



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 26 Bealtaine 2022

Thursday, 26 May 2022

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

***Paidir agus Machnamh.
Prayer and Reflection.***

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Emergency Departments

1. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to tackle emergency department overcrowding and long waiting times; the number of scheduled patient care appointments that were cancelled due to complications with unscheduled care in 2021 and to date in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26375/22]

Deputy David Cullinane: I ask for an outline of the length of time people are waiting in emergency departments. Are the Government's targets for the maximum wait times being met? Yesterday I received a response to a parliamentary question which stated that the average time to admission for patients aged over 75 through emergency departments across the State was 13.75 hours. That is a long time. Unfortunately, the data across the board are not good.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is too long and completely unacceptable. I have personally, as no doubt the Deputy has, seen the distress in overcrowded emergency departments - distress to patients, their families and our healthcare professionals across the country. I have visited some of the busiest sites including Limerick and Galway. Later today I will be in the Mercy Hospital in Cork and tomorrow I will be in Cork University Hospital, CUH. I will talk to senior management and clinicians about what is going on and what needs to change.

We invested an additional €1.1 billion in the budget for last year to expand capacity, increase services and support reform. We maintained this level of investment this year with an additional €77 million in the winter plan for the winter that has just gone by. The plan sought to address the causes of long waits in the emergency departments. It targeted attendances, patient flow and better egress or discharge.

The approach is to allow emergency department staff to focus on those most urgently in

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need of care or most in need of urgent care. We have provided 850 additional non-ICU hospital beds since January 2020.

Despite this unprecedented investment and increase in capacity, patients still face unacceptably long waits. What patients face in some, not all, of our hospital emergency departments is simply not acceptable. It is mainly due to increased attendances and admittances especially of those aged over 75, as outlined in the response to the parliamentary question the Deputy received. Many are sicker than before, have comorbidities and stay longer. As the Deputy will be aware, Covid impacted bed availability and facilities in hospitals. It has also significantly affected discharge options, including taking out about two thirds of nursing homes in terms of being able to discharge patients to them.

Deputy David Cullinane: In one of the hospitals the Minister will visit tomorrow, Cork University Hospital, the average wait time for over 75s in April was 28.8 hours which is staggering. These are people over the age of 75, who the Minister admits have comorbidity and other challenges. The average wait time in the Mercy Hospital was 26.8 hours and University Hospital Limerick was 22.2 hours. We have major problems in all our acute hospitals. The Minister is right in saying some hospitals are getting it right. I will get to the solutions in my next round of questions. Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda and Cavan hospital are two examples of hospitals that have put in place in a zero-tolerance approach to emergency department waits and it seems to be working. Why is this not being replicated across the State?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I fully agree that the operation in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda is fantastic. I think it has five separate pathways when patients come in, including the use of advanced nurse practitioners who are doing a phenomenal job in being able to see, treat and discharge about 70% to 75% of the patients coming into that hospital. The challenge the Deputy posed is exactly the challenge I posed the HSE. What are we doing about it? We now have a group that is looking at every emergency department throughout the country and doing an analysis of what they have and do not have, versus what they must have. It is using an approach, called the five fundamentals, which is drawn from experience in Scotland and across the UK. Essentially it comes down to looking at pre-admission and reducing the numbers coming in, ensuring hospitals have the facilities and management they need, and ensuring patients can be discharged. We are carrying out an analysis for every emergency department. I am determined that the identified gaps will be addressed.

Deputy David Cullinane: We obviously need more inpatient beds in some hospitals, but it is not all about beds. In some hospitals which got additional beds in recent years, we are not seeing the improvements we need. Of course, we need more inpatient bed capacity because if we have more beds, we can admit patients more quickly. We also need a discharge plan for each patient as soon as they go into the hospital. That needs to be multidisciplinary with all staff working together as a team. They also need to know that step-down beds are available in the community which very often is not the case. Many patients cannot get home care support packages. There is a clear linkage between what is happening in our acute hospitals and a lack of capacity in GP care and out-of-hours care, a matter I have raised with the Minister before. Unless we get the enhanced community care piece right, 40% of patients, who should be treated within the home or in the community, will continue to go to emergency departments. That is where the Minister's focus needs to be.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I agree with all of that. In Bray on Friday, I met the new chronic disease management team, the new older persons team and the new community health-

care network, including a pilot on mental health led by an advanced nurse practitioner in mental health. The level of prevention that is going on, including emergency presentation, is very impressive and fully in line with the Sláintecare vision, involving a massive investment in community-based care. We are beginning to see a reduction in referrals in the areas where that has been deployed.

There is no monopoly in wisdom for fixing this issue. If the Deputy, other colleagues or members of the health committee want to meet or make a submission, that would be very welcome. We are in the middle of a very intensive planning phase at the moment with the HSE. I have asked the HSE to work with the Department on a hospital-by-hospital basis because the solutions are different by hospital. Any insight or ideas the committee or colleagues may have would be a very welcome part of that planning work.

Departmental Reviews

3. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of the sodium valproate inquiry and the provision of community-based care to patients and families affected by foetal valproate syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26376/22]

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister will know that 1,500 children have experienced a major congenital malformation or some form of neurodevelopmental delay because of exposure to sodium valproate. He committed to an inquiry into this but that has not happened. I believe terms of reference have still not been agreed. Support packages were supposed to be put in place for victims and survivors but that has not happened. I want to get a sense of the status and how this can be advanced as quickly as possible.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I am very sympathetic to the patients and their families over what has happened. I met the patient groups involved in late 2020 and supported their call for a review into sodium valproate. I committed to making it happen. Since then, senior officials in my Department have been engaging closely with the patient groups and other stakeholders over the past year to finalise the terms of reference to get this review under way.

Critically, the review will be designed around giving a voice to patients and their families and looking at the use of sodium valproate in Ireland since it was first licensed. It was important that enough time and resources were invested in scoping out the work to be done and engaging with patient groups as opposed to simply designing something and telling them what it would be. Many factors needed to be considered and I wanted to ensure the terms of reference incorporated what people wanted to see.

Many different groups are involved here, including the manufacturer, prescribers of the drug, our medicines and pharmacy regulators, and most important the patients and their families. As a result, there has been a lot of preparatory work to get this together and to make sure all of the groups involved would come together for the review.

With regard to community-based care, as part of the valproate response project, the HSE has developed a diagnostic and community pathway to ensure patients are properly assessed and are referred to community services if they receive a diagnosis of foetal valproate syndrome, FVS. The first step in developing the pathway was establishing a dedicated diagnostic clinic in

2019. That was established in Children's Health Ireland in Crumlin and is headed by a specialist consultant geneticist. As of today, 36 patients have received a diagnosis. There is, critically, no waiting list at the moment for that diagnosis. I will, in my next response, continue on the rest of the community pathways.

Deputy David Cullinane: People want to hear when the terms of reference will be complete and when the inquiry will be established. Does the Minister have any timeframe at all? That commitment was given a long time ago. There was also a commitment given in 2019, when the HSE recommended medical cards for all individuals who have FVS. That has not happened.

I understand it was also recommended that community healthcare organisations, CHOs, submit business cases for additional supports to provide these services. According to a report in *The Medical Independent*, none have been submitted. A national FVS co-ordinator was to be appointed. Has such a person been appointed? My understanding is that to date, only 35 people have been diagnosed with FVS and we know the number is going to be much higher than that.

There is a diagnostic pathway but it is clearly not working fast enough. When will the inquiry be established? When will the supports that were promised be put in place?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The inquiry will be established as soon as we get the terms of reference finalised. It is important that the terms of reference, first and foremost, make sense for the patients, families and groups. We must also ensure all the stakeholders can work with those terms of reference. We are reviewing the terms of reference at the moment. I cannot give an exact date but I will revert to the Deputy with an update when I have it.

After a diagnosis, the geneticist makes a recommendation on the health services that are needed for the patient. This is important. The geneticist is designing or recommending a package of care. The relevant CHO is then informed and a liaison officer is appointed. We will all agree that is important. The liaison officer establishes the link to the services and, critically, is an advocate for the patient. At that point, the appropriate healthcare services and the appropriate equipment are provided through the care pathway and with the CHO.

Deputy David Cullinane: I have met with the campaign group and many of the affected families. They are very sore about this. They said that nurses were sent to families to assess their support needs but no supports ever came. That is the problem. There has been a commitment to an inquiry which has still not been established. I heard the Minister say he wants to get it right. Those affected also want to get it right but they need some sort of timeframe for when it will happen. Solid commitments were given in respect of community care, as the Minister has outlined. Nurses sat down with patients and assessed their needs but those patients simply have not received supports. Commitments and promises were made in respect of medical cards and a whole range of medical supports. It is a sore point for them that while they are still waiting for word on when the inquiry will be established, their healthcare needs have not yet been met. It is great that nurses are engaging with these individuals but it does not suit anybody if there is nothing coming out the other end, the HSE is stating it does not have the resources and there is a blame game going on. The situation needs to be resolved.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. It is very serious if that is the case. It is not the advice I have from the Department or the HSE. The advice I have is that the services and equipment are being provided. There is a mechanism whereby if a CHO does not have a

budget specifically for this group of patients, it can put a business case together centrally. The HSE has not received any business cases and the advice I have is that the CHOs are providing support. What the Deputy is saying is serious. I will look into it today.

Deputy David Cullinane: Somebody is at fault and it is not the patients.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Let us take a look. I will revert to the Deputy with a note.

Health Services Staff

4. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of the Sláintecare consultant contract negotiations; the rationale for not appointing a new independent chair; the timeline that he is now working towards for the introduction of a new contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27163/22]

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am yet again raising the issue of the consultant contract. If the Minister is serious about tackling the inordinate waiting lists in hospitals and getting our health service to function properly, we must recruit consultants. It is now five months since the independent chair had to withdraw from her role in the talks. What are the plans? Why has she not been replaced? What is the timescale to which the Minister is now working?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Government, as provided for in the programme for Government, is committed to introducing the new public-only consultant contract. I want to do so in a timely manner. A new consultant contract, as I know the Deputy will agree, is one of the important steps towards universal, single-tier healthcare, with public hospitals exclusively used for the treatment of public patients. That is the cornerstone of the contract from the State's perspective.

Last July, terms of reference were agreed with the representative bodies. There were several months of talks with an independent chair. My Department, in conjunction with the HSE, engaged with the representative bodies, the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, and the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, IHCA, on the new contract last autumn. As the Deputy will be aware, those talks continued until Christmas. The chair was appointed to the High Court and had to go.

My preference is that the new contract will be introduced following negotiation and agreement. My strong preference is that this is an agreed contract. I am committed to recommencing the talks very soon under a new independent chair. I recently met with the IHCA and the IMO about the talks and their parameters, and some of the key issues around the talks, with a view to getting all the groups back into a room. We do not have a set date for the talks to reconvene but my hope is that it will happen very soon. It is my intention and that of the Government to have this contract in place this year.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I must remind the Minister that he said at the IHCA conference several months ago that he wanted the contract finalised within weeks. He said in reply to a number of parliamentary questions over the past six months that his timeframe was a number of weeks. There has been considerable slippage and one must question if the Minister is serious about this.

There is a point I wish to make. The Minister is negotiating with people who are already in

posts and are operating under different arrangements entirely. When I raised this issue with the Minister a number of months ago, I asked him to meet with the hospital doctor retention and motivation project, led by Dr. Niamh Humphries. Representatives of the group were before the Joint Committee on Health. They have done incredibly important and interesting research on why it is that so many of our doctors leave these shores and go to work elsewhere. As far as I know, the Minister has not met the representatives of that group. Perhaps I am wrong on that and I hope I am. Has he considered the points that group is raising about the reasons people are leaving and the kind of new contract we need?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: As it happens, I met Dr. Humphries and her associate on Monday or Tuesday. As the Deputy is aware, they have done five years' work on this. They have focused their work specifically on Australia but I fully agree that the matters are intrinsically linked. A root-and-branch reform of the non-consultant hospital doctor, NCHD, pathway is needed. The current pathway for NCHDs is not acceptable and we should not be surprised that too many of them elect to go to Australia, New Zealand or Canada. There is a whole piece of work we are doing with the Department and the HSE. I have met several groups of NCHDs. When I speak to them about the job, one of the first things they reference is the new contract. They want to know that when they finish what is a very tough training scheme, a new contract will be there. They are intrinsically linked. The Deputy can be assured that I and the Government are fully committed to getting this contract in place. A lot of informal work has been going on about the talks. The Deputy will appreciate the details of that are confidential.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Unfortunately, I do not get a great sense of urgency from the Minister. What we know about the new consultant contract sounds attractive and would be attractive to all of those many doctors who have left these shores. What they are looking for, first and foremost, is a proper work-life balance. They are looking for respect in their job, which, unfortunately, they have not had during their training period. They are looking for part-time work, especially for women. They are looking for that kind of flexibility. Most of all, they are looking for a system that works and serves patients and for which they do not have to apologise. They want to be confident that the Government is serious about reform. The Minister needs to progress this very quickly. He needs to tackle the attitude within the HSE at the start of these talks, where there was talk of preventing doctors and consultants from advocating for their patients. There is a need for respect and a catch-up in respect for newly trained doctors because they have been treated so badly in the system that is there at the moment. There is a real urgency about this and the Minister needs to move on it because the health service cannot wait any longer.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I agree with everything the Deputy said other than her point about a sense of urgency. If I am not conveying a sense of urgency here, I can assure her that the groups involved, including the Department, are very aware that there is a sense of urgency. We are moving on this as a priority and we are doing two things at the same time. We are looking at the NCHD contract, at the six to ten years that they are with us but separately to that, we are moving on the contract. Obviously they are linked but they are separate pieces of work.

It is my absolute and very clear intention, and all of the stakeholders involved know this, that we will have a new consultant contract in place this year. That contract will be public-only in public hospitals. That is a cornerstone of everything we are doing. I fully agree with Deputy Shortall that it must be attractive to our existing consultant cohort, to those abroad who we want to come home and to the NCHDs coming through so that Ireland is seen as one of the best places in the English-speaking world for doctors to work.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will go back to Question No. 2 and Deputy Duncan Smith.

Industrial Relations

2. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will meet with representatives of an organisation (details supplied) with regard to its claim for pay parity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26880/22]

Deputy Duncan Smith: I apologise for being late and thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for facilitating me.

This question relates to the Medical Laboratory Scientists Association, MLSA, industrial action. While I welcome the return to talks, I am interested to know what the Minister is going to do now in terms of engaging with the workers and their representatives. As the Minister knows, this is not over and we do not want it just to disappear back into the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and for the Minister to hope that it just goes away because it will not.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: A number of Deputies have tabled questions on-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is a priority question.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Is it dealt with separately?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes, unless there is another priority question on the same issue.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Thank you.

I thank Deputy Duncan Smith for raising this issue. We had a good debate on this yesterday. I want to acknowledge the incredibly valuable role that medical scientists play in our healthcare system but on top of that, the fact that they, along with their healthcare colleagues across the system, have put in even longer hours and tougher shifts during the pandemic. I have met a lot of them and am fully aware of the personal and professional cost of this. It has meant very long hours working in even more stressful conditions. It has also meant time away from family and friends and I want to acknowledge that they stepped up, along with the rest of the healthcare community, during Covid.

I also want to acknowledge the long-standing claim for pay parity between medical scientists and clinical biochemists. The current public service pay agreement, Building Momentum, includes sectoral bargaining to address outstanding claims such as this one. This is the method through which claims can be addressed within the lifetime of the agreement. Health management have been engaging with the MLSA for many months to find a way to advance their claim through sectoral bargaining but no resolution to the matter has been reached so far. However, I was very happy to see that the industrial action has been suspended and did not take place yesterday. There was a very constructive engagement at the Labour Court yesterday, with all sides in attendance. It has been agreed that all sides will now convene at the WRC for a three-week period. Hopefully all issues can be dealt with in the WRC but if not, the sides have agreed that any outstanding issues at the end of the three-week period will be reverted back to the Labour Court.

Deputy Duncan Smith: When I submitted this question the industrial action was still live and I am happy that it has been suspended and the parties are back at the WRC. However, we need to use this time wisely. A consistency with this Government when it comes to industrial relations issues, not just in the Department of Health but across all Departments, is a hands-off approach and no sense that the Government wants to get things resolved. This dispute is not just about pay; it is also about retention. We have a massive shortage of medical scientists and we have seen a haemorrhaging of them from the profession over the last number of years. One thing that has come up in parliamentary replies is that the HSE does not conduct exit interviews which means we do not have accurate information as to how many people have left the profession and why. This is something that must be standardised across the HSE and across all parts of our publicly-funded health service if we are serious about tackling the retention crisis.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: That makes an awful lot of sense, not just for medical scientists but right across the board. Probably the single biggest challenge we have in terms of the ongoing modernisation of the public health service is recruitment. If we are going to have a challenge, it is the right one to have. The funding has been allocated and the posts have been sanctioned but we are trying to recruit a huge number of people in a very short period of time. In community care, for example, we have sanctioned 3,500 health and social care professional posts. We have around 1,800 in post or about to be deployed now. There has been a huge increase but it does lead to pressures right across the system when we are trying to hire so many people. There has been a net increase since 2019 in medical scientists of around 6% but that said, we do need to understand why people leave, either for other jobs here in the private sector or for jobs abroad. We also need a process through which that can be addressed.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We absolutely do because it is very easy to say that people are leaving various jobs because of the housing crisis or low pay. While they are definitely factors for medical scientists, there are also really important career progression issues and other technical issues which are distinct to this industrial relations dispute. We cannot lose sight of that, which is why we need a keen eye to remain on this. The workers are not out on the picket line and the journalists and politicians are not out with them, getting their news lines and social media posts, but real work and meaningful engagement must begin. Those of us on this side of the House can lose a bit of connection because the issue is with the Government now. It is with the Minister's side. We really need to get this resolved. This is an anomaly and a mistake that dates back 20 years. As I said in the House yesterday, it is a campaign for parity that goes back almost 50 years. I hope that what has happened over the last week will finally lead to a just resolution.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Yes, hopefully through the WRC and then, if necessary, through the Labour Court, we can find a resolution to this that works for everybody. Deputy Naughten made a very salient point in yesterday's debate when he said that we need to respect, grow and develop this workforce because as science and technology become more advanced and linked into care through genetics and so forth, and as we move towards personalised medicine which is opening up incredible opportunities in terms of healthcare in the future, medical scientists are going to play an even more central role.

Dr. Colm Henry, the chief clinical officer of the HSE, is kicking off a review which will look at medical scientists more broadly across the public health system. One thing we are looking at is bringing in an advanced practice role, the equivalent of an advanced nurse practitioner, ANP, or advanced medical practitioner, AMP, in this area which is very exciting.

Mental Health Services

5. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the status of the national review of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, CAMHS, following the mistreatment of children in south Kerry CAMHS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26377/22]

Deputy Mark Ward: The Maskey report into south Kerry CAMHS found that over 200 children were put at serious risk and that 46 children suffered significant harm. I seek an update on the status of the national review of CAMHS, including the timescale for completion and publication. I also seek an update on any improvements that have been made for children in south Kerry.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputy Ward for his question. The Maskey report contains 35 recommendations, the implementation of which will involve a range of actions by the Cork, Kerry Community Health Organisation, CHO, for Kerry south, as well as national actions.

As the Deputy knows, the audit of CAMHS is divided into three separate parts. The procurement process for the national audit of compliance with CAMHS operational guidelines is under way. This had to go out to tender. Proposals were received on 2 May 2022 and following assessment and in line with procurement procedures, a provider will be identified as soon as possible thereafter. The successful provider will be requested to complete the audit within six months of appointment, but I want to see it completed before the end of the year. I am pushing really hard on that. There is a huge opportunity for us in relation to the 73 CAMHS teams, and to look at the complete area of oversight in relation to compliance.

An expert audit group on prescribing practice has been established. It is independently chaired by Dr. Colette Halpin, who was nominated by the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland. The audit group includes Dr. Imelda Whyte, who is a child psychiatry faculty chair, and Dr. Suzanne McCarthy, who is a senior lecturer in clinical pharmacy practice at University College Cork. We felt it was very important to include pharmacy because pharmacists have raised issues with regard to the prescriptions they receive coming across their counters.

The engagement of an academic partner to conduct qualitative research into CAMHS experiences is at an advanced stage. The research methodology for this audit strand will require ethical approval, and the process for securing same is under way. It is expected that the research into the experiences of children and young people attending CAMHS, their families, referrers and other key stakeholders can be completed within six months of the confirmation of the ethical approval.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister of State. On the procurement processing, I always get worried that this will slow things down and that there is a lack of urgency here. Does it go to tender after this? What happens after the procurement process and will that slow things down any further?

I am aware the Minister of State will come back on this, but it is my understanding that since the Maskey report there is still no full-time consultant in south Kerry and a locum is still filling in. We even heard the bizarre news that the whistleblower, Dr. Sharma, asked to come back - he said he would come back and work for the HSE - but his pleas were ignored. At this stage, that man should be commended and not ignored. Is everything possible being done for

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those children in south Kerry CAMHS at the moment? Will this review be slowed down by any procurement and tender processes?

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Deputy is aware, we must do due diligence. These audits will cost quite a lot of money. Obviously that is not the issue but they must be done right. We will get real-time data that we have never had before. We have been talking about the waiting lists in CAMHS for so many years and we have been talking about the challenges. I welcome that we will have these data but I want it completed before the end of the year. The six-month timeline was always there. I meet regularly with the HSE to move this along.

The Mental Health Commission is also doing its own review, as opposed to an audit. I met with Dr. Susan Finnerty again last week. The commission has commenced that review and it is up and running. I welcome that the Mental Health Commission is doing a review at the same time the HSE is doing an audit. There will be great comparisons to be made at that time.

On the Deputy's specific question on the south Kerry CAMHS, that post is still vacant but not for the want of trying and not for the want of funding. Huge improvements have been made and I will come back to the Deputy on those.

Deputy Mark Ward: I want it on the record that while I may be critical of CAMHS, I am not being critical of the CAMHS staff.

Deputy Mary Butler: I know that.

Deputy Mark Ward: I appreciate the pressure they are under at the moment with staffing, as the Minister of State has mentioned. At the moment, CHO 4, which includes south Kerry, is at 64% of what is recommended in A Vision for Change. I can understand the pressure they are working under.

Will the scope of the review include Tusla? The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth found out some weeks ago that 20 children who were in the Maskey report were also under the care of Tusla. Will Tusla be included in that report to look at what its role was?

With the closure of the beds in Linn Dara, are acute mental health inpatient facilities to be included in any national review of CAMHS? I received information during the week that 27 children spent 87 days in adult mental health facilities in 2021. I am aware that this number has decreased but there was CAMHS inpatient bed availability at the time. One child spent 13 days in such a unit. Will there be any movement to stop this draconian practice?

Deputy Mary Butler: On the Deputy's first question, the four acute units are included in the audit. I believed that this was very important.

The Deputy asked about Linn Dara. The Deputy will be aware that everything that we can do is being done. There was a report in the newspapers yesterday when I said there was capacity of 16 beds available in Cork. This is actually correct. There are 13 inpatients there at the moment.

To the end of March this year, thankfully, no child had been placed in a psychiatric ward so far this year. If there is capacity, sometimes the units in Dublin and in Merlin Park in Galway do gastro-tube feeding for young people with eating disorders if it is recommended by a consultant psychiatrist. The procedure is not available in Cork and this might be the reason the person was

not sent to Cork even though there is capacity there with beds.

Deputy Mark Ward: Most of it was in the CHO 9 area.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Health Services

6. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when additional healthcare professionals (details supplied) will be recruited in view of long delays for children receiving appropriate therapeutic interventions and supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26865/22]

Deputy Brendan Smith: There is a very urgent need to recruit healthcare professionals such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and social workers across Cavan and Monaghan. At present, we have totally unacceptable delays in children with special needs and children with a disability receiving assessments and follow-up treatment and support. Progress in the recruitment of such healthcare professionals is absolutely essential and must be progressed without further delay.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will take this question on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who sends her apologies to the Deputy.

The HSE acknowledges that the Cavan and Monaghan children's disability network teams are currently operating their services with reduced staff numbers due to recruitment issues being experienced locally and nationally. The HSE advises that it is currently in the process of recruiting for vacant posts in the areas of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology and social work. It is acknowledged that there are significant challenges in the recruitment of staff due to the availability of options for candidates across the health and social care sector. Senior management in CHO 1 are currently examining a range of options to attract staff.

At present, there are a number of initiatives currently supporting efforts to provide timely therapeutic interventions in the area. There is a joint children's disabilities and primary care autism spectrum disorder, ASD, diagnostic wait list initiative. This joint initiative has been allocated funding to complete 130 private provider ASD assessments for those waiting longest in Cavan and Monaghan.

The Deputy will be aware that the Cavan children's disability network team is based in the Hillside facility at Rathcorrick, County Cavan. The lead agency for the team is Enable Ireland. The team has a whole-time equivalent staffing allocation of 24.2 posts, but at this time there are only 15.3 posts in place, with 8.9 vacancies - one can say there are nine vacancies. Having looked at the figures, I note that there were five resignations and there are two people on maternity leave at the moment. This is having a huge impact on these services. The service is

currently in the process of recruiting to the vacant positions but it is proving difficult to backfill these positions with minimal interest, if any, in any of the positions advertised.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I also appreciate the interest of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in this area. Along with Oireachtas colleagues and parents from Cavan and Monaghan, I met the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, on Tuesday last. The stories those parents told to the Minister of State that day were really heartbreaking. I had met the parents previously as they have been seeking better services for their children.

