UHL and deal with the extraordinary waiting lists for procedures.

I understand a number of initiatives are being rolled out in the mid-west to divert older

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people away from the emergency department at UHL. The integrated care programme for older people, ICPOP, is being rolled out, with a hub in St. Joseph's Hospital in Ennis, as well as the pathfinder initiative. In the context of her responsibility for services for older people, will the Minister of State update the House on those initiatives?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I take on board all of the points the Deputy has raised regarding the proposal to build three elective-only hospitals, his comments on UHL and the enhanced role for the model 2 hospitals located in that particular community healthcare organisation. The health service capacity review 2018 was clear on the need for a major investment in additional capacity in both acute hospitals and community services, combined with a wide-scale reform of the manner and location of the provision of health services. Since January 2020, more than 800 additional acute inpatient beds have been provided nationally on a permanent basis.

However, even with all the extra capacity in Limerick, it clearly is not enough. I provided details in my reply about the number of new beds, as the Deputy acknowledged. The most important thing we can do for people, especially older people, is to ensure they can get care in their community. The ICPOP teams are fantastic in supporting older people, ensuring the first step is not always the emergency department and providing wrap-around support in outpatient services.

I note the Deputy's request for a meeting with the Taoiseach and the Minister. I will feed that suggestion back to them. All the Deputy's points have been really well made. I recognise and respect the sincerity with which he has made them. I will speak to the Minister on his behalf.

### **Animal Welfare**

**Deputy Mark Ward:** As much as I enjoy a debate with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, of which we have had many, I am disappointed that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is not present to take this important debate. Clondalkin Equine Club was opened in 2017. I attended the opening alongside Deputy Gino Kenny and it has been a really welcome addition to our community. It was born out of the need to facilitate a community tradition of urban horsemanship in an area of disadvantage. The club is like an oasis in the heart of our community. It was developed as a joint enterprise between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and South Dublin County Council, with the latter providing the land and the former giving the initial funding. There are 20 horses stabled at the facility that might otherwise have been left tethered in a field. The number of horses seized by the council has dropped dramatically over the years since the club opened.

The reality is that if funding is not found, this beautiful space will close. The club is in a really difficult position. While I accept it is not the sole responsibility of the Department, somebody needs to take the reins, if I may be excused that pun. Children using the project have progressed into jobs in the horse industry, including in veterinary practices. The club has enabled children to participate in educational projects. It has created a space where children can be safe and away from the pitfalls of a disadvantaged area. The club has hosted children with disabilities and those from marginalised groups in our community.

Clondalkin Equine Club needs core funding of €60,000 to stay open. Will the Minister of State ask the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, to provide immediate interim funding to give the

club some breathing space? I also ask that the Department take the lead by bringing together the other stakeholders. Like mental health provision, this is a cross-departmental matter, encompassing issues relating to education, justice, community development, children, local government and sport. Will the Minister of State ask the Minister to get all those people around the table?

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I have been a board member of Clondalkin Equine Club for the past five years. I was one of the co-founders of the club ten years ago. The concept was somewhat unique in a context where there was an enormous number of problems relating to equine welfare in the Clondalkin area. Horse owners got together more than ten years ago to appeal to the council and the authorities to prevent a type of revolving door system whereby horses were impounded and destroyed, which resulted in animosity. The club has brought all the educational and safety guidelines to bear on the project.

The money we are talking about is a pittance relative to what the State gives to Horse Racing Ireland, which amounts to approximately €70 million a year. Clondalkin Equine Club is asking for a very small amount. Urban horse ownership is a great tradition in working-class areas in Limerick, Cork and Dublin. It stems from the movement of people from inner cities to suburbs and the tradition of horses being used both for work and as a hobby. There are 20 horses stabled at the club and it facilitates 20 children as well as their parents. Speaking as a board member and a representative of the area, the idea that it will close in July is an absolute travesty. For the amount that is needed, it would be an absolute sin to see the closure of a club that gives joy to so many young people. I hope we can find a solution over the next couple of months.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I am taking the debate on behalf of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, who is on official business as part of an agriculture trade mission to the US. He sends his apologies. The Deputies have brought great passion to the points they raised. I am not familiar with Clondalkin Equine Club but they have made clear how important it is to their community.