It is most disappointing that there is a total of 18.4 full-time equivalent healthcare professional therapy and social work posts vacant in the two children's disability networks in Cavan and Monaghan. As the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has said, it is proving difficult to recruit. There has been a deterioration in services, and particularly in the past five to six years. Far too many children have not yet had assessments. Far too many children, unfortunately, did not get early intervention when they needed it. Parents are paying for private assessments. They are really stretching themselves financially to try to get private assessments to ensure their children can get access to special teaching units and ASD units. What is happening is just not acceptable.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am aware that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has been engaged with the Deputy and in various areas in the State. The Minister of State has taken to the road and is holding public meetings in different CHO areas to see what actions can be taken. As the Deputy recognises, it is not for the want of the Minister of State trying.

The occupational therapy and physiotherapy wait list initiative is managed by primary care services in Cavan and Monaghan. It offers assessment and brief intervention to children who are waiting for occupational therapy and physiotherapy. The initiative has commenced in 2022, with the HSE aiming to reduce the number of children on the waiting list over a 12-month period. Those are two different initiatives that are under way, the primary care autism spectrum disorder waiting list initiative targeting the 130 children and this one. As the Deputy knows, it cannot come soon enough for the parents.

Deputy Brendan Smith: One thing the parents have highlighted to me in meetings and correspondence is that there has been no international recruitment for such healthcare professionals. The Minister, Deputy Donnelly, might take an interest in this as well. There was success in recruiting nurses over the years from the Philippines and elsewhere. Some parents put forward a suggestion regarding international recruitment. Is there an issue with permits for people with the relevant qualifications? I do not think the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, is being used in this area either. There is a question mark over the recognition or status of reports from private practitioners. This area needs to be addressed. If there is capacity within the private sector to buy in that necessary work and expertise, we need to do so urgently. Are there proposals to increase the number of places in our colleges to train such therapists? One other possibility that has not been considered, to my knowledge, is final-year students doing some practical work while they complete their studies.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy has raised some good points. I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, about encouraging people from outside the EU to come and work in these areas. We are looking at that with regard to home care as well. Everybody knows there is a shortage in the workforce. The Minister of State has been speaking to the Minister for Health

about funding to buy private capacity. That capacity was bought in for assessments of need 12 months ago and it reduced that waiting list significantly. A lot of the children were then placed on further waiting lists as a result but the assessment of need was done. Primary legislation will be required in order to access the NTPF for psychiatry and psychology services. I had a meeting about this yesterday. It is quite complicated. If someone is referred for a cataract or hip operation, it is a once-off procedure but for children with psychology, psychiatry or therapy needs who require multiple sessions, it is a lot more complicated. We are looking at it.

Departmental Reviews

7. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health when the clinical review of fatal foetal abnormalities since January 2019 will commence; the terms of reference of the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26018/22]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I raise this matter on behalf of Rebecca Price and Pat Kiely, whose baby Christopher was wrongly diagnosed with a fatal foetal abnormality in Holles Street in March 2019. Baby Christopher's life was ended wrongly in 2019. The family has sought a review to make sure this does not happen to anybody else and that no other family grieves in the way Rebecca and Pat do on behalf of their baby and with their baby. The family has met the Minister and his officials. I would like an update on the review of fatal foetal abnormalities to ensure this does not happen to anybody else.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. In 2019, the HSE recognised the need for increased awareness surrounding the correct identification and diagnosis of fatal foetal anomalies. The clinical review of termination services, as provided under section 11 of the Health (Regulation of Termination Pregnancy) Act 2018, was commissioned by the chief clinical officer of the HSE. From notifications I receive under this Act, I understand that termination services are provided under section 11 in approximately 100 cases each year.

The HSE has confirmed that the clinical review group met for the first time on 29 April 2022. The terms of reference were ratified by the review oversight group in advance of this meeting. I will ask the Department of Health to provide the terms of reference directly to the Deputy. The HSE has advised that the clinical review will identify the requirements to enhance the provision of termination services under section 11 of the Act. It will work collaboratively with stakeholders and there are quite a number of stakeholders involved. This will cover both the delivery and management of termination under services regarding fatal foetal anomalies and-or life-limiting conditions diagnosed during pregnancy. The group will engage with service users so their experience of the service is central to the process. It is essential that we hear not only from the clinicians and scientists but from the women themselves and the people involved in using the services. Recommendations will then be made and submitted to the HSE oversight group.

The HSE has stated that the review will examine areas including screening, diagnostics services and genetics in the context of fatal foetal anomalies and life-limiting conditions. It will also examine access to the multidisciplinary expertise that is required and which is being invested in, including clinical genetics and other specialties, counselling services and genetic counselling, which must be put in place, bereavement and other service user supports.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am very glad to hear the Minister mention the role of

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clinical genetics. If they had been utilised in this case, this simply would not have happened. If there had been an external review, the parents would not have felt the need to go to the High Court to highlight the circumstances of this case. Hospitals cannot be allowed to review themselves.

I thank the Minister for expanding the number of public interest directors in the new national maternity hospital. That is an important response to cases like this and many others, where parents highlight problems within maternity hospitals and where maternity hospitals do not listen and do not allow for external review. That is essential. This happened in 2019, the parents met the Minister in July 2021 and the terms of reference are from 29 April 2022. It is essential that clinical genetics are included in the review. Parents need to have sight of that and I am not clear as to whether Rebecca and Pat have had sight of that on foot of the correspondence with the HSE. I see that a letter has been sent to their solicitor but I am not sure whether they have had the detail that is appropriate.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will engage this morning with the HSE and the Department to make sure they have full sight of this. The HSE has acknowledged that this has taken a long time to put together. A very eminent chair, Dame Lesley Regan, has been appointed to this work. She is a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Imperial College London. She was identified as suitably qualified to lead the review and is an independent person, which is one of the things that was requested and is very important. Professor Regan was also president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the UK from 2016 to 2019 and is currently honorary secretary of the International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics. It has taken a long time to put this together and the HSE has acknowledged that. One of the positives that has come out of this is the HSE has identified an eminent international independent expert to lead this review. I have no doubt she will bring very important international expertise to this important review. To answer the Deputy's other question, genetics and genetic counselling will be included.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is essential. We have very eminent geneticists in this country as well. Dr. Willie Reardon, who was involved in this case, is a very eminent geneticist and has been a great support to Rebecca and Pat. I thank the Minister for confirming the appointment of Professor Lesley Regan. Rebecca and Pat have looked to meet with her and I hope that can be facilitated.

Something going wrong in a maternity hospital is a tragedy for any family, from which it is very difficult to recover. Where something goes wrong, such as the death of a child or an injury to a child that could have been avoided, it is even more difficult to recover from than other cases. I know the Minister is aware of that. All the parents want is to ensure it does not happen to anyone else. That has been the motivation behind Rebecca and Pat's campaign, to make sure this can never happen to any other family who want a baby in the way they have wanted a baby, as lots of people do.

It is also essential that there is oversight of private fertility clinics. They are covered by the clinical indemnity scheme but it is not clear what is happening around notification to the incident management scheme with the State Claims Agency. I have raised this at the Committee of Public Accounts. It is essential that these clinics are overseen. If they are to receive the benefit of the clinical indemnity scheme, they must be overseen in every way too.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I will ask the Department to revert to the Deputy with a note

on the current oversight situation. She should feel free to get in contact with me to discuss the matter when she has received that note. Two additional things are happening that are relevant. First, in this year's budget I have allocated €1.5 million specifically to perinatal genetic services. We know more needs to be done and that we need more expertise in this area so €1.5 million has been invested in the national women and infants health programme, NWIHP, to grow that service. Second, as the Deputy may be aware, Dr. Peter McKenna, who was leading the NWIHP, is now leading an adverse incidents team and will be looking at cases around the country where things have not gone as they should have. Specifically to the Deputy's point, this will make sure we have very quick feedback, for all the reasons she has laid out.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Would Dr. McKenna meet me?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I am sure he would.

Health Services Staff

8. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the status of the situation regarding medical scientists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26798/22]

20. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will work with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure that an organisation (details supplied) is granted pay parity with other laboratory colleagues that they have been seeking for 21 years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26950/22]

21. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the issues raised by medical scientists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25997/22]

Deputy Paul Murphy: My question relates to medical scientists, who were on strike last week, on Tuesday and today and who then called off the strike to enter into discussions with the Department of Health and the HSE. We debated this yesterday morning in the House with our motion. Does the Minister agree the expert group recommendations should be implemented and that these workers should get equal pay for equal work and pay parity with biochemists?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 20 and 21 together.

I hope the Deputy will accept my bona fides when I say I want to let all sides engage without interference from the Government, Ministers or whatever it may be. What happened yesterday was welcome and I commend the Medical Laboratory Scientists Association, MLSA, on agreeing to suspend the industrial action because it was having a very significant impact on patient services. As I said yesterday in response to the Deputy or his colleague Deputy Boyd Barrett, I know that not a single medical scientist who went on the picket line wanted to be there. They, more than any of us, are acutely aware of the disruption to patients, sometimes for quite urgent care, and the last place they wanted to be was on a picket line. It is noticeable, as several colleagues referenced, that it has been a long time since they felt compelled to take such action. I commend them on suspending the action and going to the Labour Court yesterday. We now know more than we did when we were debating this yesterday morning, and there has been a very positive and constructive development. All sides have agreed to go back to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, for three weeks. All issues will be put on the table and all sides represented. They have also agreed that if, as we hope, that three-week process in the WRC is

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all that will be required and an agreement can be reached that works for all sides, any outstanding issues will revert to the Labour Court and all sides will be bound by that court's decision. It is a very positive move.

Turning to the Deputy's very reasonable question, this issue was identified in 2000. Thereafter, the report was received in early 2001, and through a benchmarking exercise in 2002, the matter went in a different direction. It was further noted, although not acted on, in 2007. I want to see a resolution to this that will work for all sides. Nevertheless, Deputy Naughten made an important contribution yesterday when he made the point that as science, technology, genetics and personalised medicines come more and more to the fore, the role of medical scientists and other scientific grades and groups within the public health system will come more and more to the fore of medicine for patients.

Not only, therefore, do we need a resolution to this issue, which is essentially a pay dispute, we also need an ambitious pathway for medical and laboratory scientists into the future. Dr. Colm Henry, the HSE's chief clinical officer, is instigating a review and looking more broadly at the profession and where it can go. I am pleased that work is being done on advanced practice. Advanced practice nurses and midwives are, effectively, autonomous clinicians. This is one of the most important and radical changes we are seeing in healthcare in Ireland. Ireland is becoming one of the leading countries in this and work is under way looking at advanced health and social care professional practitioners, one category of whom comprises medical scientists. We need to resolve the current situation and then be ambitious about what is possible for the profession.

Deputy Paul Murphy: As a general point, many of these workers were in the Public Gallery yesterday watching the debate, and the Government line, which is the usual Government line, suggested it has nothing to do with the issue. The Minister stated he wants to resolve the dispute without interference from the Government and so on, but that is as though the Government is not a party to the dispute. The Government, fundamentally, is these people's employer and I do not accept the idea it needs to take a hands-off approach. It can resolve this with a clear statement about pay equality and by finding the funds for it.

The Minister responded to Deputy Boyd Barrett yesterday by highlighting a line in the countermotion relating to "insufficient funds", which I accept. Does he accept that any resolution of this dispute will have to be agreed outside the framework of Building Momentum, for example?

Finally, why has the MLSA not been invited to participate in the Dr. Colm Henry review?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: To the first claim, about the hands-off approach, our approach is quite the opposite. Officials from my Department were in the Labour Court yesterday, along with officials from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The people involved in these negotiations comprise officials from the Departments of Health and Public Expenditure and Reform, the HSE and the MLSA, so I am not for a moment suggesting this has nothing to do with the Government - of course it does. Nevertheless, given all parties have agreed to go into talks, it is appropriate to let those talks happen and respect that process, and I hope that will work well.

With regard to the MLSA and the future of the review, there is no question but that the association will be involved in that and I have no doubt Dr. Henry will talk to its representatives.

It is essential that it be part of that process.

I apologise for not reaching the Deputy's final question. He might remind me of it in order that I can follow-up in my second response.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The third question was whether the Minister accepts that if this is to be resolved, it will have to be resolved outside of the framework of Building Momentum.

The strike was not just about pay equality, although that was the dominant issue, but also about a lack of people coming into the profession and a lack of clear career progression. There are very few roles beyond that of medical scientist. Workers have to go into management if they want to progress, which means they will not get to work as a front-line scientist in the way many people want to. Deputy Barry made a point yesterday about the role of clinical medical scientists in the UK National Health Service, NHS, which seems to provide a natural career progression. Would the Minister be open to that?

There are a few stories I did not get to raise yesterday during the debate on the motion. People have told me about their co-worker in Tallaght who lives in Belfast and drives to Dublin every day to work - just incredible. As a result of low pay and the cost-of-living crisis we are experiencing, those are the kinds of conditions in which, unfortunately, some of these people are working and living.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There are five grades at the moment for medical scientists, namely, basic scientist, senior scientist, chief scientist, specialist scientist and laboratory manager, ranging from €34,429 to €95,320. There is an anomaly, as we discussed yesterday, although it applies only in the first year. The grade of medical laboratory aide was moved up at a time when that of medical scientist was not, so there is an overlap. It amounts to only €82 for the entire year, which is very small and applies only for the first year. Nevertheless, it is an anomaly and these issues need to be examined.

To the wider point, many people in the country face very serious pressures, such as those relating to inflation and housing. There are many wider aspects to this. In the realm of health-care at least, we want to see a resolution to this that will address the various issues raised by MLSA members.

Mental Health Policy

9. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health his views on a study by the Maynooth University centre for mental health and community research that has led to calls for the implementation of a family focused approach to treatment in cases in which parental illness is identified and if the Government has plans to introduce a family focused approach to mental health treatment. [26279/22]

Deputy Mark Ward: What are the Minister of State's views on a study by Maynooth University's centre for mental health and community research that has led to calls for the implementation of a family focused approach to treatment in cases where paternal mental health illness has been identified? Does the Government have any plans to introduce a family focused approach to mental health treatment?

Deputy Mary Butler: I welcome the research findings of Maynooth University's centre

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for mental health and community research into family focused interventions where there are parental mental health difficulties. The study is known as the PRIMERA programme, the findings of which I launched last week. The university's research programme findings recommend a family focused approach.

10 o'clock

This was funded by the HSE at a cost of almost €500,000. The centre did a huge amount of research over the last five years. It is estimated one in four people will experience mental health difficulty in their life. Parental mental health can typically affect the entire family. It is estimated one in five children have a parent with a mental disorder. Where there are parental mental health difficulties, the risk of children themselves developing mental disorders and impaired lifetime outcomes is higher.

It is recommend that a Think Family policy and practice approach be developed and incorporated urgently as part of the routine adult and child and adolescent mental health services. This programme identified, implemented and evaluated family focused interventions for families with parents with mental illness. One of the evaluations was that when there was a six- to ten-week programme - this was trialled with I think with 136 families - of between six and ten interventions and meetings with the families and young people involved, the outcome was absolutely fantastic. It is therefore really important we develop this programme and include it in Sharing the Vision.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister of State. I am a graduate of Maynooth University so I welcome the report by the centre there. I have worked in community mental health services and always found the inclusion of family members, loved ones, or both had much more positive outcomes. That holistic approach always works. As the study said, when a parent has mental health difficulties it can typically affect the entire family. I use the analogy of throwing a stone into a lake and seeing how the ripples go outwards. Those mental health difficulties touch everybody who is close to the person. As the Minister of State mentioned, the report said 23% of all families have at least one parent with mental ill health and that increases the likelihood of the children having a lifetime risk of mental ill health by 41% to 77%. This could be a really early indicator. We have had the debate around early interventions loads of times. Is this something that will be looked at going forward?

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy and I are on the same page here. It is hugely important. The centre spent five whole years looking at the effect mental illness of a parent has on the family. Family involvement, as the Deputy said, is very important in the recovery process and it is aligned with Sharing the Vision which, as the Deputy knows, is a ten-year plan. To show how important family involvement is I recently set up a reference group to support the work of Sharing the Vision's national implementation monitoring committee. The group will represent the voice of the service users. There are family members, carers and family supporters on it. The group will ensure that the values of recovery and person-centredness espoused in Sharing the Vision are prioritised in all aspects of the implementation of the policy. It held its first meeting two weeks ago. The organisation Shine is providing the format for it as well as the secretarial support. I attended the very first meeting and met all the group. Group members were so delighted the voice of the family, the voice of the service user and the peer support is all being included.

Deputy Mark Ward: The report also states, "there has been a growing recognition in most

European countries of the need to support families in order to protect children, but Ireland lags well behind”, so we are playing catch-up at this stage. One of the recommendations of the report is, “Increased collaboration between traditionally segregated adult and children’s services”, for example, mental health services and schools. I met the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy two days ago. Association representatives have spoken to the Minister of State before. They spoke to me about their proposal for providing counselling and psychotherapy in secondary and primary schools. They say this service is going to be outside the scope that is already there for guidance counsellors and would be on the recommendation of the school. This report could be a way of identifying children who need early intervention. Would this be something the Minister of State might work at? Could it be done in a cross-departmental way with the Department of Education?

Deputy Mary Butler: It is interesting the Deputy has raised this today. Deputy Lahart raised it with me last night as well. The association has obviously been meeting with quite a few Deputies around the House. There would have to be collaboration with the Department of Education. We have collaborated previously when I sent out the leaflet on supports available to young people. The situation has changed, as we all know. The day is gone that when children present to school they just come to learn to read, write and do maths. Children are presenting with so many complex needs at the moment. I was in Mount Sion Primary School in Waterford, which Deputy Cullinane knows well, last week. I was there to speak about the supports offered to children, especially children with complex needs. Teachers know first-hand the supports children need. They have them for six hours every day. A collaboration between our Department and the Department of Education must happen. It is happening at some level but we must accelerate it.

Health Services Staff

10. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the way that he proposes to address the large shortfall of homecare assistants nationally through better pay and working conditions and through specific recruitment drives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25454/22]

Deputy Fergus O’Dowd: Older people are being encouraged to stay in their homes as long as they can, especially as they age and get sick. The demand for home carers has never been greater and neither has the funding. However, the fact is every week we find people who have been assessed as needing home care for whom there is no carer available. At the end of March over 5,458 people nationally had been assessed as needing a home carer but not having one. There were 90 patients in acute hospitals awaiting discharge with nobody to look after them. How does the Department intend to recruit adequate and appropriate care for these people and keep them out of long-term care?

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for his question and his continued interest in this particular sector. We have had many conversations on it. He is right the demand for home support has never been higher and its importance as an alternative service to long stay care has grown considerably over the past number of years. It is also a much more cost-effective way for the State to support people compared with them being in acute hospitals or nursing homes. In budget 2021 I secured additional funding of €150 million to progress the development of a reformed model of service delivery to underpin the statutory scheme for the financing and

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regulation of home support services and to provide 5 million additional hours of home support. I am delighted this funding has been maintained into 2022.

Last year we delivered 20.9 million hours, which is up 2.9 million on the previous year. That is a huge increase. We are currently supporting 55,000 people on a daily basis but there are challenges. On the figures the Deputy referred to, we had three areas that were especially problematic, namely, CHOs 4, 5 and 7. This week alone I had meetings with the chief officer and the older person's lead in both CHO 4 and CHO 7 to see what more I can do to help them. One thing we have done is I have put in place a cross-departmental strategic workforce advisory group. This group has met all the key stakeholders. We are trying to make home care an attractive, viable option as a career choice. That group is working well. There will be significant recommendations out of this I will bring to the Minister and with his support these can be brought to Cabinet. We will be looking for funding in next year's Estimates because this is a serious piece of work. The second piece I discussed with the Minister of State, Deputy English, yesterday concerned working outside the EU to encourage people and to make permits available so those outside the EU might come to Ireland to provide home care.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I very much welcome the initiatives but they do not change the fact that home care was provided by the State through the HSE and that has changed now. I get glossy brochures regularly from big companies that are moving into this area and treating it as a market rather than what I believe it should be, which is a career for people.

My point is I do not see any sign of a national recruitment drive. I see no ads on the television. I do not hear it on the radio. I welcome the Minister of State's initiatives on visas for people coming from abroad or outside the EU but we are not doing enough. We must tackle it. We must make it a career. It was a career in the health service; it was respected and was acknowledged as a very important one. We need to recruit full-time carers into the HSE, pay them and give them a career. The people want and need them. It keeps them out of inappropriate care and acute hospitals. As I said, 90 such people were in acute hospitals at the end of March taking up beds because they could not go home. I welcome the Minister of State's initiatives but we need more action.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy is quite right in what he says. A national recruitment drive is really important. As he knows, we have nine CHOs and they vary. CHO 9, which covers north County Dublin, delivers all its supports through both voluntary and private. There is no HSE. It is something that evolved over many years. Its waiting list is the lowest in the country with 50 people waiting. Yesterday, I met with CHO 4, which is Cork-Kerry, and 75% of its home care is provided through the HSE and 25% is provided through the voluntary and private sectors. It is important to consider the voluntary sector here. Last week, I met with Northside Homecare Services in north County Dublin. It is a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation and it delivered 900,000 hours last year. It is doing phenomenal work.

However, I agree with what the Deputy said. We are doing a rolling recruitment campaign in certain CHOs, not all of them. The terms and conditions provided by the HSE include €16 per hour plus mileage. They are attractive compared with some in the private sector, but I agree with the Deputy and my meeting yesterday was focused on that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I support the Minister of State with regard to community care and voluntary organisations. However, it is not possible in some communities to do that, particularly as towns grow to become cities and people are not as neighbourly. They do not know

their neighbours as well as was previously the case and that community benefit is lost. I am delighted that it is there. Could the Minister of State let me have a note on how much is paid to private providers nationally and the number of hours they provide? They appear to have a significantly greater payment for the individual service they provide than the individual worker. However, it has to be a career, and it has to happen now.

The other point is one on which we all agree. There is a large number of people who are inappropriately in nursing home care. They do not need to be there and they are charged a fortune. In many cases they are getting excellent care, but in others they are getting very poor care. They need that care at home. That is the place to be. All supports we can provide there would be very welcome. I look forward to the Minister of State's national recruitment drive and I welcome her involvement with the Minister of State, Deputy English, with regard to access for people outside the EU.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have spoken previously about this issue in home care. We all welcomed the work of the workforce advisory group. It has to look at the issues of visas and tax breaks. Pay rates have to be on the table, as well as expenses. There are anomalies among the various CHOs. However, we need a timeline. Beyond that, there is the wider issue of workforce planning to ensure we will have enough people to be able to cover what needs to be done because there are families under significant pressure as they cannot get people to provide adequate hours for their loved ones so they can stay in their homes.

Deputy Mary Butler: We have had many conversations about home care, and I know everybody feels the same. I am in a unique position as Minister of State in that I have a budget of €672 million to deliver home care. Every one of those packages, apart from what comes in rolling over ten or 14 days, is funded. The other ones will be funded very quickly. The issue is not funding.

One issue we have, and I provided money in the Estimates last year and again this year for it, is that some of the CHOs, not all of them, are still working on a paper basis. They do not have a fit-for-purpose information technology, IT, system. We piloted an Irish company, which I will not name, in CHO 3, which is the area of Limerick, Clare and parts of Tipperary. This pilot has worked extremely well. I wrote to Mr. Paul Reid last week to see if it can rolled out across all nine CHOs. All the chief officers are very supportive of it. Trying to work a paper system for home care in 2022 is not fit for purpose. The IT system would also be way more effective with regard to waiting lists.

I will provide the note requested by Deputy O'Dowd.

Question No. 11 replied to with Written Answers.

Dental Services

12. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans for arresting the collapse of the dental treatment services scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26379/22]

Deputy David Cullinane: This question is about the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS. I am aware there have been talks between the Minister and the Irish Dental Association,

IDA, over the last number of months and that some movement has been made. Unfortunately, from the association's perspective, it does not appear to be enough. I am seeking an update from the Minister on the current position. Does he believe we can attract more dentists into the DTSS given the impact it is having on medical card holders?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Government and I have been concerned for some time that medical card patients in some parts of the country have been experiencing problems in accessing dental services. The problem became particularly acute over the last couple of years as a significant number of contracted dentists chose to opt out of the DTSS. I secured an additional €10 million in budget 2022 to invest in the scheme. That is a combination of an increase in fees and the reintroduction of scale and polish.

To address the concerns of contractors about the viability of the scheme, I have also used approximately €16 million of an underspend in this year's Estimate to increase the fees as well. Essentially, the spend on the DTSS last year was approximately €40 million and this year we are allocating €66 million. It is an additional €10 million and an allocation of a projected underspend of €10 million to an increase in fees. It is a very significant projected increase in the DTSS this year. Following consultation with the Irish Dental Association, the measures came into effect from 1 May. I am happy to talk through the increases if that is useful.

I hope this substantial investment and significant increase in the fees will encourage more dentists to stay in the scheme and, indeed, encourage dentists to return to it. However, that is not enough. These are interim measures. What is required is a root-and-branch reform of the scheme. The scheme was put in place many years ago and it is not fit for purpose now. This year, the Department, the HSE and the IDA will be involved in a fundamental review of the scheme to look at a scheme that is fit for purpose for today and into the future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It looks like it is root canal treatment.