The Minister is fully committed to supporting sustainable One Health, One Welfare initiatives in line with the programme for Government and Working Together for Animal Welfare - Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-25. His Department continues to support a number of urban horse projects nationwide. In line with the strategy, the Department's focus is on supporting start-up infrastructure costs as well as initiatives that bring education on all issues relating to equine welfare to areas dealing with urban horse challenges.

*10 o'clock*

The Department is committed to working with local authorities, charities and community stakeholders in supporting urban horse welfare programmes, in particular in the context of facilities and education programmes.

The Clondalkin Equine Club is an important example of this activity. The Department has shown considerable commitment through the provision of the largest capital outlay in support of an urban horse programme in support of the Clondalkin Equine Club. A sum of €503,000 was provided to South Dublin County Council in 2016 for the development of the club's infrastructure. This funding was committed on the understanding that the club, when up and running, would be self-sustaining. It was made clear to both the council and the club that, follow-

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ing the investment in infrastructure, funding would not be available for the day-to-day running of the club. Funding under the terms of the urban horse projects is limited to the provision of education courses and infrastructure. However, to assist with the initial sustainability of the project, the Department worked with the club and the local authority towards the hiring of a development manager, responsible for the further development of the club. This agreement was subject to the club agreeing further efforts to secure alternative funding.

Last year, following further representations from the club board and meetings with the board and management, the Department agreed to provide a final tranche of short-term funding to the project through the council. This agreement was in the context of limitations imposed by Covid-19, the club agreeing further efforts to secure alternative funding, and the proposed formulation of a strategy and robust governance for the organisation going forward.

To date, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has committed over €580,000 to the project. In addition, officials from the Department have worked with the club, South Dublin County Council and Government agencies in attempting to source funding for the club. From these interactions it has become clear that, under the existing model, the club has not met the commitments undertaken in order to qualify for long-term public funding.

I am pleased that discussions between the club board and the council are continuing and I understand that the club has agreed to work with the council to review its business model and governance structure.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I mentioned six different Departments. I do not want to oversimplify, but €60,000, €10,000 from each Department, would really work. We need to get these people around the table. At the moment Departments are working in silos. The left hand does not seem to know what the right hand is doing sometimes. I was asking the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to arrange such a meeting to get all the stakeholders around the one table and to see if there is any other funding in other Departments that could really help this club.

For example, and I got a reply to a parliamentary question about this tonight, we have done a fair bit of work on a Bill relating to proceeds of crime and returning the proceeds seized by the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, into disadvantaged communities. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, she has moved a fair bit on that. There is a grant open for that. I got news of that only tonight. That, I think, would really benefit this community. It is a community of high disadvantage and one that has been detrimentally impacted by crime over the years. If that money seized by CAB were given over to something like the horse project, it would send out a really clear message to the community that it is being listened to and valued. Something needs to happen.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I speak as a board member of the club. The board and the club have exhausted every single known funding avenue to the point where we are at this juncture. If we do not get this small amount of funding, the club will have no alternative, unfortunately, but to close its doors in July. As I said, that would be an absolute travesty in respect of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I commend the Department. It has been really good in promoting urban horse ownership. Previously, people who owned horses in working-class areas were marginalised and stigmatised and looked upon as scumbags, but that is not the case. The majority of people who keep horses in working-class areas manage and keep their horses very well. A minority could not look after a goldfish, never mind a horse. It is so important this club is kept open.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank both Deputies again. I acknowledge, as Deputy Kenny himself has done, that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has committed over €580,000 to the project. In addition, officials from the Department have worked with the club, South Dublin County Council and Government agencies. However, I take on board what the Deputy said as a board member, that the board and the club have exhausted every single avenue. I also take on board what Deputy Ward said about how it is a highly disadvantaged community. That is very important. All I can say to the Deputies is that I will bring their thoughts back to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and give them a commitment that I will also speak to the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, about what they have raised tonight. That is all the information I have so I cannot say any more about the matter, but I take on board how genuine both Deputies are about this facility. I thank them for their time.

### **Common Agricultural Policy**

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I will have to revise a number of my remarks because I had very much hoped I would be having a discussion with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine this evening. Of course, that is no disrespect to the Minister of State.

One of the fundamental problems I had with the Minister's approach to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, strategic plan is that he refused even to indulge us with a debate prior to submitting the plan. He refused to bring it before the House for approval and refused to bring it before the Oireachtas committee for consideration. Perhaps if he had done either of those things, we in this House and those of us who understand the importance of the Common Agricultural Policy to the future of not only Irish farming but the rural communities that depend on our family farmers, collectively, would now be in a better position. As it stands, the Minister essentially has to own the correspondence he has received from the European Commission because the strategic plan was his and his alone. He was very forceful in that regard. That was despite the fact that he resisted some of what I would describe as the progressive measures that were sought at EU level in respect of the next round of the Common Agricultural Policy. The reason he gave for opposing those measures at a European level was that they should be made at a national level and made democratically, whereby those people who will be impacted would have an opportunity to engage, but then he did not follow through, as I said.

There is quite an amount to take in from the observation. It is a detailed critique. I saw one report describe the European Commission as "less than pleased" with the Irish CAP strategic plan, which seems a fair, if understated, description given that, essentially, the Commission has rejected the Irish CAP strategic plan. I do not agree with the view and the analysis in everything the European Commission has said. In some areas it makes points we in this House made in advance of this plan being developed within Agriculture House, that is, points about redistributive measures, particularly in respect of organics and the need to promote and support farmers making transitions to mixed farming or other types of farming. Some of the aspects of the report are frankly mind-boggling. There is a line in the correspondence that states: "... the Commission has doubts [as to] whether [or not] what is proposed goes far enough. In this context, it particularly has in mind the substantial growth in the size of the Irish dairy herd in recent years...". The substantial growth in the size of the Irish dairy herd is a direct result of the EU's removal of quotas, which led to an expansion of the herd in Ireland and also a corresponding, or almost corresponding, decrease in the size of the herd in other EU member states.

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My questions, which I hope will be dealt with in the Minister of State's response, are as follows. What will the Minister's approach now be in how he deals with this? Does he intend to engage with all stakeholders? Does he intend to engage with this House before he responds to the European Commission? What status does he give the comments the European Commission has made? Does he consider its reflections to be binding on him to make amendments or does he consider them simply to be commentary that he can ignore?

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am taking it because the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, is away on official business. I welcome the opportunity to update the House on the matter.

The receipt of the observations letter from the European Commission on 31 March marks another important milestone in the development of Ireland's CAP strategic plan for the period 2023 to 2027. Ireland is one of the 19 member states that submitted plans ahead of the statutory deadline of 1 January last and to which the Commission is now responding following an assessment by all of the relevant Commission services, including those responsible for agriculture, climate and the environment.

The Commission has carried out a comprehensive assessment of Ireland's draft plan. The observations, which number over 200, set out high-level and more detailed technical observations. The letter acknowledges the quality of the plan. It notes the coherency of the plan, the level of completeness covering all of the specific objectives of the CAP and the European Commission recommendations. It notes that potential to contribute effectively to a competitive, resilient and diversified agricultural sector that ensures long term food security. From an environment and climate perspective, it welcomes the ambitious approach to landscape actions through the flagship agri-environment and climate measure, AECM, which will benefit water, biodiversity and climate, as well as the setting of a national target for the European Green Deal, including our significant ambition in organics, nutrient loss and landscape fixtures. However, areas have been identified where the Commission considers that we have an opportunity to strengthen our ambition and to set higher targets. They are requesting more information on the extent of environmental benefit that will be achieved by some interventions, including the new eco-scheme intervention. They note also the environmental challenges resulting from the substantial growth in the dairy herd. The Commission has also asked all member states to review their plans in the context of the impacts arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In terms of next steps, the Secretary General of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has already provided an initial reaction by way of written response to the observations to the Commission. I understand that the Commission intends to publish the observation letters of all 19 member states and their responses shortly. The Department has already published the Commission's observation letter on the Government website.