Deputy David Cullinane: A sticking plaster solution is not going to work. I welcome the fact that funding has been increased. However, additional funding can be provided, and we have just discussed home care supports where the funding is available, but we cannot get the staff to provide the service. Telling people that the funding is there is no comfort to them when the service is not being provided. Obviously, we have to fix the scheme and get dentists back into it.

There is a wider issue here as well, and it is happening across primary care. We are at the mercy of independent GPs to deliver universal GP care if that is where we want to go. It is the same with independent dentistry. Obviously, there is a role for independent practice, but we also need to consider directly hired dentists to work in the public system if we want to guarantee services for medical card holders. What has happened here is that medical card holders have been left high and dry, and I am sure the Minister will accept that. In many parts of the country people who have medical cards cannot get access to dental treatment simply because the scheme has collapsed. We have to examine new and innovative ways to address that.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There are dentists employed directly by the State in community health centres across the country. I brought my child to one quite recently. It is an interesting proposal. Should we look at substantially increasing that with more directly employed dentists? It is certainly something I would not rule out and it could be examined. In the meantime, however, the vast majority of care is provided by contracted dentists.

I am not sure I would characterise it as a sticking plaster. If we are moving from a €40 million investment to a €66 million investment in one year, that is more than a sticking plaster. It is a very significant interim measure. The reality is that the scheme we have was designed in the 1990s. It is not fit for purpose and has to be examined. The cost of care has to be examined as well as part of that.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is a sticking plaster solution if the money is not spent. That is the point. I welcome the fact that the Minister has committed the additional funding. He has gone some way to address some of the issues. I am not blaming all this on the HSE or on the Minister. I want all parties to come to the table to resolve this issue. The people I am focused on are the medical card holders who cannot get access to care. We can tell them we have provided more funding and there is a pot of money available, but if their dentist is not providing the service it is no use to them. Many of them do not have access to a public dentist to provide the treatment they need. The access does not happen in most areas because we simply do not have enough dentists.

We have to do the root-and-branch reform the Minister mentioned. I appeal to the Irish Dental Association and to dentists to engage with the Minister and the HSE and to come back into the scheme. However, from their perspective, it has to be on the basis of the root-and-branch reform taking place and a clear commitment that it will happen. More needs to be done. It will be a sticking plaster solution if people cannot get access to the services I am talking about.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: There is no doubt that more is needed. We have this short-term measure and the review, but more needs to be done. We are also looking at training and retention of dental graduates. We are looking at the numbers graduating and the mix between EU and non-EU graduates who are coming in and training. That has to be looked at. We are looking at that for medical students as well, as I know the Deputy will be aware. Ultimately, I agree with the Deputy. We need a new, sustainable, long-term scheme that makes sure everybody, whether on a medical card or not, can get access to affordable, high-quality oral healthcare when they need it. Unfortunately, at the moment, that simply is not the case for too many people.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move on, cuirim céad míle fáilte roimh na daltaí scoile thuas staighre.

Disability Services

13. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health his plans to address the delays in assessments of need and the subsequent roll-out of services to children with developmental delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26977/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Frankie is two. His parents, very worried, came into my office this week because a paediatrician and their own observation established that Frankie has very serious developmental delays, is non-verbal and is showing all the signs of severe autism. They got a letter stating he would be assessed within the legally required time, and then they got a phone call shortly afterwards from the disability network team stating it would be two years before Frankie would be assessed. That is a disgrace.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this question. I offer my apologies on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who is not able to be here. We hear stories

such as Frankie's all the time, and the Minister is acutely aware of the current situation.

The new standard operating procedure for assessments of need was implemented for all new applications for assessments of need from 15 January 2020. Since then, approximately 10,000 preliminary team assessments have been completed. In quarter 1 of this year, the data indicate there were 1,719 assessment of need reports completed. The recent judgment of Mr. Justice Phelan in the High Court directed that the preliminary team assessment approach does not fulfil the requirements of the Disability Act. The judgment states a diagnosis is required to determine the nature and extent of a person's disability. The implications of any ruling from the Court of Appeal in respect of other relevant cases will be considered as soon as that becomes available. The HSE will now implement a process for a revised approach to assessments of need. In developing this, the HSE has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including families, providers, staff and representative bodies, in an intensive consultation to develop a pathway for assessment of need that seeks to comply with the requirements of the Act but also protects the commitment to the provision of intervention and principles as set out above.

It is important to note that what is different now that was not there before is that children do not require an assessment of need and may be referred directly to their local children's disability network team. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, would be able to speak about this subject much better. She has worked so hard on this, receiving funding through the Minister to make sure the assessments of need are carried out. Many children are then referred on to waiting lists, and there are huge issues in receiving these therapies.

I ask Deputy Boyd Barrett to refer the case that has been brought to his attention to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I certainly will refer it to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. I have also been talking to one of the barristers who is taking many of these cases and the situation is very bad. This story suggests the establishment of the disability network teams is not making any difference; it is just another layer. We have assessments of need, disability network teams, CAMHS and NEPS. It is all fragmented. In reality, while they might tick certain boxes, they are not actually doing the assessments or getting the services. The point is Frankie's future and the future of many thousands of other kids are at stake. If Frankie gets the early intervention and the supports now, he will be fine. Despite developmental delays and so on, he can flourish. If he does not get that, his future will be seriously jeopardised, as will the future of many other children. There are new layers of bureaucracy. Disability network teams, by the way, are 28% understaffed. That is the problem.

I will talk in a minute about the psychologists and the lack thereof. We need the law to be upheld and the rights of Frankie and other children to be upheld.

Deputy Mary Butler: I wish to point out an important point. The assessments are being done. There have been 10,000 assessments done over the past two years. Obviously, the court ruling has challenged that. There were 1,719 assessments done in the first quarter of the year. My understanding is the assessments are being done and that children are being referred on to different multidisciplinary teams and the supports are not there.

Since 2019, funding has been provided by the Government for approximately 475 new development posts, enhancing the network teams throughout the country, with a similar situation being seen in a lot of the multidisciplinary teams. The teams are not full - we know that - and

there is the same issue with recruitment and retention. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has taken to having meetings in the various community healthcare organisations, CHOs, to listen to parents and to hear from those who are providing supports. I met with the psychologists recently. I will come back to that in a moment.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A preliminary assessment is not an assessment of need. That is the point and that is what the judge ruled on. It was a way of appearing to tick the box of assessment without actually giving the assessment necessary or the diagnosis. I see the Minister shaking his head. Why do Frankie's parents get a letter stating they will get their assessment by May? This is a tick box the law requires of them. This was earlier this year. The box is ticked, but then they get a call from a human being in the disability network team who says it will be two years before Frankie gets assessed. This is the difference between ticking boxes and actually doing assessments and then providing the services that are needed. I am not a psychologist. I have raised this so many times. If the Department wants to staff the teams, it should remove the barriers to psychologists being qualified and getting their doctorates such as extortionate fees. I know that is not a matter for the Department of Health, but we need joined-up thinking. There is no funding for educational or counselling psychologists. It is impossible for people who want to do psychology and who want to help children like Frankie, vulnerable children, to get qualified. Barriers are put in their way.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Boyd Barrett has spoken about the fact we need early interventions. I raised a Topical Issue matter on this and spoke about Louth and Dundalk and the lack of occupational therapists, OTs, and speech and language therapists in the area. There are people who have been assessed and who are being told they will not get services for a year or two years. Obviously, that is not on. I am back to the same issue. It is a matter of ensuring we have the throughput of training and we remove all obstacles. Beyond that, we need to do a serious amount of workforce planning, because otherwise we will fail these people, children and families, and the impact long term will be devastating.

Deputy Mary Butler: It is acknowledged there are serious challenges in the filling of therapy posts due to the availability of new opportunities across the health and social care sector. As I have said, 475 posts have been developed since 2019. I reiterate that assessment of need reports will no longer be issued on the basis of a preliminary team assessment, and the HSE will engage directly with the families of those who received a PTA to establish if they wish to receive a further assessment under the terms of the Disability Act.

As for little Frankie, to whom Deputy Boyd Barrett referred, the Deputy is completely right that early intervention is key. Two years is not an acceptable wait time for any child or his or her family. If the Deputy sends on those details to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, I will discuss the matter with her.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): We have a couple of minutes left. I could allow Deputy Connolly's question to be answered briefly.

Hospital Inspections

14. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the remedial actions that have been taken to date pursuant to the October 2021 inspection by the Health and Safety Authority of University Hospital Galway, including the temporary emergency depart-

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ment, as reported in an article (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26797/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is a very important matter for Galway. I know the Minister is aware of it. I am raising the issue of the accident and emergency department and the recent report by the Health and Safety Authority and its background. Where is the new accident and emergency department?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: If we cannot conclude, if we run out of time, I will make sure the Deputy gets a detailed note.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: If the Minister wants to save time, I have the response.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The privileges of the Chair.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I have been advised by the HSE that the HSA conducted the unannounced inspection in University Hospital Galway, UHG, on 21 October of last year. I understand the issues that were raised during the inspection were immediately addressed by the hospitals and that any obstructions, for example blocking the fire exits, were actioned to ensure continuous on-site safety. Following subsequent engagement between the hospital and the HSA, the hospital has implemented corrective measures, including in relation to ventilation, fire escape routes and safety signage. The hospital provided a comprehensive written response to the HSE in December of last year to address the issues that were raised. I have been informed that there was a follow up inspection of 7 April and that a formal report from the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, has yet to be received.

There are a number of ongoing and planned capital projects for University Hospital Galway, UHG. The Deputy and I have discussed these before. The development of the new emergency Department will address the current challenges in terms of capacity, infrastructure and patient experience times. The project is in its early stages and a strategic assessment report is being developed by the HSE. It is expected to be received by my Department in the coming months.

I can say to the Deputy that I was in UHG recently. There, I discussed with the senior management and the senior clinicians just how important this new four-story block, with which the Deputy is very familiar, will be. Because it will cost well in excess of €100 million, it must go through a laborious public spending code. However, following my meeting in UHG, I have raised this particular capital project directly with the chief executive of the HSE. I have asked that it will be prioritised by the HSE. While we have to adhere to the legal requirements of the public spending code, I have asked that there will be no more delays. I was told in the hospital that they have been talking about this build for about eight or nine years.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputy Connolly may give a very brief response.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am stickler for time.

I could not accept that in 2015 it was unfit for purpose and yet here we are in 2022. I will follow it up elsewhere again.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Agriculture Industry

117. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce primary legislation to establish an unfair trading practices enforcement authority. [26982/22]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I want to ask the Minister about the expected timeframe in respect of his proposed legislation to establish an unfair trading practices enforcement authority; when he considers each stage will be progressed through the Dáil; and when he expects the final legislation to be concluded.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Carthy for the question. As he is aware, the unfair trading practices enforcement authority was established by my Department in April of last year when I signed a statutory instrument transposing the EU unfair trading practices, UTP, directive directly into Irish law. I want to assure the Deputy that this enforcement authority has been assigned all the necessary legal powers, including to investigate complaints from suppliers of agricultural and food products and to initiate legal proceedings for breaches of the unfair trading practices directives, which are defined in the UTP directive.

It is open to suppliers, including primary producers, to engage with the enforcement authority on any concerns they may have in relation to UTPs. Information regarding enforcement authority can be found on the authority's website, where there are good resources and information. Suppliers can submit complaints in confidence through that website.

The authority has been engaging in an active awareness-raising campaign. It has been meeting with stakeholders throughout the supply chain to ensure compliance with the directive.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, following Government approval of a general scheme of the agricultural food supply chain Bill 2022 on 22 March last, the Bill has been forwarded to the office of the Parliamentary Counsel for priority drafting. It has been submitted to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine for pre-legislative scrutiny. I hope that Deputy Carthy will be able to give it his support in order to deal with that pre-legislative scrutiny promptly. The general scheme of the Bill has also been published on my Department's website and I am hopeful that the legal drafting will be finalised shortly, in the next few weeks, and that the Bill can be presented to both Houses of the Oireachtas in that timeframe.

This Bill will establish the office for fairness and transparency in the agrifood supply chain as a new independent statutory body. It will take over enforcement of the UTP directive. It will also have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland, with a view to bringing greater transparency to the agricultural and food supply chains. I know that we are all committed to that. The establishment of the new office will fulfil the Government's commitment to ensure transparency in the food supply chain for farmers and fishers. I want to thank Cabinet colleagues for their support on this to date.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I say with assurance that the Oireachtas committee on agriculture will, as I know from our discussions, be keen to scrutinise this Bill in an efficient way. Yet,

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it is very important that we do it in a robust way. The Minister will know that I was part of the discussions at a European level in relation to the unfair trading practices regulation. I was extremely disappointed with the concluding document. I felt that it was minimalist and that it allowed member states to take a minimalist approach. At the time of transposing the UTP directive via statutory instrument, the Minister took a minimalist approach. This legislation is an opportunity to make a real difference to primary producers, such as our family farmers, to ensure that they at long last get fair play in the food supply chain.

How does the Minister envisage this process? If a farmer has a complaint with the price they receive for their product within the factory, what ability will they have to make a complaint? More importantly, what power will the new enforcement authority have to pursue that complaint?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I have been advocating for this since my time in opposition. Indeed, I put it forward as part of our platform at the last general election. I welcome the recent support from Sinn Féin for the principle of the establishment of an office to ensure fairness and transparency. It is important that we see the Oireachtas agriculture committee do that pre-legislative scrutiny. I look forward to a robust and thorough engagement in relation to that.

It is important to outline that prices cannot be set. The market determines that. The key objective behind this office will be to ensure that there will be transparency in terms of what is happening in the market. Then we can see how it can be traced back from the prices that are available in the marketplace, back to the farm gate. We will see where the margins are going in relation to that. We can then put pressure on the supply chain to ensure that the farmers get fair reward, a fair profit and fair respect for the work that they are carrying out. I see that as a key objective behind the office.

As the Bill moves through the Oireachtas, I look forward to the pre-legislative scrutiny, as well as any engagement or perspectives that Deputies across the House will have in aiding in that. I have engaged very widely so far in consultation to ensure that we can have legislation that is as robust as is possible.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sure that the Minister will agree the last thing we need is another quango. We need an organisation that has real teeth. In the first instance, therefore, we have to ensure that unfair trading practices are outlined, identified and outlawed. That means that the current list of outlawed practices needs to be widely expanded, in my view. Second, we need to see that the enforcement authority has power to pursue breaches of that.

There is legislation before the Dáil at the moment on Committee Stage to give new powers to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to levy fines of real significance that are based on turnover. It will give the commission new powers to tackle actors who are in breach consumer and competition law. In my view, a real meat regulator that has teeth would have those powers, and more. Will it have those powers? Farmers will quite naturally ask if they will finally see a rebalancing of the relationship between them and the factories, so that they can challenge decisions that are made by factories in relation to prices. This does not necessarily relate to the prices itself, but to the penalties and to the rules that apply at factory level that are set in place to penalise those same farmers.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is a quite unique initiative that the Government and I are bringing forward with the objective of ensuring that primary producers, in particular farm-

ers and fishers, get respect and that they get paid properly a fair margin of what is available in the marketplace for their massive amount of work over one or two years to produce an animal for market. As a country that exports 90% of the food we produce, it is the international marketplace that determines the final outcome. We must try to optimise that in every way we can. The core objective and the reason for coming forward with this office is to ensure there is an independent office with the credibility and capacity to shine a light on what is happening in the marketplace and the supply chain and, therefore, to try to ensure farmers are getting fair play and, where they are not, that it is called out. That office will have any powers possible to follow that through.

I have taken a very collaborative approach to how we can develop this. I look forward to continuing to do that through pre-legislative scrutiny and in bringing legislation to the House.

Departmental Policies

118. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to facilitate farmers trading carbon credits; if he intends to establish a verifiable framework to record and manage net carbon sequestration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27161/22]

Deputy Denis Naughten: The agriculture sector is facing an emissions reduction target of 30% by 2030 due to the failure by the Government to progress any actions over the past two years to reduce emissions. While plenty of stick is being doled out to farmers to meet these targets, there is not too much carrot. What is being planned to encourage farmers to sequester carbon and get rewarded for it?

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. The recent publication of the European Commission's communication, Sustainable Carbon Cycles, has sent a clear signal to European member states on the need to increase the ambition and participation of our land managers in the area of carbon removals and reductions. Under the recently updated all-of-government Climate Action Plan 2021, the Government has committed to "explore the development of a carbon farming model". This commitment is in recognition of the important role land managers will play in the achievement of our national climate change mitigation targets and the potential to reward these land managers for their additional carbon sequestration activities.

To address this action, officials in my Department have formed the carbon farming working group to examine how an enabling framework for carbon farming can be developed. A key element to future efforts required for a carbon sequestration reward model will be the establishment of national baseline data for a range of activities. To this end, and taking a proactive approach, we have provided core funding for a number of relevant initiatives, such as the establishment of the national agricultural soil carbon observatory, the pilot soil sampling programme and the farm environmental scheme, along with a number of European Innovation Partnership, EIP, research projects based on peat soils.

These national research and demonstration activities will have key learnings for future policy in this area, while also leading to a refinement of data to the national inventory reporting framework for greenhouse gas emissions. The current woodland environmental fund, adminis-

tered through my Department as part of the national afforestation programme, provides us with a pre-existing model for targeted payments to land managers for their positive environmental activities, which will be of significant benefit to the future roll-out of a dedicated carbon farming incentive to the Irish market.

Our farm families and landowners are key to delivering national climate change targets. In fact, they are taking a real leadership role in meeting our ambitions. Offering farm families the opportunity to derive new income streams from their land is something I am excited about working on. I look forward to working with all stakeholders on innovations such as carbon farming and contributing to the future development of an Irish-specific voluntary carbon market.

Deputy Denis Naughten: I am afraid not too much excitement was relayed in that response. As the Minister of State knows, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has pointed out that mitigating greenhouse gases alone will not get us to net zero. We need to increase our carbon stocks, and measuring what we have in our soils, hedges and trees is key to that, in addition to improving our soil health and, in turn, storing more carbon in our soil and rewarding farmers. To do this, we need to establish a carbon measuring, reporting and verification process, which has already started in Northern Ireland. Why not here? Why are we still tinkering away at pilots instead of getting on with delivering on this project for the whole country?

Deputy Martin Heydon: The challenge is to have a baseline. We need to have a baseline so we can adequately market in the future the activities of farmers. Should we have been doing this earlier than recent years? Probably. If we had our baseline from five or ten years ago, we would be in a stronger position now, but that is why the investment we are undertaking now is so important. It is critical to have a meaningful carbon farming option and income stream for farmers into the future. That is why our investment in the national agricultural soil carbon observatory, which will comprise a network of greenhouse gas measuring flux towers that are a very significant investment on our part, with up to 20 funded by the Department across a range of farm enterprises and soil types, is critical. These sites are managed by Teagasc and will be established on a range of soils, adding value to existing Teagasc projects, including the industry co-funded signpost farms and the agricultural catchments programme. The resulting national agricultural soil carbon observatory will place Ireland at the forefront of EU carbon sequestration research.

Deputy Denis Naughten: We will not get a baseline with 20 sites. To get the ball rolling, we need to support a comprehensive carbon soil analysis programme throughout this country. We need to roll out the airborne light detection and radar surveys on our land. Instead of expanding the airborne surveys, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has suspended its existing programme, but should we be surprised? The Government has net deforestation by felling more trees than it is planting. Farmers and homeowners have not been paid since last June for renewable electricity they are putting onto the grid, even though that right was forced on Ireland. I signed up to it in 2018, despite strong opposition at the time, and people are still not being paid today. Is it any wonder the Government is demanding farmers cut emissions by one third more over the next eight years, as it continues to sit on its hands and talk about pilots?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I respectfully disagree with the suggestion the Government is sitting on its hands. We have talked about the national agricultural soil carbon observatory, which is obviously important, and the flux towers in different locations are a key component

of that. These will be established through working with the Teagasc signpost programme. We also have the pilot soil sampling programme, which is very important. EIP projects such as the results-based environmental agri pilot and farm payments for ecological and agricultural transitions are locally led, innovative, results-based farm schemes. The results-based element is critical to the changes in how we gather that information. The national soil moisture monitoring network is a very important part of that. It will also involve soil moisture probes and new instruments, known as cosmic ray soil moisture observing systems, being deployed throughout Ireland. These are a number of the measures being taken with a view to us being able to have a viable income for farmers from carbon farming as an additional source of income for their farming enterprises into the future.

Organic Farming

119. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his proposals to increase participation in organic farming. [26983/22]

Deputy Matt Carthy: Organic farming is one area where the interests of Irish agriculture and our climate action targets can collide, yet we have set a very low target in this State, which has been highlighted by the European Commission. What is the Minister's proposal to increase participation in organic farming within Irish agriculture?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Growing our land under organics and continuing to build a very exciting sector here is a key priority of mine and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett. The current programme for Government target is to align the utilisable agricultural area under organic production in Ireland with the EU average of 7.5%. A budget of €21 million was allocated to the organic farming scheme in 2022, which is an increase of €5 million from the previous year. This allocation supports the 1,734 contracts currently in the organic farming scheme.

The sector in Ireland is experiencing considerable growth at present, with the area of land under organic production now at approximately 110,000 ha following the most recent reopening of the scheme. It has been reopened in each of the past two years to give every farmer the opportunity to join. I have introduced changes to the scheme this year by reducing the required stocking rate and by increasing the area paid at the higher rate from 60 ha to 70 ha, measures I believe will encourage new entrants to organic farming. These have already had a positive effect. There were 380 new applicants for the organic farming scheme, which closed for applications in April. This is almost a 20% increase in application numbers compared with 2021. Altogether, this means just under 700 new farmers joined the scheme in the past 12 months, which is significant.

In 2021, an additional 12,000 ha were farmed organically and it is expected this will increase by a further 17,000 ha, taking into consideration those who applied to join the scheme this year. These 29,000 new hectares mean a 35% increase in land farmed organically in the past two years. I am committed to continuing the implementation of the national organic strategy 2019-2025 that sets out an ambitious growth strategy for the sector by aligning it closely with market opportunities, which the Deputy will agree is important.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister mentioned the 7.5% target was the EU average about three years ago. It has already gone way beyond that. For what year is that target? When does the Minister expect to achieve it and what is the Government's target for 2030? The EU has set

a target of 25% for then.

The Minister mentioned marketing opportunities and the need to ensure that, when farmers move to organic products, they get a premium for those and they have a market into which to sell. Has the Minister engaged with other Departments, in particular the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, to ensure a portion of the budget for the procurement of food using taxpayers' money is ring-fenced for Irish-produced organic food? This single measure could make a major difference in increasing the targets the Government has set.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There has been engagement with other Departments on that issue and there will continue to be. The 7.5% target was set when the three Government parties agreed the programme for Government. It represents a significant increase-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: By when?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The end of this programme for Government period. That is why we have increased the funding allocation for organics in the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, programme fivefold compared with the previous programme. We have allocated €250 million to organics over the course of the next CAP period, which will run from 2023 to 2027. Those who have applied to the scheme this year and last are being accepted. Previously, there was not enough space on the scheme for the number of applicants. That is no longer the case. The door is open and there is a warm welcome for everyone who wants to go organic because the Government has committed to putting funding in place. Farmers are increasingly seeing the opportunities in organics from the point of view of family farm profits and, importantly, what it can contribute in terms of the sustainability of our food and its emissions footprint.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Regarding procurement, we need to go beyond just engaging with Departments. Consider the hundreds of millions of euro the State spends on food for hospitals, schools and buildings such as this one, for example. When using public money to purchase food, it would send a strong signal and be a supportive measure for the sector if a portion of that budget were ring-fenced for Irish-produced organic food.

The Minister referred to marketing. Bord Bia will set out what it has done to market Irish-produced organic food, but its budget for that is not ring-fenced either, so how can the Minister or any of us be confident we are marketing and selling this fantastic product appropriately? Irish-produced organic food is probably the best quality food in the world. How are we ensuring there is always a market for it and that, when our food is going into that market, it is securing a premium price?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are making good progress. I have outlined the Government's commitment of a fivefold increase in funding for organics over the next few years. Between last year and this, the area under organic farming has increased by 35%. That is significant, but we need to drive on. We want to reach the 7.5% target. We want to communicate to farmers the great opportunity for them presented by moving into organics, how that can work for them from the point of view of production and profitability, and how it can work for Ireland in terms of capturing more of the organic marketing, which is undoubtedly growing internationally and domestically. The Minister of State, Senator Hackett, has engaged with Bord Bia on ensuring the marketing of the organics scheme proceeds at pace alongside the growth of the sector, and the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, has been working closely with Bord Bia on this matter and on new market development in his responsibility for developing markets. It is

important we not just support organic produce through our schemes but also develop the premiums and markets for same.

Agriculture Industry

120. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the concerns that agricultural contractors are facing in terms of unprecedented input costs that are leading to major instability within the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27216/22]

Deputy Carol Nolan: What measures will the Minister take to address the unprecedented and significant input costs our agricultural contractors are facing? The Association of Farm and Forestry Contractors in Ireland, FCI, has highlighted its concern for the sector's viability, stating the sector is under increased pressure and that, in addition to the supply issues, the significant fuel costs are making the situation impossible for contractors. It has become a crisis. What measures is the Government currently taking to support the sector and what measures could it take?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for posing this question. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, significant implications are being seen across all sectors, including the agrifood sector. As well as the immediate humanitarian crisis that is facing us and that must take priority, we need to take the necessary steps to ensure food security is maintained in the period ahead.

The impact the illegal war in Ukraine is having on our farm families is the number one priority for me and the Department. At farm level, the crisis has been impacting significantly on the price of fertiliser, animal feed and fuel. Within the Department, I have established a rapid response team to monitor actively the impacts on the agrifood supply chain and to contribute to the whole-of-government response. I have established the national fodder and food security committee, headed by Teagasc under Professor Frank O'Mara and chaired by Mr. Mike Magan, and tasked it with preparing an industry response and develop contingency plans and advice to assist farmers in managing their farm enterprises over the coming months. I have also announced a number of measures over the past three months to assist the agricultural sector and am currently considering, and will continue to monitor, what additional measures may be necessary.

One of the main input costs for contractors is fuel, which has been subject to significant price rises in recent months. While primary responsibility for the taxation of fuel lies with the Minister for Finance, I continue to work closely with him to ensure the tax code reflects the Government's priorities for the agrifood sector. I am working closely with the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, in advocating for that.

Ireland's taxation of fuel is governed by EU law, as set out in the energy tax directive, and the Finance Act 1999 provides for the application of excise duty in the form of mineral oil tax. As the Deputy will be aware, gas oil that qualifies for a reduced rate of mineral oil tax is marked green and is usually referred to as marked gas oil, MGO, known as green diesel or agricultural diesel.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

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Mineral oil tax comprises a non-carbon component and a carbon component. The carbon component is commonly referred to as carbon tax and the non-carbon component is often referred to as excise. In March, the Minister for Finance reduced the excise rate on agricultural diesel by 2 cent per litre and then again by an additional 3 cent from 1 May. This total reduction of 5 cent reduces the non-carbon component, or excise, to nil. The current rate of mineral oil tax on agricultural diesel is €111.14 per 1,000 litres. This compares favourably with the current rate applied to auto diesel, which is €405.38 per 1,000 litres.

It should be noted that those who incur expenses in respect of farm diesel in the course of farming or the trade of agricultural contracting may claim an income tax or corporation tax deduction for these expenses, including any carbon tax charged in respect of the diesel.

I continue to engage with all stakeholders and continue to work across Government and with our European partners to respond to this crisis, using all of the tools at our disposal. I am taking a proactive approach to the crisis in Ukraine. We must protect our agrifood sector through this period of significant upheaval.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister for his response, but the Ukrainian crisis was not responsible for the introduction of the carbon tax, which has crippled agricultural contractors and had pushed many of them out of the sector before the Ukrainian crisis ever erupted. This Government blames either a crisis or the EU, but it needs to take responsibility and implement clear measures to support this sector.

Has the Minister met the farm and forestry contractors, who are in a deep crisis? They are facing more than a doubling in the price of MGO, known as green diesel, since January. MGO is used in the machines that provide services to thousands of farmers in every townland throughout Ireland. FCI research has shown that, during 2021, its members were being quoted an average MGO bulk delivery price of 75 cent per litre, plus VAT, with slight variations throughout the year. In recent weeks, quotations have risen to nearly double that and now average €1.30 per litre, plus VAT. This is the highest ever price quoted for MGO for farm and forestry contractors and we need action from the Government.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There have been intensive engagements between my team and contractors on the issues facing the latter. I will meet them shortly to discuss the challenges further. Due to the fact that excise duty on green diesel is much lower than on auto diesel, the capacity to make changes in that excise duty is limited. We applied significant cuts to standard diesel and standard petrol in response to the fuel challenges, but we also reduced the excise rate on agricultural diesel by 5 cent - 2 cent initially and a further 3 cent subsequently. While this reduction was small in terms of its impact on farmers and contractors, it represents the removal of the majority of the excise.

A large contracting expense on farms is silage. Importantly for the year ahead, I have introduced a €1,000 support for farmers to help cover the increased cost of contracting prices.

11 o'clock

That is a significant measure which I hope will help in this regard.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister made reference to limited capacity to reduce the excise duty on agricultural diesel. That suggests to me the Minister could have gone further than the 2 cent reduction. I ask him to go further and to make sure he takes measures that will assist this

sector, which, as I said, is in deep crisis.

I ask that an additional matter be considered. Farm Contractors Ireland, FCI, is requesting that farming and forestry sector fuel supply requirements are prioritised, given that contractors need supply. These requirements need to be prioritised as essential in the event of national fuel shortages. The FCI fears that the national silage harvest could be compromised, leading to a fodder shortage in winter 2022 and spring 2023. It has also asked for the Government to remove immediately the carbon tax from the marked gas oil used in agriculture and forestry by farm and forestry contractors for a period of five years in order to reduce costs and allow adequate time for the international machine development and supply sector to provide alternatives to internal combustion engines. I ask the Minister to consider those measures.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We have been monitoring the situation closely, in particular the challenges facing the farming community. That is why I came forward with the tillage scheme, providing €400 per hectare for each additional hectare of cereal that is grown this year. It is also why I have come forward with the €1,000 payment to farmers to help with the cost of making silage. One of the key costs involved, alongside fertiliser, is contractor costs, which are obviously increased because of the current challenges. That should certainly help farmers and contractors with those bills, although it will not cover them all.

In regard to the removal of excise on green diesel, there is no more room to change that as we have now removed it all. The first 2 cent move reduced the take of the national Exchequer by 40%, which is small in regard to what it means for farmers but it was 40% of the total. We then proceeded to remove it all so there is now no excise duty on green diesel for the foreseeable future as a step to supporting the sector.

We are conscious of the pressures. We are working closely with the sector and will continue to monitor this issue.

Agriculture Industry

121. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 157 of 31 March 2022, the status of the wool feasibility study; when the final report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26800/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have specific questions in regard to the wool feasibility study being carried out. Where is it? When is going to be published? What are the reasons for the delay?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As Deputy Connolly will be aware, one of the commitments in the current programme for Government is to conduct a review of the potential demand for wool-based products, such as for insulation and fertilisers in domestic and international markets. There is huge potential for us to develop a wool industry here in Ireland to help to drive increased returns to our sheep farming families. Over the last couple of years, for a product that used to be quite valuable, it has not been covering the costs of clipping.

In March last year, I initiated a public consultation to identify terms of reference for this review and the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, has worked to bring this forward. The agreed

terms of reference were as follows: identification and assessment of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool-based products; carrying out economic feasibility and cost-benefit analysis on proposed market opportunities; determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives; and identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities. Respondents were also asked to make recommendations on potential domestic and international market opportunities for wool products. Forty-five stakeholder submissions were received.

The request for tenders seeking service providers to carry out this study was published in July 2021 through a competitive public procurement procedure and five tenders were received. In November 2021, I appointed the Agile Executive, a consortium of experts from Munster Technological University and Donegal Yarns, to conduct this study. The expert group was contracted to conduct the review in accordance with the terms of reference. The final report has been received and is expected to be published in the coming weeks. Given that wool is a natural substance that is sustainable, organic and renewable and can be used in a variety of products such as textiles, fertiliser and insulation, it makes great sense to investigate its potential.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: When we ask a lot of questions, we build up a library of responses. What jumps out of that response gives life to the cliché of pulling the wool over our eyes. The Minister repeated, as the Minister of State repeated, the huge potential in regard to wool products, and I agree with them. Where is the feasibility study? What is the delay? Part of the terms of reference surely included a timespan. Has that timespan been exceeded? If so, why? The only positive thing I heard from the Minister is that the final report is with the Department. Is it going to be published?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are being very proactive in trying to identify new uses for wool. The completion of the report took longer than we had hoped but we were pushing hard to keep it moving along. Thankfully, we now have the report and it will be published in the next short period - over the next few weeks.

Our objective has to be to see how we can add value to wool. Its traditional use is in regard to clothing and while that market has become depressed, there are new potential uses for it. I hope this report will provide potential opportunities and then, as a Government, we will look to see how we can try to work on delivering on those opportunities. It is something we owe to our sheep farmers and also something we owe to the sustainability of the sector overall because it is such a tremendous natural product. We have to make sure we maximise its potential and its uses.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I fully appreciate that but the same language has been used repeatedly, with reference made to the programme for Government, conducting a review, the potential demand for insulation and fertilisers, and the domestic and international markets. I welcome the Minister's confirmation that it is going to be published, which is positive news. Cuirim fáilte roimh an bhfógra sin. However, why has it taken so long? It was going to be published "shortly", "in the first quarter of 2022", "very soon", and so on. At some stage, words have to mean something instead of woolly language. Forgive me for this stretching of clichés and stretching of words but we are drowning in responses like this. I will take the best part of the response today, which is that it is going to be published in the next few months.

In his reply, will the Minister clarify the cost? I know €100,000 was set aside. Were the terms of reference extended to allow it to continue on and to look at the various issues that have

been identified? What is the cost to date?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: To take the Deputy's approach, we are looking for woolly opportunities here. We are looking to maximise the potential that wool can deliver in terms of new uses, ones that have not traditionally been used and ones which can deliver a profit margin for farmers and remove what has become a cost for them. Under the programme for Government, we have taken this initiative, which is unique among countries internationally. We are looking to forge new ground and we are working hard to drive it on as quickly as we can. We will be publishing that report and we will then look to see how we can avail of the opportunities that might be there. If the Deputy has any ideas or suggestions in that regard, we are certainly very open to that. This is a tremendous natural product and one which we want to use.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: What has been the cost to date?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As to the overall cost, €100,000 was committed to the project.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Fodder Crisis

122. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures that his Department is taking in conjunction with the relevant agencies to put adequate supports in place for the farming and livestock sector to ensure sufficient fodder supplies and prevent a fodder crisis in the coming winter months. [26521/22]

Deputy Cathal Crowe: What strategies and policies has the Department put in place to avert a fodder crisis this winter?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Crowe for raising this issue. I also thank him for his advocacy in regard to the challenges facing farmers as a result of cost pressures, in particular his advocacy and representations on putting a scheme in place to support Clare farmers and farmers nationally in regard to growing fodder and preparing for the winter ahead.

As he will be aware, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I met with the main farm organisations and Teagasc on 8 March 2022 to discuss the impact of that illegal invasion on agriculture and supply chains. Following on from that meeting, I established the National Fodder and Food Security Committee and tasked it with preparing an industry response to the emerging crisis. Following the first meeting of the committee, Teagasc issued advice to farmers on how to manage their farms during the current grass growing season, with a view to securing sufficient fodder for next winter. The committee, which encompasses all of the main farming organisations, has continued to monitor the situation, led by Professor Frank O'Mara and his team at Teagasc and under the chairmanship of Mark McGann. The advice it has given relates to applying sufficient fertiliser and how to minimise the cost impact while maximising grass

output.

On 22 March, I announced a targeted intervention package, amounting to €12 million in funding, framed around three pillars to support Irish farming families. The tillage incentive scheme is a key anchor support mechanism of the package, delivering €400 per hectare for each additional hectare. The package also includes support for the sowing of multispecies sward and red clover silage. Subsequent to that, with the support of my Cabinet colleagues, I introduced a €1,000 support scheme for farmers to help to cover the cost of making silage or hay this year.

My key message to farmers is to make sure they maximise their capacity to grow grass and save silage and hay this year. Fortunately, it has been a good growing year so far. We must maximise that potential to ensure we are secure for next winter and spring. The €1,000 provision we are bringing to the table to support farmers in doing that came about in response to the representations from Deputy Cathal Crowe and many other Deputies. It is an important support. We must all work together to support our agrifood sector and farm families over the year ahead.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. The €55 million silage scheme he has introduced is a positive development that will put money back in the pockets of farmers. It is also good to see the establishment of the national fodder and food security committee. Year on year, the farming organisations have only been brought to the table at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a crisis is unfolding. That is not good enough. Research undertaken by University College Cork last winter suggests fodder crises may become an annual event. We need to factor that into our approach.

There are many variables that are putting huge pressures on farmers, including the cost of fertiliser. Figures released last week indicate that the purchase of fertiliser is already down by some 15% this year. The soils are warming up and the rain is falling but the ground is not fertilised. What I have seen increasingly in Clare and other counties in the west, where the land is heavy and it is wet for much of the year, is that farmers are bringing the cattle into the slatted shed later into October, or sometimes even in early November, and letting them out sooner the following year. The grass is not having a chance to grow. All of that, cumulatively, will have a huge impact when we get to the winter period and people are trying to hold on to bales.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: I recognise the efforts farmers are making and the response they are showing. Costs, including fertiliser costs, certainly have gone up and there are other challenges too. Farmers are recognising the absolute importance of growing grass. We also are seeing them take on board the advice from Teagasc in regard to the efficient use of organic manure. We have a lot of latent potential in this country in terms of how we use slurry. We are seeing a real step change this year in terms of its efficient use. It has never been more valuable and it should never be wasted. It must be used really efficiently and we are seeing progress in that regard.

The €1,000 provision will be an important scheme to support farmers. Again, my message to them is that it will be paid at the end of the year after the work is done. If farmers grow the silage and hay, they will be paid up to €1,000, at €100 per hectare. It is an important initiative. Given the challenges we have had over the past decade, with fodder shortages in two or three of those years, it is essential that we have all hands on deck. We need a wartime response over the coming months, because that is the extent of the challenge, to ensure we have the silage pits and hay barns full going into the winter ahead.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: While the national silage scheme is welcome, there is an elephant in the room in that dairy farmers have been omitted from it. They are again asking whether they will be considered for inclusion. We are heading into late May and the silage season is upon us. Dairy farmers will see their beef counterparts receiving €100 per hectare, up to a maximum of 10 ha. It is a positive intervention but there are many farmers losing out.

The multispecies sward initiative the Minister announced in March really did not have much of an impact in the west of Ireland. I do not know anyone in Clare who ploughed and put seeds into the ground. They are still dealing with the old meadow grass, which has its limitations. When I go home to Clare this evening, our cattle will be out on mountain commonage because we are trying to save what precious grass we have. We are hoping to get more meadows out this year than we typically would have done. The winters are getting longer, climate change definitely is upon us and the cost of all the variables, such as agrifuel and fertilisers, has gone up. We need to know today whether the Minister will consider bringing dairy farmers into the scheme. Its scope should be broadened and made more flexible as we head through the summer period.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I am glad Deputy Cathal Crowe showed up to ask this question because my Question No. 147 is similar. There is a convention whereby Departments group similar questions together, but that was not done in this instance. I hope it is not an attempt by the Minister's staff to avoid scrutiny of him.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Deputy McNamara should speak to the question.

Deputy Michael McNamara: It would be unfortunate if that were the case.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I show up every day.

Deputy Michael McNamara: However, if he did not - and some colleagues do not - then I would not be able to get to my feet to address the issue.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It is important for me to say that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I listened to what the Minister had to say. He has a lot of nice words about committees and discussions. In essence, however, what he is saying to farmers is, "Live, horse, and you will get grass". He talked about a wartime response. What he is doing is not a wartime response. There are people on committees discussing this problem who have got more, even if just a cup of tea, than farmers have got up to now to combat the crisis in fertiliser costs. Given that farmers are taking fertiliser on credit, that cost will inevitably be passed on to consumers next year. Food prices are going to rocket and we will see division between farmers who are passing on a legitimate cost - they have no alternative because the Government has not helped them - and consumers who are paying an awful lot more for food than they can afford.

Deputy David Stanton: I join colleagues in asking whether the Minister will consider including dairy farmers in the scheme to which he referred. Will he give us an idea as to what the subscription to the scheme will be or what the take-up is at the moment? Has he any estimate of how many applicants there will be?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputies for their questions. The Ministers of

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State, Deputy Heydon and Senator Hackett, and I have been very proactive as a team in working with the farming organisations to address the challenges that are there and to ensure we make the preparations now in order to be secure next April and May. I brought all the farmer representatives together immediately after the invasion of Ukraine, recognising the challenges that would arise from it and the need to act now. We must do the work in these coming months that will leave us secure next year.

Alongside that, I have put in place a number of schemes to support farmers in carrying out the work. We have given a clear commitment to farmers that they will get €1,000 towards the cost of making hay and silage this year. Deputy Cathal Crowe asked me about dairy farmers, a point that Deputy Stanton has raised with me previously. We gave their inclusion great and careful consideration and took on board the advice and evidence we were given. The assessment from Teagasc is that the activity on dairy farms is very strong and the farmers are making the silage as usual.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Has the Minister done anything about EU import tariffs?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This time last year, the price of milk was 35 cent a litre.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Thank you, Minister. We are over time.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Today, it is 50 cent a litre and the cost of production has gone up by an estimated 7 cent in the meantime. Therefore, the costs are being more than covered by the prices being made. Indeed, the estimate is that profitability will be very strong on dairy farms this year.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This particular issue is not about covering all sectors. It is about growing grass and making sure agriculture, as a sector, is secure. That is why we are targeting the available funding at the beef and sheep sectors, which, as the evidence is showing, need that support to generate the activity to make the whole sector secure.

Climate Change Policy

123. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on the measures being taken by his Department to assist farmers in contributing to the national effort to reduce climate-based emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26636/22]

Deputy David Stanton: This question relates to the role farmers can play in reducing climate-based emissions. What supports is the Department making available to help them in this regard? Farmers are often demonised but they really want to play their part and are anxious to do so. They need help, support and guidance in that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for his question. As he is aware, the agriculture sector is required to reduce emissions by between 22% to 30% by 2030, based on a 2018 baseline of 23 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalent. This is a challenging target for the sector, but it is one that also will present opportunities for farmers. Our farm families are committed to taking a leadership role in meeting our overall climate ambitions and have shown their will-

ingness to do so. Indeed, it is as much in the interest of farmers as anyone else to do so, if not more so, because no sector of the economy will be more exposed to climate change in the years ahead than agriculture, given our dependence on the weather to be able to produce food. There will be an even bigger challenge in this regard in other parts of the world that are also facing serious difficulties.

The Teagasc marginal abatement cost curve was the original source of information on how to move forward and it has been built upon by both the Ag Climatise roadmap and the climate action plan of 2021. I recently established a Food Vision 2030 dairy group to set out specific actions on how emissions reduction in the dairy sector will be achieved. A beef and sheep subgroup with a similar objective will soon be established under the chairmanship of Professor Thia Hennessy.

The advisory services both within Teagasc and the private farming consulting network are working closely with farmers to advise them of the transition necessary on their farms. Teagasc has established a network of model farms under its signpost programme. These farms are considered best in class when it comes to climate-smart agriculture, supporting peer-to-peer learning between farmers.

One of the most important actions farmers can take is to reduce their dependence on chemical nitrogen. I have put in place additional supports this year to encourage farmers to transition to clover and multispecies swards. There is real potential in that and I think we will see a significant movement towards that in the years ahead. This year has brought home the importance of insulating ourselves from the cost challenges of chemical fertiliser while also reducing emissions and enhancing sustainability at farm level.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response. I wish to raise two issues. I ask him to comment on the Meth-Abate project whereby methane is set to be reduced by the addition of seaweed additives. I ask him for his views on its effectiveness and potential. What is his Department doing to support research in this area?

The last time we were here, I spoke about the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, grant. It is not possible for farmers who use TAMS money to put up solar panels to sell the electricity back to the grid. If I recall correctly, I think the Minister agreed that this was an anomaly that needed to be looked at. Has any progress been made in this area? Would the Minister agree that if this were changed it would encourage more farmers to install more solar panels on their sheds and generate electricity, thereby indirectly reducing emissions? I also ask the Minister to talk about the planning restrictions preventing farmers from putting solar panels on sheds.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There is great potential for the use of feed additives to reduce methane. Seaweed is one of the options that can deliver on that. Other products are also coming on the market. Teagasc has carried out tests to assess how that would work in an Irish situation. The assessment suggests it can deliver a reduction of approximately 30% in methane, which is quite exciting and offers considerable potential. However, we would need to verify that. Following the research, we will be looking to utilise that and maximise the capacity to deliver.

Under the Common Agricultural Policy, TAMS-funded solar-generated power can only be for own-farm use. My team is engaging with the Department of Environment, Climate and

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Communications regarding its new feed-in tariff to ensure we have the supports in place so that it joins up. We want to encourage the great potential farmers have to contribute to energy production and be rewarded for that. We are continuing to work to prepare a package on that.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for that. I understand in some instances methane reductions of 67% have been observed. The Minister is right in what he is saying and I encourage his Department to move on that one.

I again ask the Minister to comment on the planning restrictions with respect to solar panels on farm buildings. In some countries such restrictions do not exist and people can simply install solar panels on buildings and they also get paid for the electricity that comes back on to the grid.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I know the Deputy has been advocating for farmers to maximise the potential to produce energy in the years ahead as has the Government. Regarding the joined-up thinking that will be required to drive progress on this, we are engaged on a cross-Department basis to ensure the systems talk to one another so that it ultimately works at farm level. We need to support farmers to put the infrastructure in place. We need to ensure the planning capacity is there so that it can be done easily in practical ways. There should be rewards for farmers so that they can be paid for it. There is great potential for this and we are engaging to ensure it happens. We will see significant progress on it in the next year.

Common Agricultural Policy

124. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his response to the request of the European Commission to strengthen the application of the partnership principle with regard to the next CAP; if he intends to re-engage farm stakeholders with regard to a revised CAP strategic plan; and if he intends to bring a revised CAP strategic plan before Dáil Éireann for debate. [26960/22]

Deputy Matt Carthy: What does the Minister plan to do to strengthen the application of the partnership principle with regard to the next CAP? Further to the correspondence he received from the European Commission does he intend to re-engage with stakeholders? Will he ensure we have a collaborative approach to Ireland's implementation of the next Common Agricultural Policy?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It has always been my policy to conform to the highest standards when it comes to stakeholder and public consultation. I believe farmer engagement, through farm organisations as well as directly with farmers in my tour of the mart network last year, was really important in framing this CAP programme and the CAP strategic plan I submitted to Brussels.

This has been the case in the development of our CAP strategic plan, despite the difficulties posed by Covid-19 restrictions. I thank the many farmers in every county that I visited for their input. As we know there are many different views and it was really important to hear them all to ensure we could have as balanced a CAP proposal as possible.

The approach to consultation has been informed by three key principles: that there should be genuine engagement, that it should be targeted and easily accessible to those with a clear interest in the policy and that systematic efforts were made to ensure that all parties had an op-

portunity to take part at all stages of the policy process.

Consultation was carried out over the entire course of the plan's development, including on the drafting of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, SWOT, analysis in summer 2019; the scoping report for the environmental assessment in spring 2021; the proposed interventions in August and September 2021; and the draft plan and strategic environmental assessment which concluded on 8 December 2021.

Consultation is still ongoing through the CAP consultative committee, which has met on 30 occasions since its establishment in May 2019. That encompasses all key farm representatives and key stakeholders in the sector.

My ministerial colleagues and I also consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including through a series of in-person meetings in autumn 2021. The response has come back from the European Union and we believe we have submitted a strong and balanced CAP plan. We will be responding to the Commission's letter to us outlining the merits of the proposal we have. It is our objective to get approval for that and be ready to have all the schemes kicking off from January 2023.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The consultation process on the CAP strategic plan was disappointing. Essentially stakeholders were invited to make submissions and that was it. Online public meetings were organised in a very unsatisfactory manner, with no ability for people to engage directly. While the mart meetings the Minister mentioned were still continuing, the strategic plans had all but been drafted. We need to be honest about that.

Am I correct that the Minister said that he plans to respond to the European Commission essentially making the case for the strategic plan as it is and that he has no plan to make any further amendments? The House deserves clarity on that important point.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We put a massive effort into engaging and consulting. We never previously had such extensive consultation. There were many different views and I believe we reached a balanced and strong CAP plan. The mart meetings were very important. It had not been finalised at that stage; it fed into the finalisation of it. I visited 26 counties as part of that. We had a great engagement with the farmers who came along and contributed. There was great engagement from Oireachtas Members across all parties except the Deputy's. None of the county meetings I held had a Sinn Féin Oireachtas Member present. Many farmers, farm families and all the farming organisations were represented. Not once did a Sinn Féin Oireachtas Member turn up to those marts. At the very body where farm families come together to engage and discuss, the Deputy's party was entirely absent. I will not take any gyp from him on the consultation process.

The engagement now is with the Commission and it is important we have approval in place as soon as we can so that we can get these schemes up and running.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is at it again. He is playing games and trying to twist and spin things. It is beneath his office, I must say. The Minister has a very important job of work, that is, to ensure we have a Common Agricultural Policy that actually protects Irish agriculture for generations to come at a time when the industry is facing many challenges. The place of Oireachtas Members is not at marts and taking up speaking time that was made available to farmers in what was a limited consultation process. The place for Oireachtas Members to do their jobs is in this House, the Seanad and at meetings of the Joint Committee on Agricul-

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ture, Food and the Marine that relate to this topic. The Minister was asked on several occasions to bring the CAP strategic plan before this House for approval. He refused to do so. He would not allow the type of scrutiny, consultation and collaboration that would have ensured he did not get a stinging rebuke from the European Commission. Had he done so, we would now have a CAP we could all be championing. This CAP will be having an impact long after the Minister is gone. It is not about him, his personal views or his play-acting. This is about Irish farming and the future of Irish agriculture. It is time for the Minister to get real. It is time to start engaging with us, as elected Members of this House, in a collaborative way so we can have a CAP we all support, which we all buy into and which will serve Irish farming into the next generation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. The consultation process was done in a depth that was never done before. There has been immense opportunity for the Deputy's party and other parties to feed into that through the consultation process.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We did so and the Minister should put that on the record.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Sinn Féin did engage in the written consultation process. The Deputy would not get what was important and valuable in the process because he did not show up to any of the marts to listen to the farmers who were sharing their views. Some of those meetings lasted for three or four hours. The engagement and feedback were phenomenal. There were many different perspectives and varying views. That was important for framing the CAP and ensuring farmers were at the centre of it.