The Department officials are currently in regular bilateral discussions with the European Commission to finalise the plan. The approval process will be a continuation of the structured dialogue with the Commission. The latter has proven to be very effective to date. The officials will provide the necessary clarifications and explanations in more detail around the level of environmental gain expected from the interventions. We consider that all elements of the green architecture must be considered as a package. There has been extensive engagement with the stakeholders. The plan strikes the right balance to support the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the sector. Other supports outside of CAP will also be required to achieve climate and environmental targets, including regulation, industry market initiatives and new

technologies and innovations.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine will continue to consult with stakeholders as the approval process unfolds over the coming months. A meeting of the CAP stakeholder consultative committee is scheduled for Friday of this week. It is anticipated that work will intensify over the coming weeks to reach agreement on the draft plan before the summer break. It is anticipated that the final CAP strategic plan for Ireland will be adopted by September of this year, allowing the new CAP plan to begin as planned on 1 January 2023.

Overall, the Minister and the Department are confident that the CAP plan is robust, that it will support farm incomes and that it helps deliver on our climate ambitions. The Minister asked me to inform Deputy Carthy that if he has any specific questions, I will take them on board and feed them back to the Minister.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I thank the Minister of State for that, but I could have sent the Minister an email with the questions. I would have thought that the purpose of Topical Issue debates is that we could have a debate on a matter such as this. If the Minister is unavoidably absent, then we accept that. In fairness to the Minister, he is one of the better Cabinet Ministers at attending for Topical Issue debates. I want to put on the record that this whole process needs to be reviewed. I do not believe it is fair on the Minister of State or me to be here at 10 p.m. to have a debate whereby I ask her questions and she then relays them to the Minister.

I will say this, and maybe the Minister of State will take this point back, because I will take the Minister up on that specific offer of questions. Does the Minister see a difficulty in the response, which indicates that the Secretary General of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has already provided an initial reaction by way of written response to the Commission on the observations? The Commission has seen the Government's response to its observations. We, as elected representatives, have seen the observations. Farmers have seen the observations. However, we have not seen what the Secretary General, on behalf of the people, of farmers and of the agriculture sector, has said. I would have hoped that a topical issues debate, like this one, would have been an opportunity to, rather than just passing on an oversight of what is in the observations and which we can all find out, to hear what the Government has said specifically in respect of those observations.

The crucial question must be asked again: what is the status of this observations? Are they binding? Are we expected? Are we obliged? Will it be a matter for individual governments? How can the assertion be made with such confidence that a final agreement will be reached by the summer break so that the CAP can actually proceed as planned on 1 January next? These are legitimate questions and I hope that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine will be forthcoming in a public way as soon as possible in answering them.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I thank the Deputy. In response to his question about when the letter relating to the observations will be published, it has already been published on the Department's website. The Commission intends to publish all the member states' letters and member states' responses on its website shortly. That is the answer I have in relation to that matter. The officials are working through the observations with the Commission and will consider if changes are required as we move through the process over the coming weeks. Some elements are technical. Others may require further explanation. Stakeholders will be kept advised through the CAP stakeholder consultative committee.

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I will communicate to the Minister the questions the Deputy has posed. I thank him for his time.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That concludes the Topical Issues debate. Sin deireadh le gnó le Dála don lá inniu.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.17 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 27 Aibreán 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.17 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday 27 April 2022.