It is ultimately the role of Government to put together the CAP strategic plan and to submit it to Europe. It is important that we put farmers at the centre of it and that is absolutely what I did. If the Deputy would like to engage through the agriculture committee, through which there were many engagements, or otherwise, I am happy to discuss the CAP in more detail and in any way he would like. However, it is ultimately the responsibility of the Government to submit the strategic plan.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The European Commission saw the plans before the elected Members of this House. That is a scandal.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The real and detailed engagement with the plan does not happen through a to and fro on the floor of the Dáil. It happens by getting down and engaging directly with the farming community it impacts. That is the approach we have taken and that is why I believe this CAP strategic plan is balanced and will serve farming well for the years ahead.

Farm Costs

125. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department is monitoring the increase in the cost of fertiliser; and if so, if he will detail the percentage increase in the cost of fertiliser over the past three years. [26209/22]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The increase in the cost of fertiliser is hammering farmers across the country at the moment. According to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, there has been a 130% increase in the space of just two years in the cost of farm fertiliser. Farmers are also being hammered by energy prices, which have gone up by 30%, while feed prices have gone up

by 20%. The input costs for farming are increasing at an alarming rate while the output cost, the cost of the product, is not going up at the same rate. What will the Government do to help farmers?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is proposed as part of Ireland's draft CAP strategic plan, which is currently with the European Commission for approval, that there will be two approaches within the EU agri-environment climate measure, AECM. The first approach will be an environmental approach that offers a range of actions that individual farmers may undertake. The second approach will be a co-operative project approach, available to farmers in defined, high-priority geographical areas where a successful applicant will undertake bespoke farm, landscape and catchment measures, and may also be able to select from a general suite of actions under the AECM. Farmers participating in this approach will have the assistance of a local co-operation project team who will assist with implementation of the scheme at local level.

The proposed new AECM will contain results-based elements, that is, a participant's payment will be based on achieving measurable results, and prescription-based actions. Prescription-based action was the payment model for previous agri-environment schemes, such as the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS, which is just completing. The inclusion of results-based actions will assist in ensuring that farmers will be paid for the results they achieve.

For the results-based actions, the environmental health or condition of the habitat is scored using a range of indicators-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Minister is reading the wrong reply. This is Question No. 125 in the name of Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: My question relates to farm fertiliser.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Pardon me.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I have the correct reply here, if it is helpful to the Minister.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I apologise to Deputy Tóibín. The current situation around the cost and availability of farm inputs remains a significant concern. The impact the invasion of Ukraine is having on our farm families has been the number one priority the Department in recent months. It will continue to be prioritised.

Fertiliser prices have increased significantly over the past 12 months and, unfortunately, there is no sign of an easing of prices in the short to medium term. Prices are being driven by a number of factors, including global demand, energy prices and availability. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine has led to significant hikes in energy prices and significant concerns around supply chain disruption. This is being felt at farm level and is something of which that I am acutely aware, as we have discussed.

In general terms, using the CSO fertiliser price index and taking calcium ammonium nitrate, CAN, as a representative product, there has been an average increase of 321% in the price of these fertilisers from March 2020 to March 2022. Overall, CSO data highlight that the general price of fertilisers has increased 149% in the past 12 months.

As the Deputy knows, one of the key responses I have introduced to try to help mitigate

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that challenge is the €1,000 fodder support scheme. It is obviously important that we continue to maximise our capacity to grow grass in this country. Therefore, the Government is working closely with farmers to support them. We cannot mitigate the effects of all of the costs but we are certainly working in partnership with farmers to back them over the months ahead.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I was waiting for the word “fertiliser” to appear in the Minister’s reply. Thankfully, we are there now. It is important to focus on what is happening in farming at the moment. Teagasc has detailed that there are major difficulties in the farming community at the moment. Only one third of farmers are currently making a living from farms. Another one third of farmers are only making a living because somebody in the household is working off the farm as a teacher or a nurse, or is working in a shop. A full one third of farmers in this State are making a loss or going into poverty or debt. Farmers are already in big trouble.

The costs of fertiliser, feed and fuel are going through the roof. The inflation farmers face today is the inflation everyone else will face tomorrow. We have a cost-of-living crisis and the cost of foodstuffs will increase as long as the input costs in farming are increasing. We are calling on the Government to subsidise the cost of fertiliser to farmers and directly reduce the cost to them.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: That is the objective behind the fodder support scheme I have introduced, which is paying €100 per hectare, up to a maximum of €1,000 for 10 ha. That is intended to support farmers with the cost challenges involved in growing silage and saving hay this year. We, as a Government, very much recognise the difficulties at this time. The cost of fertiliser, in particular, has impacted farmers. The additional cost pressures for contractors also have an impact. That €1,000 will be a real help to farm families in meeting the challenge of growing silage and hay over the course of this summer.

Thankfully, we have had a good growing season so far. We must recognise the challenges we have and that they are the result of the war on European soil for the first time in a generation. We must also recognise that we cannot take things for granted in the coming winter and spring in a way we would have in the past. We must ensure our silage pits and hay barns are full. We must also ensure we are prepared to continue to produce food next winter and spring. As a Government, we stand alongside farmers and will work to support them to meet that challenge. I recognise the work farmers are doing in stepping up to the mark and thank them for it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the fact that the Government has made an effort to start to meet some of the costs with which farmers are dealing. However, from what I am hearing from farmers, it is not enough. We had a debate in this Chamber about a week ago on the issue of food security which is a significant concern at the moment. Food supply chains are tightening in this State and internationally. In fact, in some parts of the world, including countries in the west like Britain, certain staple foods are being rationed. In Britain, for example, supermarkets are reducing the amount of sunflower oil that individual customers can buy.

We need to make sure we grow the Irish agricultural sector. Every year farmers leave the farming sector. Every year young farmers make an assessment of whether there is a living to be made from farming and many decide that there is not. As a result, we have fewer farmers every single year. I call on the Minister to make sure there is proper investment and proper subsidies are available to farmers because €100 per hectare is not enough.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I raised this issue with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste earlier

in the year and they said that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine was meeting EU agriculture ministers and would be able to detail what was happening afterwards. When the Minister met the EU agriculture ministers, did he call for a reduction in or the abolition of EU import tariffs on fertiliser? I appreciate that is not something he can do unilaterally but it is something the EU agriculture ministers can do if they put their minds to it. Did he call for that and is it going to happen?

The Minister talked about incentives to ensure there are full sheds of hay and pits of silage at the end of the year but there is an obstacle to that which the Minister can deal with unilaterally. Farmers with low-input permanent pasture cannot cut hay and silage if they are in GLAS. The Minister is trying to incentivise them to do so but they cannot. Will they, on a temporary basis for this year or for as long as this fertiliser crisis lasts, be allowed to cut silage? Likewise, traditional hay meadows can only be cut once because cutting can only take place after a certain deadline. Will that deadline be brought forward to allow for a second cut this year? These are matters the Minister can deal with unilaterally.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: To take Deputy McNamara's points first, I want to ensure that farmers are getting an income from those schemes. It is important that the conditions of the schemes are met in order to make sure that the income is available. If we can ensure that farmers do what they normally do and grow grass as well as they normally do, using the land that they have, we will be in a good position next year. That is why I have come forward with a cost support to help farmers in making hay and silage. We all know that by next March or April we will not be able to grow grass or do much in relation to fodder here. As Minister, I will not be able to import fodder as I might have done in previous years. We do not have that safety valve. We also cannot be sure that we will have the safety valve of increasing the grain fed to cattle to mitigate a fodder shortage because we cannot be sure that there will be an adequate supply of grain available. What we can do is work now to grow grass, silage and hay. That is why the Department and my ministerial colleagues and I are working with farmers to back them in preparing for next winter and spring by putting the fodder scheme in place. My message to farmers is to continue doing what they are doing, in terms of really stepping up. It is very important that we recognise that now is the time to act to prevent challenges arising next winter and spring.

Deputy Michael McNamara: What about lifting the tariffs?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is disappointing that we have not had action on it yet but I have been asking for it.

Agriculture Schemes

126. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the targeted measures that will be included in the new agri-environment scheme under CAP to ensure that farmers are rewarded for results that help to tackle the biodiversity crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26937/22]

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: What targeted measures will be included in the new agri-environment scheme under CAP to ensure that farmers are rewarded for results that help to tackle the biodiversity crisis?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this issue.

It is proposed, as part of Ireland's draft CAP strategic plan which is currently with the European Commission for approval, that there will be two approaches within the new agri-environment scheme. As I outlined earlier, there will be standard or general agri-environment climate measures, AECM, involving a range of actions that individual farmers may undertake and a co-operative project approach, whereby farmers in defined high priority geographical areas will be able to work together. Under the latter approach, successful applicants will undertake bespoke farm, landscape and catchment measures and may also be able to select from the AECM general suite of actions. Farmers participating in this approach will have the assistance of a local co-operation project team which will assist with implementation of the scheme at local level and work with farmers to ensure the landscape and co-operative measures are undertaken in a way that contributes significantly to our environmental objectives.

The proposed new AECM will contain results-based elements as well as prescription-based actions which are similar to the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS. The inclusion of results-based actions will assist in ensuring that farmers will be paid for the results they achieve. For the results-based actions, the environmental health or condition of the habitat is scored using a range of indicators to assess biodiversity, climate, water quality and soil aspects to estimate the environmental services provided. The higher the environmental health of a field, the higher its score and consequently the more the farmer will be rewarded for his or her time, effort and management of it.

The AECM general approach has been designed to enable all participating farm types to improve their biodiversity levels by ensuring the provision of winter food, nesting and chick rearing habitat for farmland birds, and resources for pollinators through a range of proposed actions.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister for his response. I have consistently said that the upcoming agri-environment scheme is going to be one of the key measures in tackling biodiversity loss and turning that tide. The Minister gave a good outline of the scheme and its fundamentals are good, particularly the eight co-operation areas. It is so important that within those co-operation areas there are targeted schemes for bespoke measures that will specifically tackle declining populations of wading birds and farmland birds.

There are enormous opportunities with the so-called menu A measures for those farms that are not within the co-operation areas. Farmers, many of whom are GLAS participants, may be able to avail of the menu A measures, including tree and hedgerow planting, mixed species sward planting and so on. Where there is evidence of breeding wading species like red shank, snipe, curlew, dunlin, and so on, farmers should be able to avail of an extra payment for those targeted measures. That is key and will mean fantastic results for the farmer and for biodiversity.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Co-operation and collaboration between farmers is needed to deliver the results we want and we now have a mechanism to enable that to happen. Over the last two or three decades, there has been a decline in biodiversity, not just in Ireland but across the world, and a biodiversity crisis has emerged. This is something we have to take really seriously and to reverse and this scheme is crucial to that. There are measures that can be taken, with farmers working together to support different bird species and habitats and it is crucial that we use this scheme to deliver on that. That is why we have increased the funding for this scheme by 50% relative to the previous one. We are now able to pay up to €10,000 for co-operative measures and up to €7,000 for the individual measures.

Again, I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this matter. It is important that we all work to get this right because it can deliver a really positive outcome.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I agree with the Minister that it is important to get this right. In terms of the eight co-operation areas and the menu B items, I have been studying the maps and there is some really exciting potential there. The one most relevant to me is the Cork Kerry co-operation area which takes in parts of Kerry and large parts of west Cork. Having studied the maps, however, a very obvious omission in that area is the Mizen peninsula. The Beara Peninsula is included, as is the Sheep's Head Peninsula which is right next to the Mizen Peninsula, but none of Mizen is included. As someone who knows the area extremely well from the point of view of biodiversity and breeding birds, I would argue that the exclusion of Mizen must be reviewed. There are some high-value biodiversity areas there and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, data tell us that. I think this was a desktop exercise that has led to the omission of Mizen Head. I ask that this be changed. It would only lead to the inclusion of between 50 and 100 additional farmers. I ask the Minister to review the west Cork and Kerry co-operation area.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this point. If he provides further details and data on it, I will certainly have it considered and assessed. The Department has worked with the National Parks and Wildlife Service using the available evidence, intelligence and data to identify the areas where co-operative projects would work and deliver results and where collaboration is needed. In those areas where it is needed, we must ensure it is applied and we work together. I will certainly ensure that any additional information is assessed. It is key that we use the environmental scheme to reduce emissions and support the environment, while seeking to reverse biodiversity decline and maintain our wildlife and bird life. We must bring farmers together at a landscape level to put in place measures to support that and deliver results. I am happy to engage further on that.

Farm Costs

127. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the ongoing impacts of the war in Ukraine on Irish agriculture; the latest Government actions to mitigate negative impacts on Irish farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26908/22]

Deputy Brendan Griffin: My question relates to the war in Ukraine and the impacts it is having on Irish agriculture. Will the Minister discuss what is being done to try to assist Irish farmers at this very difficult time?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, significant implications are being seen across all sectors, particularly the agrifood sector. I assure the Deputy that the illegal invasion of Ukraine and its impacts on our farm families continue to be the number one priority for me and the Department since the invasion occurred.

At farm level, the crisis has been impacting significantly on the price of fertiliser and animal feed, as we have discussed. Following a strong year for farm family income in 2021, Teagasc has forecast that a decline in 2022 is now likely as output price increases have, until recently, been failing to offset the rise in production costs. Significantly higher production costs will be a feature across all sectors this year, with higher fertiliser, feed and fuel prices. The current

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market outlook for output prices is uncertain. We cannot be sure of it but upward pressure has been seen. There is no guarantee that this will cover the additional input costs.

The Deputy will be aware that I have set up a rapid response team in the Department and, at national level, the national fodder and food security committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Mike Magan. Under the leadership of Dr. Frank O'Mara and the Teagasc team, the committee is working very closely with farm organisation representatives to manage the challenges in this area.

With regard to supporting farm families, we have introduced a number of packages. We provided €12 million to incentivise increased tillage and grain production, which is very important. Working with the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, we are providing €3 million in support for the horticulture sector. Working closely with the Minister of State, Deputy Martin Heydon, who is chair of the pig roundtable on this issue, we have introduced €20 million to support the pig sector at a time when it is under massive pressure. More recently, the fodder incentive scheme was introduced to incentivise Irish families to do what we do tremendously well, namely, to grow grass, while recognising this is costing more this year and to support farmers with that cost challenge.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: I thank the Minister and I appreciate the efforts that have been made to date. They are all very helpful and make a difference on the ground for individual farmers and farm families. I encourage the Minister to keep trying to do more and find more resources to assist our farming communities. The situation for farmers is akin to the situation for the tourism and hospitality sector during Covid-19. They face a major challenge and there has been an enormous increase in production costs.

I raise the particular case of farmers in milk production who are on fixed-price contracts, especially in the north Kerry area. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, for meeting yesterday with some councillors and farmers in Moyvane, County Kerry, and the north Cork area. They are having serious difficulties because of huge production costs. I call out Ornu, which will not engage in the process. These farmers are suffering and need help.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am aware that Deputy Griffin has advocated strongly on this issue. On the need to support farmers with costs, the €1,000 we have provided for fodder production costs over the summer will be important in that regard. We did not apply that payment to the dairy sector in general because, thankfully, we are seeing record prices for milk. Teagasc figures will show that the increase in the milk price is exceeding the increase in costs. As such, profits should be strong and the evidence show that activity at farm level in saving fodder has also been strong.

There is a challenge facing those on fixed-price milk contracts. The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine has considered this matter. It is very important that the co-operatives also give it serious consideration. A number of them have moved to provide some support to those on fixed-price milk contracts. I encourage them to consider the issue further because undoubtedly there is considerable pressure on those locked into fixed-price milk contracts, despite the very strong prices in the general market.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: It is welcome that milk prices are rising, but those who are locked in to prices face an enormous challenge. The stress and fear these people are facing are very worrying. I again call out Ornu. It is my understanding that the company was asked to ap-

pear before the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine and has not yet agreed to do so. That is unacceptable at this point. This issue is causing enormous stress and worry. The Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, listened to the farmers yesterday. I thank him for his time and effort. He saw at first-hand the huge impact this is having and the massive amounts of money involved. I acknowledge those companies that have done the right thing in the circumstances, but they all need to do that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There is a very important role for milk contracts, including fixed-price milk contracts going forward. In general, these contracts provide support for farmers given the fluctuations in markets. It is also important that there are safeguards in place for farmers around that. Lessons need to be learned from the experience in that regard in recent months. It is a matter for the co-operatives and the processors, working with Ornuá, to assess. A number of the co-operatives have examined the matter and delivered increased prices for the farmers in question. This is a difficult and challenging issue. Nobody predicted the unprecedented increase in costs over the past while or the increase in milk prices that has occurred at the same time. Farmers in fixed-price milk contracts are not able to avail of the higher prices but they are certainly subject to the higher costs. That is a very difficult situation to be in. It is important, therefore, that the processors and industry work together to see how they can support these farmers in the time ahead. We also need to learn the lessons in order that we future-proof this option in a way that safeguards farmers. The Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, has engaged closely with Deputy Griffin on this matter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As we are running out of time, I ask Deputy Leddin to skip the introduction to the next question and we will try to get a reply from the Minister followed by a response from the Deputy.

Common Agricultural Policy

128. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the way he intends to bridge the gap identified by the European Commission between the greenhouse gas reduction targets for agriculture in the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the measures identified in the draft CAP strategic plan; the way the bridging of that gap will be funded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26629/22]

Deputy Brian Leddin: The European Commission has identified a gap between the CAP strategic plan and the climate action plan *vis-à-vis* the targets. Will the Minister identify how he plans to bridge that gap and how we will reach the target of achieving a reduction of 1.2 megatonnes in emissions, as identified by the European Commission under the CAP strategic plan? I want to hear about the measures and how the Minister intends to fund those measures.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As highlighted previously, the Climate Action Plan 2021 sets very ambitious and challenging targets for the agriculture and land use sector in reducing emissions as a key contribution to the overall economy-wide 51% target by 2030. My policy approach to achieving our climate targets in the agriculture, land use and forestry sectors centres on four different drivers of change.

The first driver is through public supports and incentives including the new Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan for 2023-27, which contains a range of new measures to drive behavioural change at farm level, for example, through strengthened conditionality; a new eco-

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scheme; an ambitious new Pillar 2 environmental scheme; and a significantly enhanced organic farming scheme, underpinned by extensive training of farmers and advisers and a fivefold increase in funding for organic farming.

The second driver is through regulation and focusing on reducing nitrogen allowances, the mandatory use of low emission manure technology and the use of nitrogen-fixing clover. The third driver is through market and private industry incentives, where industry will play a significant role in driving on farm change. The fourth driver for this change will be through new technologies, innovation and diversification opportunities that can deliver significant emissions reductions.

Industry incentives will also be needed to ensure they are fully adopted at farm level.

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This includes innovations such as feed additives, income diversification into areas such as anaerobic digestion and the development of carbon farming models. As I have repeatedly indicated, and as is acknowledged in the Climate Action Plan 2021, a whole-of-government, whole-of-industry approach will be needed to achieve our overall climate objectives as the CAP strategic plan alone will not be able to deliver on all the changes required. By working together, I am confident in the sector's ability to achieve its climate targets without compromising food production. We are a sustainable food producing nation and we want to ensure the work we are doing does not compromise our status. Our farm families are already sustainable and we must work to future-proof the sector for the next generation and beyond.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I want to pick up on the point about regulation with respect to nitrogen. We regulate nitrogen primarily to protect our rivers. Is the Minister looking at regulating nitrogen to reduce greenhouse gases as well? It is important to put that on the record of the House.

The Minister did not talk about rewetting peatlands. The CAP strategic plan identifies 40,000 ha of peatlands and the climate action plan 80,000 ha, but there are 300,000 ha of emitting peaty soils in the country. The CAP strategic plan is worth €2 billion a year. We need to direct that €2 billion to supporting farmers and providing environmental benefits. It is remiss of us that we are not sufficiently addressing the rewetting of bogs. I ask the Minister to clarify the matter of nitrogen regulation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Water quality is essential. We have to take steps to improve it and the regulation of nitrogen and fertiliser is important in that regard. It also delivers in reducing emissions. There will be great potential over the years ahead to work towards using more clover in swards and multispecies swards, which reduces significantly the need for chemical fertiliser but is also beneficial from a food production and biodiversity point of view. Rewetting is a key part of the CAP plan, as is forestry. We will be stepping those measures out over the next number of years and they can deliver real benefits from an emissions point of view.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Matt Carthy: At this stage, we are running out of words to describe the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on ordinary workers and families. Households simply cannot keep up. They are struggling to make it to the end of the week. Their hard-earned money is going out faster than it came in. While people watch every cent they spend and do everything they can to provide for their children, they also hear that the wealth of Ireland's nine billionaires rose by €16 billion since the start of the pandemic. This cost-of-living crisis is happening at a time when inequality and the lack of fairness in Ireland is writ large. It is up in lights for all to see. People are working long, hard hours but they cannot afford to pay utility bills, put a roof over their heads, put fuel in the car and put food on the table.

It is an understatement to say the packages the Government has introduced do not go far enough. They did not make a dent in the astronomical living costs people face. The €200 energy credit was overtaken before it was delivered. The excise measure to deal with the soaring costs at the pumps was wiped out virtually overnight. Incredibly, the Government still has not done anything to reduce the cost of home heating oil. In fact, at the beginning of this month it did the exact opposite, hiking the cost even further. What has been the result of the Government's slow and sluggish response? The impact is felt sharply right across the board. The price of groceries is now soaring, as farmers warned us it would. Increases in the prices of essentials like milk, bread and butter have hit people hard and more and more families are depending on food banks and charities like St. Vincent de Paul. All the indicators point to further dramatic rises in food prices. Fuel prices are now back to the levels they were at before the Government introduced a measure it was told was not enough. In some places, in fact, the price at the fuel pumps is even higher today than it was then. It is Groundhog Day for those who are paying huge sums to fill the tank to get to work or get the kids to school. We have all heard the stories from people like nurses, teachers and many others who simply cannot afford to run their cars any more. These people live in communities where there are virtually no public transport options. The car is the only option.

For too long, the Government has skirted around the edges of this crisis. We know international factors are at play. We accept that reality and I accept the Government cannot do everything, but the truth is it can and should do a lot more. People struggling to make ends meet today do not want to hear what the Government did three months ago. They certainly do not want to be told they have to wait until the budget in October. That is for the birds. There are options. Sinn Féin has presented a comprehensive package of measures that would make a real difference. We called for a mini-budget but the Government has sat on its hands.

What is the Government's plan for now, for 26 May 2022, knowing the reality faced by so many workers and families who are struggling to make ends meet and who do not know how they will reach the end of the month? People want to know what the Government is going to do now, today, to help the people who are going without lunch so they will be able to put fuel in the car on their way home. That is happening today. This situation is beyond a crisis. We need to hear that the Government intends to act and we need to hear that right now.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question. At the outset, I acknowledge that Ireland, and the entire world, is facing a cost-of-living crisis driven by inflation, which is largely

caused by international factors beyond our control, as the Deputy acknowledged. The cost of everything is going up and the cost of very little is going down. People can see that in their utility bills, when they go to the petrol station to fill up their tanks with petrol or diesel and in their grocery bills. A lot of families are struggling and a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet as a consequence of that. As the Deputy acknowledged, this is not driven by Government policy. It is driven largely by international factors, including the rising cost of energy and the war in Ukraine. The zero Covid policy still being pursued by China is not helping.

As Sinn Féin has acknowledged on many occasions, no Government is in a position to compensate people fully for the fact that the cost of living has risen by so much. We are here to help and the Deputy is right to call on us to help some more. So far, the Government has provided €2.4 billion to homes, households and families to help them with the rising cost of living. A usual budget package is €1 billion or maybe €2 billion. We have already introduced measures totalling €2.4 billion so far this year. Far from being a mini-budget, we have done more since January than would be done in the average budget, with €2.4 billion in spending to help people with the very high cost of living. There was a pension and social welfare increase in January, as well as an increase in the minimum wage and reductions in income tax, which were not supported by the Deputy's party, it is worth saying. People are having €200 taken off their electricity bills at the moment. Public transport costs have been reduced and that seems to be very successful given the increase in the number of people using the bus and the train. VAT has been cut on electricity and gas to the extent we could within European law. We have also reduced excise on petrol and diesel. There have also been targeted actions in relation to the fuel allowance, for example, particularly helping those families who suffer the most from high energy costs.

We are of course exploring other measures. The Deputy will be aware that there is legislation before the House at the moment that would eliminate hospital charges for children. We would like to go further again and eliminate them for adults as well.

We are examining what else we can do. Pay negotiations have now started, involving the Government and public sector unions, on what we can do around a new pay agreement. While we are a while away from an agreement, I think it is fair to say we will come to an agreement at some point, and that will mean increases in wages and salaries for public servants to help them with the cost of living. That is happening in the private sector as well, where employers that can afford pay increases are providing them.

We are also examining what we can do in the area of childcare. Childcare is very expensive in Ireland relative to other European countries. Often, the families facing high childcare costs are the same families that are trying to pay the rent and trying to save for a home. It affects young families in particular. We will be working on solutions over the next few months that might help them with the cost of childcare. That is something the Government can do.

The Minister, Deputy Harris, is also looking at some proposals regarding the cost of education. It is very expensive for middle-income families to put one or two kids through college, and we are looking at solutions in those areas as well.

In summary, as the Deputy acknowledged, inflation is being driven largely by international factors. No government anywhere in the world can fully compensate people for that. What we have done so far, worth €2 billion, is more than a mini-budget. It is the kind of thing that is usually done in two budgets, and that is what we have done since January. Of course, we are

open to taking more action if we can.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On the back of a piece of paper, I can think of rents, mortgage interest costs, childcare costs, insurance premiums and healthcare access. These are all areas where Irish workers and families were already paying among the highest rates in the world under the Tánaiste's Government, and all of that has been added to by the soaring cost of electricity and fuel prices that are quite simply out of control, and now we know grocery prices are also going to soar even further. I asked the Tánaiste what the Government is planning to do today to help those families. His response was, essentially, that it is exploring things. The time for exploring is over. We have given the Government options and measures that will support workers and families in the here and now, put money back into the pockets of hard-pressed workers in the here and now and reduce costs today.

I will ask the Tánaiste again. What can the Government do to assure those people who at this moment are scratching their heads and wondering which choice to make, such as whether to put fuel in the car or miss work, or whether to put food on the table and not pay the ESB bill? Does the Tánaiste have a proposal to provide them with the supports they need here and now?

The Tánaiste: Again, I acknowledge that the cost of living in Ireland is high. It was high before the current inflation crisis, compared with our peers. The cost of living in Ireland is about 30% or 35% higher than it is in similar countries. Our wages and salaries are also about 30% or 35% higher than in similar countries, which is important to bear in mind. While the Deputy's party has given us options and ideas as to how we can further assist people with the cost of living, it has not said how we should pay for or operationalise them. In many ways, that is the difference between Government and Opposition. In opposition, it is easy to throw out solutions that are popular. The Opposition does not necessarily have to demonstrate how they are operationalised or paid for.

One thing we want to avoid as a Government is getting into a situation whereby we are using borrowed money. Interest rates for government borrowing are rising too, and we want to avoid a situation whereby we borrow money to help people with the cost of living because that is false help. We would then have to take it back off them down the line, and that is something we want to avoid. Whatever we do, we need to make sure we do it in a way that is prudent, helping people with the cost of living but not using their own credit card to pay for it, and that is why the Government has put so much effort into securing investment and employment, which drive the growth we need to pay for things.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Yesterday during Leaders' Questions, I raised specific questions about the provision of special school places for children. I asked how many children are waiting on a place and whether every child will be guaranteed one. In Dublin alone, 80 children are waiting for a special class, with many more in the rest of the country. I got no acceptable answer yesterday from the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, even with the Minister of State with responsibility for special education in the Chamber, speaking into his ear during Leaders' Questions.

Overnight, we learned from leaks to *The Irish Times* of new plans to create emergency special school centres. We do not have any detailed public information about what is planned but the Minister of State hastily confirmed the proposal last night in a series of response tweets. This is no way to make major public announcements, specifically on areas so sensitive and important. We do not know whether these are school buildings or prefabs or what type of facil-

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ity is proposed. This is causing significant concern and distress for parents fighting for a place for their child. They know all too well that these short-term, segregated solutions will quickly become the accepted norm. There has been no consultation with advocacy groups about these plans, although I understand consultation has been hastily arranged.

What was reported in *The Irish Times* is that this is an interim, emergency solution for five special educational needs centres to be created in Dublin as a stopgap measure. The language is appalling. They will open in September and there will be four special classes, with a total of 24 pupils in each. They are to be managed by the education and training board, ETB, working with the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, for children without a place in a mainstream school. This is totally at odds with what the Minister of State announced last week when she said would use section 37A powers to increase the number of places in schools for children who have additional needs. Her statement of last Thursday said clearly that the preferred solution was that schools would proactively open special classes. In a tweet posted last Tuesday, she stated:

At this point in time, I am of the view that I have no other option but to issue Section 37a notices to schools in areas which desperately require additional SEN school places across the country.

[...]

This new policy direction is a necessary step to try and ensure that every child gets the supports they need and access to a school placement.

Now we are being told of a totally different, emergency approach that allows schools that do not get their act together to get off the hook. For a child with additional or complex needs, it is completely unacceptable that an emergency solution like this will be the fallback position when it will have such far-reaching consequences. As Adam Harris of AsIAM has highlighted, these emergency centres may end up as special schools without the opportunity for children to integrate with their peers, and he has questioned whether there will even be pathways into special classes.

It is time to tell parents awaiting places for their children what is really going on. Has the Government abandoned plans to secure places in mainstream schools through section 37A orders? Why was there no consultation in advance of leaking this? Will the Tánaiste confirm the details of these emergency centres?

The Tánaiste: I reiterate the Government is absolutely committed to upholding the right of children with special educational needs to have a good education, a quality education and one that is provided in their community. Our policy is one of integration. If we are going to have an integrated society, we have to start with integrated schools, and as much as possible, children with special or additional needs should be integrated in mainstream schools and classes. What we try to do is provide education in mainstream classes with the help of a special needs assistant, SNA, where necessary special classes in mainstream schools and, on occasion when it is necessary, as is the case sometimes, special schools or home tuition.

Last night, I attended a meeting with people from Dublin 15 in my constituency, and we were able last night to confirm 22 additional places in special classes in four schools in Dublin 15. We were short 17 places and we were able to find an additional 22. The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, was at the meeting and managed to achieve the co-operation of schools in se-

curing that outcome. It was later in the day than anyone would have liked but that is the policy we are pursuing: additional SNAs to help children in mainstream classes and additional special classes in mainstream schools where possible.

There is now a Minister of State with responsibility for special education. It was my initiative to create that post. Similar to the Minister with responsibility for children and the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, those roles did not always exist. We created the post specifically because this area is important. The budget for special education is €2 billion a year, so for every €4 we spend in schools now, €1 goes on special education. That is not far off double what it was in the past. There are more special needs assistants than ever before, heading for 20,000, and there are more special education teachers than ever before. Just in the past year, we have established 300 additional special classes in mainstream schools, which demonstrates the Government's commitment to children with special educational needs and the policy of Minister of State and the Government in that regard.

There is going to be a meeting today, as the Deputy mentioned. I think it was scheduled for around 12 o'clock and it may well be under way. It is to consult the sector and people who are affected about options and ideas to bridge the gap, where there is one, in providing special classes in mainstream schools. That is the policy, and where it cannot be achieved, home tuition is and remains an option. The Minister of State has indicated her willingness to use section 37A where necessary to require schools to establish new special classes. That power was first used by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy McHugh, a number of years ago, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, is willing to use it where necessary to require schools to provide more special classes.

Deputy Duncan Smith: What the Minister of State said last week was not there was a willingness to use section 37A but that this was a new policy direction and that it was going to be the direction of Government policy, not that there was a willingness to use it as a last resort, as now seems to be the case. I welcome the news for those Dublin 15 families and children who have places, and it is great to have a Tánaiste in a constituency who can bring out the Minister of State to resolve the issue, but would that happen in Dublin 1, Dublin 2, north County Dublin or counties Donegal, Cork or Wicklow? This is a nationwide crisis. As to what was announced last night, I still do not have the answer to whether these are going to be prefabs, whether there will be pathways to mainstream schools, how these are going to function, what they are going to look like and what distance these children are going to have to travel. This still seems like one of the most brainless, out-of-touch policy responses to a real crisis that has existed here for many years. I am not satisfied, as I was not yesterday. We are not satisfied with the Tánaiste's response. We need answers to those questions. What are these schools going to look like? Will there be real pathways for these children?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I think he said earlier that language is important and that is right. Perhaps the language used yesterday was not the best. No parent wants to be told his or her child is being offered a stopgap solution. I particularly do not like the use of the term "autism centre" because it sounds othering. It sounds like children are going to be bussed away to a special place set away from other children and the rest of society and put in some sort of special centre, and I do not like that either. Perhaps the language used last night was not the right language. It certainly has been badly received by parents and by advocates in the sector and I hear that and I get that. That is why there is a meeting happening today to consult people about solutions and again making it very clear what we are aiming for is children with special needs being educated in mainstream classes. Where that cannot be done we want to have spe-

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cial classes in mainstream schools and 300 of those have been established only in the past year. It is a very big increase in the provision of special education.

The Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, is willing to use section 37A to require schools to establish more mainstream classes where they do not. Where it is not possible we then need to talk about what the options are and home tuition remains an option in that regard.

Deputy Mick Barry: Good afternoon Tánaiste. He is back from the luxury ski resort. I am sure he did not do a Eugene Murphy and sleep in the back of a car, so I am curious to know how much the rooms cost in Davos this year and what was the all-in price of the trip.

For some time the Tánaiste has been solemnly warning about the dangers of a wage-price spiral. It seems his analysis is up to serious challenge these days. For example, writing in the *Business Post* last weekend, Dr. Aidan Regan of the school of politics and international relations at UCD highlighted research by the US Economic Policy Institute that showed since 2020, 55% of US inflation had been caused by corporate profiteering. How much of it was caused by wages? It was 8%. He also quoted European Central Bank board member Dr. Isabel Schnabel who gave a major speech last week where she backed up that analysis and indicated it was very much applicable to Europe as well. Regan concluded in his article that new corporate taxes on excessive profits would do significantly more to combat inflation than holding back wages. I have heard the Tánaiste say he is bringing a proposal on the living wage before summer. That is very good. You would not feed the pigeons with the minimum wage these days. However, to be clear the figure of €12.90 was set before this inflation crisis and before rents started regularly topping €2,500 per month. What is needed as an hourly wage just to survive, to live, these days? I say it is €15 per hour and would like to hear the Tánaiste's comment on that.

In his reply he might also update us on where things stand with his living wage proposal. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform said at the weekend that Department officials would meet the ICTU this week to discuss public sector pay. Will the Tánaiste update us on what is happening there? Public sector workers need pay increases that match inflation. Is the Government prepared to engage on this basis? Last week, 2,000 medical scientists gave a small glimpse of the potential power of more than 300,000 public sector workers when they went on strike. The Government might think it has the measure of the union leadership but it would be wise not to underestimate the strength of feeling on these issues from ordinary trade unionists at the grassroots. I conclude with a question. Is the Government going to risk plunging the country into an autumn of discontent or is it going to engage seriously with public sector staff about wage increases that match the rate of inflation?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I spent Monday and Tuesday in Davos representing the country at the World Economic Forum. I was happy to do so. The Taoiseach is there now. It is important we are represented and it gives us an opportunity to tell our story, whether in relation to the protocol, what is happening in Northern Ireland or to our own economy. I flew commercially and stayed in four-star hotel. No doubt they charged for it but it was nonetheless a four-star hotel and a commercial flight.

There were some very interesting sessions. I spoke at one on the future of work. One of the megatrends affecting all parts of the world is low levels of unemployment, which are a good thing. Employers are struggling to get staff in almost every sector and we know that is the case here as well. In some countries, thankfully not this one - at least not statistically anyway - there is widening income inequality. Among the solutions I advocated there was greater technology

use, greater use of automation, but also better wages and better terms and conditions. This Government is serious about that. We have the sixth highest minimum wage in the world, or in the western world anyway, based on purchasing power parity. We intend to improve on that through the move to a living wage, the introduction of auto-enrolment to ensure everyone who works in Ireland has access to an occupational pension in addition to the State pension and also the kind of laws I am bringing in at the moment, for example, on statutory sick pay. At the moment about half of people have it and half do not. By the end of this year everyone will. There is also legislation to protect tips and gratuities. We therefore have a very ambitious agenda as a Government when it comes to increasing pay, improving terms and conditions of workers and ensuring we eliminate pension inequality between the public and private sector, and that is what we are pursuing.

However, we also need to be honest with people. I am not suggesting in any way the Deputy is being dishonest, but I say it as a general point. Pay rises can only be part of the solution because they have to be funded.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Like Robert Watt's.

The Tánaiste: Employers who give pay rises often fund them by increasing the prices they charge their customers for the goods and services they produce. If a company with a few hundred employees increases pay by say, 7% or 8%, it will seek to fund that, at least in part, by increasing what it charges ordinary customers and people for the goods and services it produces. That is why we want to try to avoid a situation like the one that existed in the 1970s where people got substantial pay increases every year but it did not do them any good because prices went up by just as much. That is why we need to look at the thing in the round. We must look at what we are going to do on welfare, pay, income taxes and the cost of things like childcare and education. That is the kind of conversation we are now having with employers and unions to try to come up with a bigger bargain, if you like, that means if people get a pay increase it benefits them and is not swallowed up by inflation.

Deputy Mick Barry: It is interesting the Tánaiste has gone back half a century and used the 1970s for his analysis of inflation. He did not engage with the examples I gave him. They are real, new, fresh and are coming from the US and Europe, including from members of the executive board of the ECB. That in itself says much, as the Tánaiste engages with the Minister, about the weakness of his line of argument.

He talked about employers struggling to find staff. It is little wonder. Yesterday in Cork City an estate agent got nearly 1,000 inquiries in the space of one day for a property that had been put up - it was a full house - for rent at €2,750 per month. How can someone on the minimum wage, that the Tánaiste has just lauded, survive in a housing market like that? How could someone on €12.90 per hour survive in a housing market such as that? I put it to him again that is a powerful argument for further increasing the minimum wage to at least €15 per hour.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I was interested to hear him cite the US. Many economists, including ones from both left and right, would say one of the reasons the US is facing such high levels of inflation, that are much higher than what we are experiencing here, is at least in part due to the level of spending by government there through the fiscal stimulus and also the extent to which the Federal Reserve has printed dollars through quantitative easing. The exact policies the Deputy advocates are being implemented in America and have caused inflation. The 1970s is an important decade to cite because it is what we want to avoid. That was a period

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of high inflation, high pay rises and lots of strikes. That might be the type of decade the Deputy wants, but it is not the decade we want. We want to ensure over the course of the next decade that there is continued incremental progress, with people getting pay rises that are meaningful and that do not get swallowed up by inflation. That is why we must look at this in the round and try to come up with a package that means, first, that pay rises are increases that people can keep because taxes are not too high and, second, that we bring prices under control so people can benefit from the pay rises they get.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: People trust PayPal. Millions of people give PayPal their bank account numbers, credit card numbers and debit card numbers to serve an account so they can purchase online. In return, they are promised by PayPal that this is done in a safe and secure manner. Last Tuesday, PayPal announced 307 job losses - 172 in Dundalk in my constituency and 135 in Blanchardstown in the Tánaiste's constituency. On top of this, in April 2021 there were 131 job losses, again in Dundalk and Dublin. In 13 months, 438 jobs were lost out of 2,800. In 2021, workers were offered a redundancy package or other jobs within the company. This time there is no voluntary redundancy. The workers do not know what is happening and they are very concerned about their future. The rumours circulating that these jobs are going to India do not help.

These employees trusted PayPal. Last year, PayPal reported over \$25 billion in revenue, up 18% on the previous year, with 426 million users in the last quarter of 2021. Some 426 million people have given the company their personal bank details and it is now turning around and making 307 loyal and supportive workers redundant with the stroke of a pen. Millions were invested by this country to help PayPal set up here. What will the Government do about this unexpected announcement? What clarity can the Tánaiste give these workers who must go home and ask their families how they will pay their mortgages, utility bills and food bills, for education for their children and for transport?

In 2003, this country received the good news that PayPal was coming to Ireland to set up its operation here. We invested €15 million in its European centre of excellence in Blanchardstown in 2009. In 2012, 1,000 jobs at the international operations centre in Dundalk were announced, and another 400 jobs were added in 2014. At present, over 2,000 people in Ireland are employed by PayPal and everyone appreciates their job. With 438 job losses in 13 months, what can the Government do to help the 2,000 remaining workers in view of the loyalty and commitment they are giving? PayPal contacted me on Tuesday and informed me of the loss of 172 jobs in my constituency, beginning on 27 June through to 19 September, and said this is due the new structure and needs of its customers. It has given me no more information. I tried to contact PayPal again this morning and basically it just fobbed me off. PayPal asks its customers to trust it. We ask PayPal to treat these workers, who have given it their commitment and loyalty, with respect.

What can the Tánaiste offer the 307 PayPal workers who are going to lose their jobs and the other 2,000 workers who still have their jobs at present? I do not use the word "trust" lightly. Enough is enough.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I heard with great regret last Monday that PayPal was going to let 307 staff go, 135 from the Dublin office in Blanchardstown in my constituency and 175 from its offices in Dundalk. I spoke to the company's representatives earlier this week and they assured me that they remain committed to their 2,000 other staff and will continue to employ approximately 2,000 people in Ireland. They said they

had to make this decision as part of a general restructuring of the company, with a reduction in the number of roles not just in Ireland but perhaps in some other countries too. Unfortunately, the redundancies are unavoidable and I express my sympathy to those who are affected. It must have been a big shock for people to hear that their roles were being made redundant. Consultation is happening with the staff today. The Deputy will appreciate that for very good reasons the company wants to consult and inform staff before it informs public representatives. That is the right thing to do, and it will do that today.

I have received an assurance from the company that the redundancy package it offers will be a good one. I do not know the details of that yet, but I will follow up on it. It is important that if people are being let go, they get a decent redundancy package to help them to get on with their lives and seek employment elsewhere in the economy.

Regarding what the Government can do, it is stepping in to ensure workers know what their entitlements are when it comes to social welfare and other matters, and also to know what their options are when it comes to searching for jobs. Most of these staff are very well skilled and they will be able to find jobs quite quickly in the same sector, where there are many vacancies. However, we need to help them and connect them with those vacancies. They will also be given advice on what is available in terms of a return to education, a return to training and the possibility of setting up their own business. The Government will click in and make sure all that is done.

As regards the nature of the redundancies, I wish to clarify that from the letter the company sent to the Department. It states clearly in that letter that if redundancy cannot be avoided following collective consultation with impacted employees, compulsive redundancies will be required. That collective consultation is occurring now. It is required under law. As a consequence of that I hope it will be possible to ensure that most of these redundancies are voluntary and that compulsive redundancies can be avoided.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I agree with the Tánaiste that the most important thing here is communication. I welcome that PayPal is going to engage with its workers today. Rumours of these jobs being transferred to India do not help at all. The Tánaiste knows more than most people the amount of money the Government and the Industrial Development Agency, IDA, invested into PayPal coming here. It is very important that the 2,000 workers who remain in PayPal are looked after as well because they are looking for some type of security. Losing 438 jobs in the short period of 13 months does not seem to be realistic.

On behalf of the workers in PayPal, I ask the Tánaiste and the Department to engage with PayPal to see what type of commitment they can get to try to save as many of these jobs as possible and perhaps to relocate these jobs. In addition, and importantly, can PayPal communicate to the remaining 2,000 workers what its future plans are, given this is a company that returned revenue of €25 billion last year and given the number of people who trust PayPal? The Tánaiste has a lot of work to do in the next couple of weeks. I ask him to communicate with the Deputies in the area and to keep them updated.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy can be assured that I will continue to engage on this matter. PayPal has given us the commitment that it will be retaining 2,000 staff in Ireland, which is very significant, and that it will put a good redundancy package in place for the staff who are being let go. The Government will provide the staff who are being let go with whatever support it can provide in respect of education, training, other employment options, welfare and so forth.

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Looking at the wider picture of employment at present, there was a very significant announcement from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, this morning. There are now 2.5 million people at work in Ireland. That is more than ever before in the history of the State. We are approaching full employment, which is a job for everybody who wants one. That is very positive. In the last year, employment increased in all regions in Ireland. The biggest increase was in the south west at 17% and the second biggest was in the south east, which was previously a region of high unemployment, at 13.6%. They are followed by Dublin and the mid-west. There were increases in employment in 12 out of 14 sectors. That is a very positive overall picture in terms of employment, with 2.5 million people at work, which is more than ever previously, increased employment in every region and almost getting to the point of full employment, where there is a job for everyone who wants one. That is not something that many countries can say.

Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation

Deputy Matt Carthy: Returning to the issue of special education, the language is not the problem. The problem is the policy and the scandalous fact that in late May there are 80 children in Dublin and many more across the State who do not yet have special classes assigned to them for next September. The problem is that the Government has not planned for and put in place the measures that would fulfil the parents' wishes that these children with disabilities will be part of the school community rather than some anonymous special education centre, which now appears to be proposed. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and the Department have the data on the number of children with special educational needs, they have the budget and they have the powers to put these special classes in place. Those classes need to be provided. The Tánaiste needs to say very clearly today that any proposition that children with autism or other disabilities be segregated in the manner that has been suggested is unacceptable.

The Tánaiste: Whatever about language, and language is important, the policy is clear and the Government's policy is absolutely clear. It is one of integration. If we want an integrated society, we must have integrated schools. It is the Government's policy to provide children who have special educational needs with mainstream education. That could be in a mainstream class with the help of an SNA or it could be in a special class in a mainstream school. Three hundred additional special classes opened in mainstream schools in the past year and that is very significant. For every €4 we spend on schools now, €1 is spent on special education, more than ever was the case before. We are very committed to making sure that children get the education to which they have a right and which they need.

Deputy Duncan Smith: A very concerning report on the risks from radon was published today by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. Radon is the greatest health risk in Ireland in terms of exposure to radiation. Fifty-six per cent of the total radiation to which we are exposed comes from radon, which is linked to 350 new lung cancer cases a year, most of which could be prevented. While building regulations for new homes require the installation of radon membranes, are there any plans to make it obligatory to test for radon when a house is either sold or rented? Will the State carry out radon tests on homes? With this new information on the number of homes at risk, will grants or financial supports be put in place to support households who wish to get works done to install necessary membranes or sumps?

The Tánaiste: This is an important issue and the Deputy asks some valid questions. I am

afraid I do not have an up-to-date answer with me but I will ask the line Minister to come back to the Deputy in writing.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Returning to the issue of special education centres, I agree that language is important. Can the Tánaiste imagine the shudder of fear that went through families with children with special or additional needs last night when they heard the phrase “special education centres”? The Government asks us for our trust. The Tánaiste says the policy is integration, yet the practice now seems to be segregation. I will ask the Tánaiste straight out: can he promise me, the Chamber and families at home who are looking on with fear that over the coming months and years no child with a special or additional need will be placed into a pre-fab or an underused building? The Tánaiste talks about policy, but this cannot be the practice. Each week, we in the Dáil see children come to us with their families seeking school places or wheelchairs. Children and families have for too long had to strive for their basic needs when it comes to the vindication of their disability rights. They have absolutely no trust when they hear “special education centres” that it will not mean segregation. It simply will not be stood for.

The Tánaiste: I understand the concern and understand how parents must have felt last night when they heard language used that their children would be offered a stopgap solution. No parent wants to hear that. The Government’s commitment and policy on this is clear. As I mentioned earlier, 300 special classes opened in mainstream schools last year. The Minister has the power to require schools to provide additional mainstream classes. The policy is one of integration and mainstreaming. Sometimes other solutions are necessary. Sometimes special schools are required. We had to open one in my constituency. That was a big improvement for the children who used the school and who had previously been in home tuition. Today there will be a meeting involving the stakeholders at which there will be proper information and proper consultation. I would prefer to let that happen rather than my adding further confusion. I think that that meeting is happening now, and it is important that it proceed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The ESRI report published today shows the utterly disastrous situation facing low-income households looking for and needing support to get affordable housing. It demonstrates that the Government’s failure to provide the social housing necessary for low-income families and to have housing assistance payment, HAP, limits that are even close to the extortionate rents being charged out there, as well as its refusal to raise the income thresholds for more than a decade, mean that low-income families are either not getting the housing support necessary to find rental accommodation or, worse, not getting any housing support at all because their incomes are marginally over the income thresholds. The human reality of this is that today yet another person facing eviction through no fault of their own walked into my clinic. Nothing is available in the area. This person is facing homelessness and is not entitled to housing support. What is the Government going to do to respond to the findings of this report?

The Tánaiste: I have not had a chance to read the report yet but I will certainly get to it, if not over the next few days then over the weekend. As the Deputy will know, at the centre of the Government’s response to the housing crisis is an increase in supply. Supply on its own will not solve the problem, but we will not solve the problem without additional supply. It is a fact that 25,000 new homes have been built in the past year, more than has been the case for probably a decade. There are 35,000 under construction and 45,000 going through planning. We need to ramp up supply. That on its own will not solve the problem-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It will not.

The Tánaiste: -----but it is the biggest part of solving the problem.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Hundreds of thousands of commuters are paying massive prices on motorway tolls every day. Many people are commuting up to three hours a day and paying thousands of euro a year for tolls in their areas. In Meath there are four tolls. Someone living in Kells, for example, and working in south Dublin can pay up to €3,600 per year on tolls. Aontú has done research that has shown that commuters have paid €1.3 billion just on M50 tolls in nine years. This is State-owned infrastructure and commuters have already paid for its construction yet, incredibly, people are being fined up to €25,000 for not paying tolls on this road. The Government often says that it cannot reduce the cost of living and that its hands are tied, but this is something it can do. This is infrastructure it owns. Will the Government scrap the tolls on the M50 bridge or reduce the cost on commuters, who can hardly pay to put petrol in their cars?

The Tánaiste: I am not a big fan of road tolls, and the Deputy will be aware that that toll is in my constituency. Many of my constituents travelling south in the morning and north in the evening have to pay that toll. It would be remiss of me, however, not to acknowledge that in most cases tolls help to pay for the infrastructure in the first place, which has to be paid for.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is built. It is paid for.

The Tánaiste: In other cases that money is used to pay for additional road infrastructure elsewhere, so the money stays with Transport Infrastructure Ireland. To help commuters with the cost of commuting, we have introduced a reduction in excise on petrol and diesel and a very significant reduction in the cost of using public transport, which seems to have been a great success, given the increased numbers using buses and trains in the past few weeks.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Earlier this week the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, stated that she was bringing forward a targeted and time-bound proposal in the form of a subvention for our post offices of between €10,000 and €12,000 per year in order to save the network from collapse. This was followed, however, by mixed messaging from the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who stated that his Department had not ruled in or out any funding. This mixed messaging is unfair. It is unfair on our postmasters and does not instil confidence among the postmasters that the Government is willing to step up to the mark and to save the network. Also, for some time now rural post offices have been calling for the services identified in the Grant Thornton report to be implemented urgently in order to make post offices viable and to enable them to survive and to thrive across our State. What actions and what measures will the Government take? Will it give clarity to our postmasters? Mixed messaging is just not good enough.

The Tánaiste: This matter is not yet finalised. Taking the Deputy's point on board, I would prefer that it is finalised and fully agreed before I make any announcement on it. What I can say, however, is that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, working with the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Heather Humphreys, is working very hard on a proposal that would provide State subvention for a number of post offices around the country, particularly those in rural areas and those very small post offices that provide an essential community need. That proposal is now being developed. That does not mean that every post office will remain open. It means that where there is somebody willing to be the postmaster and to keep the post office open, it will be a viable commercial option for them to do so.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I had planned to raise a different issue today but instead I want to mention that when I had to go out for something earlier, I was shocked to see tents that are used by homeless people for shelter being removed from the area outside Agriculture House on Kildare Street. The people doing this work were using a van from the infamous Aramark company. They were working on behalf of DublinTown, which is working on behalf of Dublin City Council to remove the tents. This is the only accommodation that homeless people have. The recent ESRI report, which was published yesterday, set out that the unavailability of rent subsidies puts people at risk of homelessness. Will the Tánaiste ensure that rent allowance limits are raised, as outlined by the ESRI, and that the thresholds for access to housing are raised, as the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has been considering for the last two years?

The Tánaiste: We all acknowledge that the limits for access for social housing need to be raised. They have not been raised for quite some time and the cost of housing has increased considerably in the last couple of years. It is intended that we raise those limits, but I cannot give the Deputy the exact amount or the timeframe for that at the moment. That is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. However, it would be right to acknowledge, as I am sure Deputy Pringle will, that we are very much under way on the biggest social housing programme in the history of the State. Nearly 9,000 new social homes will be provided this year. This figure is more than any year in the 1980s, the 1950s and the 1920s, or any time in history that we want to go back to. As a consequence of that, the number of people on the housing list has fallen by approximately 30% in recent years. However, that does not take away from the fact that we need to raise the limits.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Tánaiste knows, Ulster Bank proposes to exit this State next March and KBC proposes to do the same the following August. This does not seem to be a realistic timeframe, due to the challenging logistics for those two banks' customers transferring their accounts to other financial institutions. I hear daily of the frustration and worries of customers of Ulster Bank and KBC who are trying to open new accounts elsewhere.

The Financial Services Union has quite rightly pointed out that all retail banks have significantly reduced their personnel and their branch network over recent years, which has resulted in much poorer services for their customers. Bank staff are under enormous pressures. The remaining banks need to increase their staff levels substantially to ensure an orderly transfer of accounts. Can the Government and the Department of Finance, in particular, engage with the financial regulator with a view to the establishment of an oversight committee that is inclusive of all relevant stakeholders to deal with all issues, including the timeframe for the exit of those two banks?

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. For some time, he has been raising issues in relation to the withdrawal of Ulster Bank from the Irish banking sector. There is already a huge amount of engagement under way with regard to the important issue the Deputy has raised. In recent days, the Central Bank has met with the banks that are involved in exiting our market, as well as the banks that will be expected to provide new accounts for new customers. They are emphasising the importance of this being done in an orderly way. I have engaged with the banks on this matter because I recognise that from a consumer point of view, this is a moment of huge change. At a retail banking forum that the Department of Finance organised last week in Carlow, which was attended by the regulator and all of our banks, post offices and credit unions, I made the point in public to everybody that we need this transition to go well. We will continue to follow up on this matter.

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Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I would like to express my concerns about the loss of jobs in County Louth this week. Some 172 jobs will be lost in PayPal. Since January, over 70 redundancies have been announced at Hilton Food Group. There are concerns about jobs in Premier Periclase, which is a local industry in Drogheda that is in transition. I compliment IDA Ireland on the work it has done in buying additional land in County Louth. I am speaking particularly of the 39-acre IDA Ireland park in Drogheda. It has made a commitment to an advanced building solution there. I ask it to fast-track the servicing of that site, so that new industry will hopefully go in there. It could do this by working with the chambers of commerce in Dundalk and Drogheda. Would the Tánaiste put a visit to County Louth on his agenda as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I join Deputy O'Dowd in expressing my concern and regret that PayPal has announced these job losses. Some 135 of them will be my constituency and 172 will be in Deputy O'Dowd's constituency. The company has given a commitment that it is here to stay in Ireland and will continue to have over 2,000 people employed in west Dublin, Louth and other parts of the country. We are ambitious about the IDA Ireland land bank in Drogheda. It is a really good opportunity to get a major jobs-rich investment into Drogheda, which is of course the biggest town in Ireland. I look forward to visiting Drogheda in the near future, hopefully with a view to making a positive announcement.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: That is very good, Tánaiste.

Deputy David Cullinane: I raise with the Tánaiste the issue of cardiac services for the south east. As he will know, I have been campaigning with others in the Oireachtas on this issue for a long number of years. Members in the south east met with the Minister for Health a long number of months ago. At that meeting, we were promised that the national review into cardiac services was going to be published within days. That has not happened. We were also promised that by March, primary percutaneous coronary intervention emergency services would be extended to the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday to Friday and that they would be further extended to seven days a week. That has not happened on time. We need an urgency to be brought to this issue. I do not know what has happened and why the commitments that were made have not been delivered, but it is a really important issue, as the Tánaiste knows. I want to see full 24-7 emergency cardiac services available to people in the south east in the future. A stepping stone on the way to get there is to extend the service to the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Could the Tánaiste tell me when that will happen?

The Tánaiste: I was informed earlier by the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, that it remains a Government commitment to extend the cath lab service to the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. This was meant to happen in March. It has not happened yet because it is necessary to hire another clinician to do so. That has not been possible to date. It is still intended to get that done this year, in the third quarter of the year. This demonstrates a difficulty that exists in healthcare generally, not just in Ireland but around the world. The easy part can often be the provision of infrastructure - for example, the building of a second cath lab - but the hard part can be finding sufficient staff who are willing to work 24-7, not just for a year or two but for the rest of their careers. That is why these 24-7 services often get centralised in a small number of places. The second cath lab is being provided. We are determined to extend the service to the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. as soon as possible.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I want to raise with the Tánaiste the need for a culture of safety in our hospitals and, equally, for the right to know when a doctor has been struck off. There has been another allegation of sexual assault of a patient by a doctor in Naas General Hospi-

tal, which is in my constituency. It was featured on “RTÉ Investigates” this week and it dates back to 2011. This exposes how in 2017, when a similar allegation was made, the HSE did not disclose earlier cases. We need to know why and how this happened. This raises serious questions around procedure and the lack of safety within the HSE. What steps is the Government taking to ensure safety and to ensure mandatory disclosure by the Irish Medical Council of a doctor being struck off? This is necessary in order that the public and other hospitals abroad can discover what has happened when they do a search. I hope the Tánaiste appreciates that this is not just about the Opposition and the Government. This is about the safety of our people when they are attending a hospital.

The Tánaiste: I totally agree with the Deputy’s sentiments in this regard. I was appalled to read about what happened in Naas. I read that a doctor has been struck off in recent times. I will have to follow up on this because I am not exactly sure of the current position. However, it would make sense to me that if the Medical Council strikes somebody off, it should-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: It is alleged that he is working elsewhere.

The Tánaiste: -----be publicly disclosed so that patients are aware and other potential employers are aware, not just in Ireland but abroad. The last thing we want is people being struck off in one country and then being hired in another. That has actually happened. The Deputy raises a very important issue. I will follow up on it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask the Tánaiste about the proposal for so-called special education centres. He said earlier that there is a problem with the language around them.

1 o’clock

Will the Government take the passport express approach of just changing what it is called but keeping the substance? The problem is not just the language but the substance. Parents are rightly fearful this so-called interim measure will become permanent like so many other things in this State, such as, for example, direct provision. They fear this is segregated education, without the opportunities for integration with other students, and are rightly concerned the Government is avoiding doing what it needs to do, which is to use section 37A of the Act to direct schools to open special classes and put resources in place to ensure students’ constitutional right to appropriate education is met.

The Tánaiste: I have answered a number of questions on this important matter this morning. I assure the Deputy the Government’s policy is one of mainstreaming and integration. A meeting is under way at present about that with stakeholders and partners. It is to be hoped that will have a positive outcome.

Deputy Neale Richmond: This week, we heard renewed calls from political leaders in Ukraine asking the EU to freeze Russian assets, seize them and use that funding to support the reconstruction and continuing efforts in Ukraine to repel the vicious war by Russia. These assets stand at approximately €36 billion across the EU, almost €1 billion of which is held in Ireland. What efforts will the Government make to lead the European Union approach to not just freeze these assets but seize them and put them to much more important use?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. We are all appalled by the scenes we are seeing in Ukraine and the extent to which cities are being pulverised and civilians are being killed and harmed in the way they are. I hope in the not too distant future we

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will see a ceasefire in Ukraine. That means the killing will stop and reconstruction can begin. I very much agree with the Deputy's sentiments that some of those Russian assets that have been seized should be used to help Ukraine to rebuild.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I have been working alongside families in County Wexford who are campaigning for reform of children's disability services. They are fighting for the services and support their children desperately need. For example, one child, nine-year-old Leo Dixon, has been waiting more than 18 months for a wheelchair. He has outgrown his second-hand wheelchair and is not even capable of propelling it. I understand the establishment of family forums, which provides an opportunity for families to discuss general issues and ideas about children's disability services, will be an essential part of the children's disability network teams. However, the HSE has reported to me that, to date, no family forums have been established in County Wexford. These families I have been working with are already organising a second protest. They are the experts in this field and their message is clear - they want better disability services. Will the Tánaiste tell me when the family forums be established in County Wexford? Are any additional resources being provided to the HSE in County Wexford to establish these forums?

The Tánaiste: I am afraid I cannot give the Deputy a date but I will ask the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, to contact him directly with the reply.

Deputy Michael McNamara: The Tánaiste explained earlier that bringing supply on board with regard to housing is the only long-term solution, but that will take a lot of time. Ukrainians will be housed in student accommodation during the summer but where will they go come late September or October? One of the available housing resources is the number of derelict houses throughout the country, not just in towns and villages but one-off houses in rural Ireland, where people might have abandoned an old house and built a new house or bungalow beside it. There is a lack of clarity about doing those old houses up, from a planning perspective. There is also a cost to that but it is far cheaper than bringing new houses on board. Many Members have an interest in this issue, including Deputy Griffin, who is seated behind the Tánaiste. Has the Government any plans for a campaign to bring derelict houses throughout the country back into use to house people?

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy will be aware, a lot of work is already being done to bring derelict houses back into use. In some parts of the country, local authorities are placing buildings under compulsory purchase orders and bringing them back into use. Louth is a good example of that. There is also the repair and lease scheme, which people can use-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Louth and Mayo.

The Tánaiste: -----to bring a house back into use and then lease it, but we need to do more. The kind of things we are working on at present include a general grant people will get if they buy a derelict house, bring it back into use and live in it, which is the carrot. A proposal being worked out, which would be the stick, is a tax on vacant residential properties.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Vacant is one thing, derelict is another.

The Tánaiste: I accept that.

Deputy Richard Bruton: At a time when our nearest neighbour is experiencing economic stagnation, it is worth emphasising the importance of good political and economic leadership

that has delivered, as of today, 2.5 million people at work. That is an increase of 700,000 since the economic crash and an increase of 150,000 since the onset of Covid. Will the Tánaiste indicate the progress being made on the development of a living wage to ensure quality work is enshrined in this strong growth? Is there a commitment that upskilling will become a feature of those at work and not just those who are leaving education?

The Tánaiste: The programme for Government commits us to move towards a living wage in Ireland over the period of this Government. I have the report of the Low Pay Commission in this regard, which sets out a roadmap as to how we can achieve that. I intend to bring those proposals to Government before the summer recess and then engage on a public consultation on them. It is to be hoped we will make an announcement on that in the next few weeks.

It is a separate matter, but I very much agree with the Deputy on upskilling. We will talk to him some more about that because certainly the message from around the world, and from industry, is we need to make lifelong learning the norm so that people in work are continuously upskilled and are able to move up the ladder in respect of skills and pay.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I will also raise the issue of the living wage. I understand the Low Pay Commission has completed its report and the Tánaiste has had it since March. The Tánaiste said he would engage in consultation over the summer months but when will the report be published, which we signed on to, so we can also read it? As he is aware, it is a commitment in the programme for Government and is something we want to do. Last time I spoke to the Tánaiste, he told me to speak to my colleagues in the North, which I did. Sinn Féin, in government in the North, has introduced the living wage for public sector jobs and contracts. I hope we will be included in consultations on the Government's proposals for the living wage. Will the Tánaiste tell us when the Low Pay Commission report will be published?

The Tánaiste: My plan is to bring it to Government in June. With its approval, I will publish the report and the research that backs it up, and also initiate a public consultation on it with a view to beginning to make it a reality in 2023.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I will again raise the issue of special education centres, as so many other Deputies have done. As the Tánaiste knows, I was a teacher for 15 years, 12 of which were spent teaching in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in School, DEIS, school that had an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, hub. I saw first-hand the benefits of the inclusive model of education we have and of children being able to interact with mainstream and go to the ASD class, when appropriate. I am concerned about last night's announcement by the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan. It flies in the face of so many of the buzzwords we use in this area, such as inclusive education, child-centred education, integration and so on. I have genuine concerns about the proposal's constitutionality and I believe it is a human rights issue. I urge the Government to seriously reconsider what it seems to be considering. I acknowledge the Tánaiste's earlier response regarding a meeting taking place today. We have to bear in mind what will come out of that meeting, but I have serious concerns.

The Tánaiste: I hear what the Deputy is saying and I acknowledge his concerns. I assure the House that the Government's policy on special needs is one of integration, mainstreaming children in mainstream classes with a special needs assistant where appropriate, special classes in mainstream schools where appropriate - 300 more of those were provided in the past year alone - and only where there is no viable alternative to have special schools and home tuition. That remains the Government's policy and commitment.

Regulation of Lobbying (Amendment) Bill 2020: Referral to Select Committee

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 180.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.10 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.50 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.10 p.m. and resumed at 1.50 p.m.

Irish Apprenticeship System: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Apprenticeship is a statutory-based programme of structured education and training that formally combines learning in the workplace with learning in an education or training centre. The completion of an apprenticeship prepares the participant for a specific occupation and leads to a qualification recognised under the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, from level 5 upwards. Apprentices are employed under a contract of apprenticeship. The action plan for apprenticeship sets out to make apprenticeship a valued proposition for employers and prospective apprentices, underpinned by a target of 10,000 apprentice registrations per annum by 2025. Last year there was a record number of 8,607 registrations, an increase of almost 40% on figures for the same period in 2019, the last comparable year.

When we launched the action plan we wanted to see apprenticeship become fully embedded as a mainstream route to skills development for employers and prospective apprentices. The Government will continue to ensure that learners are enabled to develop skills that will allow them to achieve the best possible outcomes. Seeing the progress to date under this plan, I am hugely encouraged that we are well on the way to achieving this. The diverse range and number of stakeholders who took part in the development of the action plan demonstrates the level of commitment to, and ambition there is for, apprenticeship in Ireland. Building on the existing excellent mix of first-hand practical experience from the worlds of further and higher education, providers and learners, industry, apprenticeship development and worker-focused advocacy, I believe that the strategies we are implementing will allow us all to reach our overall objectives under the plan. Furthermore, the national character of apprenticeship programmes, the approved standards of knowledge, skill and competence will not only be maintained but will be enhanced through this plan.

To understand how we came to this point I would like to give the House a brief overview of the history and context of our apprenticeship system, specifically the legislative basis for apprenticeships, the formation of SOLAS, the review of apprenticeship training in Ireland in 2013

and the development of post-2016 apprenticeship programmes. I will then speak in more detail about the development process and deliverables to date of the Action Plan for Apprenticeships 2021-25.

The tradition of apprenticeship in Ireland predates the foundation of the State and perceptions of apprenticeship in many areas are still based on that long tradition of craft apprenticeship. Traditionally, the system was orientated towards young males and construction-related trades have accounted for approximately 80% of all apprenticeships. Training given to apprentices was delivered on the job and under the Agriculture and Technical Instruction (Ireland) Act 1898. The main legislation governing modern apprenticeships was set out in the 1967 Industrial Training Act, the 1987 Labour Services Act and SI No. 168/1997 Labour Services Act 1987 - Apprenticeship Rules, while the National Training Fund Act 2000 provided for a levy on employers to be paid into a national training fund.

The 1967 Act established An Chomhairle Oiliúna, AnCO, and gave it the power to provide for vocational training including apprenticeships, charge a levy on employers and establish a register of apprentices. It also had the power to make rules governing apprenticeships, subject to consultation with the industrial training committee representing workers, employers and the Minister for Education. An apprentice is defined in the Act as a person employed by way of apprenticeship in a designated industrial activity and includes any person to whom regulations under section 28 of the Act applied. The Act defined an “activity of industry” as any activity of commerce, trade or occupation but excluded primary production in agriculture, horticulture, fishing and any activity of a professional occupation.

To establish an apprenticeship in any occupation AnCO was required to designate the relevant activity of industry as a designated industrial activity by an industrial training order. The Act gave AnCO the power to declare that every person employed in a particular manner in a designated industrial activity by a particular employer was an apprentice for the purposes of the Act. Therefore, apprenticeships are confined to cases where AnCO, which is now SOLAS, made a formal designation of an industrial activity as an apprenticeship under an industrial training order. Before doing so, employer and employee organisations representing substantial numbers in the activity must be consulted.

The Labour Services Act 1987 provided for the dissolution of AnCO and the establishment of FÁS and the transfer of a range of AnCO functions to FÁS, including training functions. Craft apprenticeship in Ireland had been traditionally based on time served without requiring attainment of predetermined standards of competence and knowledge. In 1991, a new standards-based apprenticeship system was introduced whereby in the future a person would have to have a national craft certificate to be recognised as a craft worker. In 1997, the apprenticeship rules set out the minimum age and entry standards provided for a vision test where necessary, precluded an employer from charging a fee or other consideration for an apprenticeship and set out rules governing dismissal and termination of contract in the event of consistent failure to meet the standards required. The rules also required employers to demonstrate to FÁS that they had the capacity to provide the on-the-job training required and to provide relevant release for the off-the-job phases. The modules of training for the on and off-the-job phases were to be determined by FÁS following consultation with appropriate bodies.

The Further Education and Training Act 2013 provided for the dissolution of FÁS and the transfer of its functions to An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna, SOLAS, which is now the body with statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system. It is estimated that

more than 105,000 people qualified via the apprenticeship route between 1967 and 2013. SOLAS was established on 27 October 2013. Its mandate is set out in the Further Education and Training Act 2013. Among other functions, such as research, monitoring and co-ordinating of further education and training provision, it also advances moneys to education and training boards and other bodies engaged in the provision of further education and training programmes. SOLAS administers the Irish apprenticeship system. At the same time as FÁS was dissolved, 16 education and training boards, ETBs, were established on the dissolution of the 33 vocational education committees. In 2014, the transfer of the former FÁS training centre network and its more than 600 staff and training facilities to the ETBs was successfully completed.

The current apprenticeship system has its roots in the 2013 review of apprenticeship training in Ireland. This reinforced the benefits of workplace learning that is supported through classroom-based learning in an education or training setting. It was this review that set out the need to expand apprenticeship beyond the 27 craft apprenticeship programmes then in place. The terms of reference of the review were to determine whether the current model of apprenticeship should be retained, adapted or replaced by an alternative model of vocational education and training for apprentices, taking into account the needs of learners and employers, the needs of the economy and the need for cost-effectiveness into the future.

The apprenticeship review took place in the context of a wider reform programme in education and training, including major structural change in further education and training, the establishment of SOLAS and the development of new national strategies in further and higher education. Written submissions came from 69 organisations and a panel of representatives of the review group and the technical group met 25 major organisations with a role or potential role in apprenticeships in Ireland. The major benefits of apprenticeship systems based on dual modes of learning, combining workplace learning in an enterprise with classroom teaching in an education or training setting, were seen as promoting better collaboration between enterprises and education and training providers, ensuring an enterprise-led role in the design and assessment of programmes, improving the competitiveness of companies, opening up rewarding careers for a large segment of the population, ensuring that theoretical learning in an education or training institution is strongly grounded in the practical experience of undertaking a real job, supplying job-ready employees and providing an ideal learning mode for those who learn best by doing.

2 o'clock

The review group concluded there was significant scope to expand apprenticeships into a wide range of business sectors, such as ICT, retail, hospitality, business administration, medical devices, sport and leisure programmes, childcare and social care, financial services, accounting, hairdressing and beauty care. Such programmes would require a strong commitment from employers to identifying occupational needs, recruitment and payment of apprentices and joint collaboration with education and training providers in programme delivery.

In practical terms the following key recommendations were also made. The first is the establishment of an apprenticeship council, and in consultation with industry experts, professional bodies, trade unions and education and training interests, it would lead the task of expanding apprenticeship into new sectors of the economy across a range of qualification levels and mapping sectors where new apprenticeships could make a real difference. This was to be carried out in consultation with partners. The second recommendation is a national training fund, a ring-fenced fund that should be established to promote the development and operation of apprenticeships in new occupational areas.

Another recommendation is apprenticeship consortiums, which would be employer-led consortiums to identify the occupations considered to be suitable for apprenticeships that can make proposals to the apprenticeship council for funding, with a key role for employers in identifying occupational standards and in shaping the content of the curriculum in collaboration with education and training providers. There should be apprentice wage determination, specifically the rate of payment to be made to apprentices in new occupational areas to be determined by individual employers, and the Apprenticeship Council would have no role in this.

On the question of apprentice employment conditions, every apprentice would be employed under an approved contract of apprenticeship. Training should be substantial in depth and duration and the apprentice should be employed in a real job, with programmes to have a duration of not less than two years and to provide for more than 50% workplace-based learning. Recommendations were also made around areas such as recruitment, curricula, assessment, progression, incentives for employers, feedback mechanisms, labour market intelligence, statistics and evaluation, branding and awareness campaigns and traineeships. SOLAS was to maintain a national register of apprentices for the purpose of planning and management of overall apprenticeship numbers and a publicly accessible national database of employers approved for apprenticeships, based on data transfer from education and training boards, ETBs.

There were also recommendations regarding existing apprenticeship programmes. The review group recommended the curriculum for each family of trades be reviewed and updated as a matter of urgency, with programmes providing for the appropriate integration of transversal skills, particularly literacy, numeracy, maths, science and ICT. It was also recommended that the minimum entry levels needed to complete each programme successfully should be reviewed while ensuring appropriate pre-apprenticeship programmes would be made available for those unable to meet the entry requirements. A curriculum review should be carried out on the basis of families of trades.

The governance framework and operational arrangements set out in the report were designed to include real possibilities to create new apprenticeships rapidly, react to emerging needs, and target resources and participants towards sectors with high potential for growth. In June 2014, the Apprenticeship Implementation Plan was published to renew existing apprenticeships and expand apprenticeship into new sectors. The enterprise-led Apprenticeship Council was established in 2014 and, over its lifetime, oversaw the development of almost 40 new apprenticeships in sectors such as auctioneering, ICT, hospitality, logistics and biopharmaceuticals. Two calls for proposals in 2015 and 2017, combined with rationalisation of some existing craft apprenticeships, have brought the total number of available apprenticeships to 65 across all sectors of the economy, with a further 18 in development. The new programmes are delivered through consortiums of employers, employee representatives and education and training providers, departing from the craft apprenticeship system of centralised programme co-ordination through SOLAS.

In its 2013 report, the apprenticeship review group signalled a new direction for apprenticeship. Some scope was envisaged for flexibility in content and delivery within programmes, but the review group was clear on issues such as the need for national apprenticeship standards and a national apprenticeship contract, for all apprentices to be included on a national register, and for all employers to be approved for the purposes of apprenticeship. The Apprenticeship Council strongly agreed that only one apprenticeship should exist and be defined for any given occupation.

In addition to its proposed role in overseeing the development of individual apprenticeships as outlined above, the council needed to give further consideration, in consultation with the relevant agencies and stakeholders, to the overall governance and system issues arising as the new apprenticeships were developed. Key issues considered included how standards would be adopted, revised and consistently applied under a more distributed system than currently exists; how new apprenticeships would be governed, both individually and nationally; and how new education and training providers and employers would access the new apprenticeships once they were in operation. There was also the question of how the apprentice registration process and quality assurance process would work, covering training both on and off the job, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the various players involved in apprenticeships.

The council was also required to review financial considerations such as development, capital, running and system costs. In 2015, the council invited proposals for new apprenticeship programmes from a consortium of enterprise, professional bodies and education and training providers. The Apprenticeship Council received 86 separate submissions and, following evaluation, 25 proposals were approved for detailed development. These covered the areas of manufacturing and engineering, tourism and sport, financial services, information technology, transport distribution and logistics, and business administration and management. A similar call for proposals in 2017 led to the approval of a further 26 programmes for continued development in areas such as horticulture, sales, animation, engineering, farming, ICT, logistics, hairdressing and recruitment. To date, a total of 40 new apprenticeship programmes have been developed to completion and successfully launched since 2016.

The Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeship and Traineeship in Ireland 2016 - 2020 set a target of 31,000 cumulative new apprentice registrations by the end of 2020. A total of 25,815 registrations was reached, supported by strong recovery of craft apprentice registrations. The new apprenticeship base had grown strongly as a result of the new apprenticeships launched during that time, providing a solid foundation for increased awareness and recruitment in the following years. A programme of review of all craft was delivered, curricula were revised and modernised, and an updated framework for quality assurance was developed.

The 2016 action plan included a commitment to review pathways to participation in apprenticeship in Ireland. The first review was carried out in 2018 and made recommendations to increase participation in apprenticeship by diverse groups; launch an online apprenticeship “jobs market” to increase visibility of opportunities for all potential apprentices; create new pathways via pre-apprenticeship courses around the country; promote the bursary incentive with employers; and promote diverse pathways to participation in apprenticeship in the 2018 to 2020 Generation Apprenticeship campaign.

Progress was made in a number of areas since the 2018 Review of Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeship, but there remained a number of outstanding areas of action in terms of baseline data collection. Developing areas of good practice were evident, including through the TU Dublin Access to Apprenticeship programme, all-female tech apprenticeship classes through FIT, and the rolling out of more than 500 pre-apprenticeship places in further education and training as part of the post-leaving certificate reform programme.

This Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 was delivered at a significant juncture in the history of the Irish apprenticeship system. For the first time, learnings from both the traditional craft apprenticeship model and the post-2016 apprenticeship model were utilised to inform the future direction of the system. The plan seeks to provide a single system for the

future that builds on the well-established strengths of craft apprenticeship and the learnings from five years of consortium-led apprenticeship in this country. The timing of the plan is also significant, having been developed during the period of the Covid-19 crisis, which has had a heavy impact on the delivery of craft apprenticeships as well as apprentices in sectors such as hospitality.

The plan is heavily informed by stakeholder input, including in excess of 60 written submissions, additional internal consultations and an online survey of all registered apprentices. In addition, targeting small and medium enterprise employers, the nine regional skills forum managers, in collaboration with the Department, undertook a survey of 340 small and medium enterprises to better understand the perspectives of small businesses on apprenticeship and how the particular challenges they face in engaging with apprenticeship might be addressed. Inputs from all three strands of the consultation process are reflected throughout the plan.

Specific proposals for change have been considered in conjunction with broader policy requirements and priorities in identifying those actions that will be required to deliver on the objectives set out for the apprenticeship system of 2025. The five key objectives we have identified are: a high-quality and innovative approach; employer-driven responses; apprenticeship for all; a valued option; an a single, coherent system.

Significant progress is being made in realising the ambition for apprenticeships set out in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, which was published in April of last year. The further development and mainstreaming of apprenticeships through the creation of a single unified apprenticeship system has a key role to play in meeting Ireland's skill needs in a manner that presents a valued proposition for apprentices and employers alike.

Key to the delivery of the ambition set out in the action plan is a new organisational architecture, involving the National Apprenticeship Office and the National Apprenticeship Alliance. The office will have-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State's time is up. There will be a Government reply at the end of statements.

Deputy Niall Collins: I will finish my contribution then.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am sharing time with my colleague, Deputy O'Reilly.

I welcome this chance to debate apprenticeships, but the picture the Minister of State presents covers up what the reality is for too many apprentices who are struggling in the current system. In the course of the next eight to ten minutes, I will tell him about some of the feedback we have received from them.

The Government is in denial about the extent of the chaos in the apprenticeship system. Failure to get to grips with the backlog is having a detrimental impact on apprentices. Right now, 8,208 apprentices do not even have start dates for the classroom training they need to progress or complete their apprenticeships, almost half of all craft apprentices are in this backlog, and four-year apprenticeships are taking five to six years to complete. This means they cannot advance in their apprenticeships or become fully qualified tradespeople.

It is unacceptable to say this disruption is caused by higher levels of registration or that the additional capacity cannot be put in place overnight. In 2016, the apprenticeship action plan set

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a target of 9,000 annual registrations by 2020. We are still below that target and the system is in disarray, so blaming young people for not taking up apprenticeships does not wash.

Recently, we heard from 350 apprentices. One electrician apprentice stated, “Almost three years at it and still haven’t gotten a call for SOLAS. 3 years of a supposed 4-year apprenticeship and will be at least another 3 until I finish”. A metal fabrication apprentice from Limerick stated that he was “in my 4th year still waiting to go to phase 2 off-the-job training”. An apprentice electrician Mayo stated:

The lack of support for me as an apprentice through the pandemic was shocking. I am going into my 6th year since registration, and I am only in phase 4. I got no increase in rates of pay even though all these delays are out of my hands. It was over 2 years from when I left phase 2 until I was called for phase 4. I feel disgusted about the system to be honest.

Those are not my words, but his. The frustration out there can not be overstated. Many apprentices told us that they felt a complete lack of respect and that no other students would be treated in this manner. An apprentice electrician from Louth stated:

Backlog is a disgrace, people signed up for 4-year apprenticeship and now it can be 6 years. How about you tell that to college students doing business or law and see the uproar.

Another apprentice told us, “At the current rate I will be in my 5th year but still capped at 3rd year rate as my employer will not pay me anymore until I’m qualified”. A mechanical automatic and maintenance fitting apprentice from Tipperary stated:

Should be qualified two months ago. Still no sign of being called for training. Won’t be done now till next year. I now can’t ask for a qualified rate which means €5 an hour in the difference. Essentially €5000 down at least this year and that’s only if I finish by the end of the year. There has been and will be no changes or improvements made to the system. Thanks to my delay, I have had to turn down jobs and can’t ask for a pay rise as I am only an apprentice, it’s a mess that I can’t do anything about. Draining.

The effect of underinvestment and the backlog is that only 1,798 apprentices became fully qualified tradespeople in 2021. That is close to 600 fewer than in 2020 and represents the lowest number of newly qualified tradespeople since 2017. With my colleague, Deputy O’Reilly, and the rest of Sinn Féin, I have been calling for over a year for emergency action to address the backlog. Despite Government announcements about investing in the system, we know the Government spent less on apprenticeships as a whole in 2021 at €150 million than in either 2020 at €156 million or 2019 at €159 million despite the increasing numbers in the system.

People are being trapped on lower wages due to the backlog in the system. Anger and frustration about the backlog is matched by stress and desperation about the cost of living. Between the cost of tools, travel, college fees, childcare and rent, many apprentices are barely able to get by. One apprentice stated, “I cannot afford a car with current prices, insurance prices and fuel prices so I have to carry a 25 kilo tool-bag on public transport for 2 hours a day”. When asked about financial pressure, an apprentice carpenter in Limerick stated:

[I have had to cut] Groceries and home heating, was frozen all winter while I was working 40 hours a week. I’ve been an apprentice since November 2020 still don’t know about college, still behind on money, and the cost of everything is rising all around me”.

According to an apprentice plumber in Wexford, between “petrol & diesel, buying my own tools, standard of living has gone down massively since starting my apprenticeship, some weeks I can’t even afford a can of deodorant”. A motor mechanic in Kildare stated:

I feel as a young person and as an apprentice that my country does not want me to be happy living here. I want to qualify so I can emigrate and live somewhere where I can live happier. Ireland is a hard place to live as a young person and even harder as an apprentice. Especially first years and particularly with the rising fuel costs. Imagine working 2 days to pay for fuel to put in your car to work for 5 days.

A former carpenter apprentice in Donegal stated, “Young men and women are struggling, I, as well as many others, have had to drop from our apprenticeships because of the increased price of living”. This is the real danger – apprentices being forced to drop out.

An apprentice hairdresser stated:

I live with my Mam and Dad but I pay rent to them. Heating has gone up significantly and once all my bills are paid, I’m lucky to have €50 left! If not for my mam and dad I would’ve had to stop already.

An apprentice from Mayo stated: “Only for family and several personal loans, I would not be able to manage, and I am truly disappointed in the whole system”. These are the lucky ones, the ones who have support.

Apprenticeships have always provided a pathway into training and the workforce for young people who may not have had other options. The Minister of State should abandon the misguided plans to dismantle the craft apprenticeship model and instead focus on investing in the system. We need to fast-track apprenticeship workshops and the recruitment of tutors as a matter of urgency. Sinn Féin would allocate an additional €52 million to the apprenticeship system, with properly measured outcomes.

Apprentices need additional supports. A simple measure that the Government could take would be to scrap college fees for apprentices. This would put €1,000 back in their pockets and take the pressure off them. We also need to consider how to support apprentices in the first couple of years when they are on the lowest wages and have to purchase tools and get set up.

It is time to listen to apprentices. It is time to deliver for apprentices. It is time to treat those apprentices whom we say are so important with the respect they deserve. Our country’s future prosperity depends on them.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: We can all acknowledge that, in terms of the quality of the instructors and the dedication and commitment of the apprentices, we have a world-class system, but it is held together by the apprentices and instructors. It happens in spite of rather than because of Government policy.

People who complete apprenticeship programmes in the State are highly valued by employers at home and abroad, as we all know. This is very much a testament to their hard work, their talent and the quality and commitment of the instructors working within a system that is effectively broken. Due to a lack of care and investment, successive Governments have failed to increase the number of apprentices in the system and expand the types of apprenticeships on offer in line with other advanced economies. Thanks to the dedication of people involved in

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the delivery of apprenticeships, our system has continued to perform and deliver high-quality tradespeople and other professionals. However, too few people get apprenticeships and they miss out on training and career prospects as a result.

We constantly hear of skills shortages in certain sectors but there is no labour shortage. There are thousands of men and women of all ages who would be delighted to undertake an apprenticeship if the opportunity were there. This is especially true of young people. I know from contacts I have had with constituents in Balbriggan, Skerries, Swords and across north County Dublin that young people would bite your hand off for an opportunity. I read last week that the apprentice development manager at the engineering contractor Mercury said young people were not applying to become electricians, plumbers and pipe-fitters because they did not want to get up early in the morning. He called this a fact but I would like to see the information behind this because it is not my experience of young people. In fact, if we listen to an Teachta Conway-Walsh and study the important survey she has undertaken, and I hope the Minister of State is paying attention to that, we hear from people who are struggling within the system but who want to be able to go through that system and do the hard work associated with apprenticeships. They say every generation idolises its own, and this seems to be a case of older people lecturing younger people and saying “It wasn’t like that in my day”.

In many ways, though, it is not like it used to be anymore. With skyrocketing rental and housing costs, excessive insurance premiums, fuel hikes, energy prices, escalating homelessness, attacks on trade unions, poverty and economic inequality, insecure jobs and short-term contracts, no pensions, low pay or being trapped on apprentices’ wages for months or years longer than necessary because the State has not provided adequate off-the-job training capacity, it is not like it once was. What are the good people at Mercury’s views on these issues? Perhaps these issues have a lot to do with the issues they say they are facing. Blaming young people is a very lame and tired excuse. It is past time the State and companies like Mercury looked at themselves with regard to these issues and looked at their own role.

Where apprentices are taken on, they often find they are trapped on apprentices’ wages for months or years longer than necessary because there is no adequate off-the-job training. These issues are a shame because mounting evidence shows the positive impact access to apprenticeships can have on school-to-work transition, youth unemployment and economic growth. As we exit the pandemic, it is vital we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Youth employment needs to be at the heart of our post-Covid recovery and this is where expanding the apprenticeship system fits in. However, it has to be a decent system and one that delivers for the apprentice. Apprenticeships have always offered people an alternative path to a qualification and a job. An apprenticeship allows students to work and learn at the same time, and they come away with a tangible skill that allows them to contribute to the workforce and to broader society. It is crucial to ensure the apprenticeship system is resilient in order that it can continue to have a positive impact on education and the job prospects of young people.

Overall numbers of apprenticeships remain low, as does the participation of women in apprenticeships, particularly in construction. This has to change. There is also a need to increase access for people with disabilities and other marginalised groups, such as Travellers. As the world of work changes, we must ensure a revised and revitalised apprenticeship programme is in place to provide opportunities for our young people. In that regard, we also need to develop a strategy to deliver a robust, high-wage, high-growth and high-productivity economy, the sort of economy where apprenticeships flourish. The solution has to be the Government working with industry, the higher education sector, banking and, crucially, the trade union movement

to develop an indigenous industrial strategy that focuses on creating a strong and diverse economic base of SMEs, microbusinesses and family businesses, operating domestically and internationally, which provide apprenticeships and well-paying, unionised jobs in manufacturing and engineering, ICT, green technology and energy, pharmaceuticals and chemicals, medical technology, food and drink, and other growing sectors.

The Minister of State should be listening to what Connect Trade Union is saying in regard to apprenticeships and the current proposals. The system that was in place worked well, but it is obvious from what has happened in other jurisdictions that, while the road the Government is going down will result in an improvement, the Government still needs to listen to the people who are on the front line. That is effectively Connect Trade Union because it knows the system inside and out. It would serve apprentices and employers well to listen to those who have this very good and valuable experience.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: It might surprise the Minister of State to hear me be complimentary of the Government's efforts in this field. Many, including me, were unsure as to whether breaking up the Department of Education and establishing a new Department was a good move. However, in fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, and the Minister, Deputy Harris, I think they have made it work. I feel they have placed a large emphasis on the area of apprenticeships and they have done good work in this space in the past two years. When work is done, when systemic issues have been tackled and when new ministerial responsibility has been put around it, that is to be commended. It also means that, when it comes to issues of apprenticeships, higher education and further education, the Department is not swamped with other education issues and it can focus on this. This kind of debate is a testament to that.

That is not to say there are not issues that need to be addressed. Apprenticeships in the public sector are long overdue, so that is a positive. The difficulty with the model is that, again, it appears to be employer-led and there is no indication that is necessarily going to change any time soon. I believe councils and local authorities are key to this, including those in my own area, Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council. Apprenticeships within councils will be crucial to allowing young people to move into a field of work, and that has to be expanded over the coming period. We also need to build skills for the new green economy. The numbers the Minister of State has outlined look well, but if we scratch the surface of the numbers, 60% of all of those apprenticeships are in two trades. We need to expand the type of apprenticeships we are resourcing. Building skills in the green economy and allowing the public sector to lead the way in apprenticeships and in building capacity is what we need to focus on. The national apprenticeship office looks great but it is far from being fully established because of staffing issues, which is something we need to focus on.

It has been said that one of the fallouts from the crash was that developers and the industry prefer to sublet jobs, as opposed to taking on apprentices, because apprenticeship is a four-year commitment. When this area is so employer-led, we tend to make mistakes in that way and we are not allowing the system to be led by the experience of the apprentice. The experience is that in year one of their given craft, an apprentice, for example, a carpenter, can earn as little as €6.84 an hour, with those in year two earning only €10.26 an hour, both of which are below the national minimum wage.

I believe the Government has taken this area seriously. The division of the Department was a good move and the fact we are even having this debate is testament to the fact we now have a Minister of State we can talk to in this area when that would not have been possible previously.

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However, our belief is we need to move to having apprenticeships that are going to serve the green economy, and we need to have it done in such a way that apprenticeships do not have such poor wages, that they are not dominated by the old traditional trades, and that the local authorities are seen as key to future growth in this area. The new national apprenticeship office must be supported to do its work. If there are staffing issues or if it needs more legislative underpinning, we need to address that quickly.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I echo Deputy Ó Ríordáin’s sentiments regarding the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. It has given a focus, particularly on apprenticeships, that was not there heretofore. We are heading into a phase in which the Government will be rolling out the largest retrofitting scheme in the history of the State, which will involve construction, retrofitting of houses, installation of insulation and so on. It is important to acknowledge the crucial role apprentices will play in that in the near future. I am as guilty as anybody else of assuming that when we talk about apprentices, we are referring to plumbers, electricians and other traditional trade and craft apprentices. However, there is much more to apprenticeships than that. There are apprenticeships in accounting, business-related courses and so on.

Having spent 15 years teaching in a vocational school, I would like to see a greater emphasis on engaging with students at second level and encouraging them as best we can at least to consider an apprenticeship for their further education. This is something the Minister of State and his Department might look into facilitating. It is important to acknowledge that apprenticeships are a type of third level education. We frequently see them dismissed as something that can be done in the event that people miss out on some other type of course or job on which they might have had their sights set. Apprenticeships are far more than that and we must emphasise this point, particularly at second level. The days are gone, and long may it continue, when there was a snobbery around apprenticeships as being for people who did not make the cut.

We need to acknowledge what the Government has done so far in this area. A total of €34 million was invested under last year’s budget to develop new apprenticeship programmes. Eight such programmes were launched in 2020 and 2021. That said, I would like to see greater emphasis on apprenticeships in the areas of online safety, cybersecurity and other aspects of the IT sector. Given the prevalence of cyberterrorism and online scams to which people are falling victim, this is an area in which we really need to engage in promotion in order to encourage growth and participation.

There is an issue around gender imbalance within the apprenticeship model. The president of Munster Technological University, MTU, openly acknowledged at a recent appearance before the education committee that the university is really struggling to get women into traditional apprenticeships. It is an ongoing issue. I understand that out of the current apprentice population of 24,000 nationally, only 1,500 are female. There clearly is work to be done and ground to be made up in this regard. I acknowledge that the Government has made funding available for female participation, including a grant of more than €2,500 to encourage employers to take on women, particularly in trades that are mostly dominated by men. That is welcome.

We need to consider the issue of capacity when we talk about getting greater numbers of apprentices into the system. There is a difficulty locally, as we heard at the education committee from representatives of various technological universities in recent months. I can speak particularly about MTU in Cork, where programmes have been oversubscribed over the years. There was an effort to accommodate too many people in an outdated building on a fairly re-

stricted site. We need to get the right investment in capital infrastructure to ensure we can take on the volume of apprentices we are saying is needed.

The provision under the national training fund, NTF, is relevant when we are talking about the future of funding for higher education. Serious consideration must be given to how we will meet the shortfall over the next few years, which I understand is approximately €300 million. Will the Minister of State address whether employers are likely to see some kind of increase in their levy to the NTF into the future?

Deputy Steven Matthews: As somebody who served an apprenticeship many years ago, I know how challenging it can be. Apprenticeships are technically challenging and, after one qualifies, some of the work can be physically challenging as well. However, there is no doubt that an apprenticeship is a very good educational opportunity that provides very transferable skills. Apprentices who have done four years of training are highly valued in a job, whereas someone who graduates from third level after four years still has to go through a significant learning process. That is not to compare the two types of qualifications. Obviously, people can do an apprenticeship and then go on to third level or, alternatively, one can go to third level and do an apprenticeship after that. Some people follow either of those paths and it can work very well by giving a really good balance of practical and academic skills.

I will focus on two areas in respect of the apprenticeship programme. First, given the massive demand for skills and capacity constraints in everything we are trying to do across construction, design and every aspect of infrastructural provision, there may be soundings or ideas around shortening the duration of apprenticeships to three years or less. I am opposed to any such change. As an apprentice, one completes academic and technical components, perhaps for three months at a time, and then on-the-job training, before returning for further technical training and then going back on to the job to practise those skills. That whole four-year process cannot be rushed. People need to learn by doing. When apprentices complete their four years of training, they are sent out as tradespeople who will go on to train other people and have others learning by their work example and work ethic. We must make sure apprentices have the best training possible before they go on to be mentors or team leaders to future trainees. Therefore, I am opposed to any move to shorten, condense or simplify apprenticeships. If we want good people and to ensure we will have other good people into the future, we must take the time to train them properly.

The second aspect of the system is that we seem to concentrate on apprenticeships being something people do straight after school, at 18 years of age. Applications for apprenticeships are now included in the CAO system, which is a positive move, but it is important to emphasise that there are opportunities for mature apprentices as well. People who have worked for a number of years and have picked up a number of job and life skills may want to come back into the training system. One of the barriers to this is that the wages for apprentices can be quite low at the start, which may not be as much of a problem for younger people. Apprenticeships involve training and work, for which one gets paid, but it is a matter of working one's way up. This may be a barrier for somebody who works in an organisation and has the opportunity to do an apprenticeship. We need to ensure people in that situation maintain their current pay grade while they do the training. Provision for this would be an investment by the State in people's education and future and would facilitate the capacity-building we need to do over the coming years. Enabling mature apprenticeships is something to which consideration should be given.

This approach would fit in well with our objectives on just transition. There are jobs, in-

dustries and workplaces that will see a decrease in demand. The work just will not be there. Facilitating mature apprenticeships would allow people to transfer skills across different areas. In the case of internal combustion engine mechanics, for example, they could start transferring their skills over to electric vehicles. All of the older polluting industries will need to change or close down because there will not be the demand for their services. We need to offer people in those sectors the opportunity to do apprenticeships that will enable them to change course or upskill. There must be no financial barrier to their doing so. It is training for their future to allow them contribute to what Ireland needs at the moment, which is greater capacity in construction, trades and across other sectors. I ask the Minister of State to consider ensuring that apprenticeships remain as four-year apprenticeships and that the training is not in any way diluted. I ask him to consider the role of mature apprenticeships to try to encourage people to get involved in that aspect of it.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and apprentices, who are not covered by minimum wage legislation, are struggling with the rising cost of tools, travel, college fees and rent. Sinn Féin conducted a survey of apprentices and the results are shocking. A motor mechanic in Kildare who responded said, “Ireland is a hard place to live as a young person and even harder as an apprentice. Especially the first year, particularly with the rising fuel costs. Imagine working 2 days to pay for fuel to put in your car to work for 5 days.” Deputy Conway-Walsh referred to this person in her speech. A plumber from Kildare who responded said “A thousand euro in fees for phase 4 and again for phase 6, trying to keep a van on the road with outrageous costs and I won’t even start about the cost of housing when we’re on a low wage.”

We are in the middle of a housing crisis. Sinn Féin is committed to delivering the largest public house-building programme in the history of the State. We will also need a significant input of skills if we are to manage the necessary climate action and a just transition. My colleague Councillor Noel Connolly brought a motion to Kildare County Council last year seeking to directly employ staff to maintain and renovate housing. The reply was that the council was considering taking on apprentices. We are almost a year on from that motion and still no action has been taken. The council often claims it does not have resources for extra staff. The Government must invest in apprentices. We need to move away from the “Do as I say, not as I do” attitude.

The council also struggles to get contractors, particularly for smaller jobs. It has taken to grouping small jobs together for quotes which delays the repairs further. Often there is an older or vulnerable person in urgent need of that repair and it is not good enough that they have to wait for weeks in some cases for a plumbing or electrical issue to be resolved. It is bad enough that they cannot afford the cost of the electricity, but when it is not working it is even worse.

Sinn Féin in government will set more ambitious targets to increase the number of apprentices. We will increase the number of apprentices employed by the public sector and State agencies. We will also incentivise the employment of apprentices in the private sector by leveraging public procurement through the use of apprenticeship clauses in State contracts. We will also work towards the development of an all-Ireland apprenticeship system. We will abolish fees for apprentices to take the pressure off struggling workers. We need to do something.

Deputy Thomas Gould: World Skills Ireland has warned that we need urgent investment in apprenticeship infrastructure if the Government is serious about addressing the chronic skills shortages in areas like construction.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire and I recently met representatives of MTU in Cork where we heard about its ambitious plans for apprenticeships. We also heard that it is teaching apprentices in old, dilapidated buildings and temporary accommodation. If the Government is serious about getting more apprentices, it needs to fund colleges like MTU to deliver them.

The Minister of State has probably heard me speak before about the need for a campus on the north side of Cork and the need for third level education on the north side. I fully believe our universities need to expand, which is why a purpose-built apprenticeship centre on Cork's north side is needed. Many people from the north side are doing apprenticeships and many more are interested. It would be very beneficial to have a state-of-the-art facility to send a real message of confidence in communities and apprentices. Currently they are being housed on a college campus that is beyond capacity and not fit for purpose. We are short 27,000 workers to meet the Government's housing targets and the only way to deliver this is by real investment in apprenticeships.

People cannot afford to live on nothing. They need proper wages. The average rent in Cork city is now over €1,500 a month. A first-year construction industry apprentice earns €246 a week. Is it any wonder that people are not going into apprenticeships? Who can afford to live on €246 a week? How is that sending a message that the Government values our apprentices?

When I was preparing for this debate, I thought of the years of austerity and the hundreds of thousands of people who emigrated, many of them construction workers. I have friends and family in Australia and America. Those people should have stayed here but left because of failed policies by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Those parties now need to get the policies right.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today on this important subject. I recognise the work that has been undertaken by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the issue of apprenticeships. My contribution is not intended for the Minister of State but more to have a discussion about apprenticeships on the whole. Who they are for? Who may they not be for and who benefits from them? I am somewhat cautious when the Construction Industry Federation points to a skills gap and I know very well who it is it intends to fill that gap.

In Ireland we have a certain cohort of people who take up university places and jobs in the highest sectors. There is another cohort of people who are expected to fill in within the low-wage economy or else take on apprenticeships which I think are really valuable. When I left school aged 18, I became an apprentice plumber. I was told I could go anywhere in the world given that we were in the middle of a boom. Within a year or two, I along with 18 other people on the site were all let go and inevitably they were spread throughout the world.

Many people benefit from apprenticeships and for some it is clearly a very prestigious profession. However, they are also jobs that are at risk from digitalisation, automation and what might happen in the economy. How are we future-proofing the sectors the Minister of State highlighted in his contribution? The employers' federation believes we have serious skills gaps. However, skills gaps will not just be filled by bringing apprentices into the city and paying them €246 a week when we know they cannot afford rent. We need to take an holistic approach and identify the barriers to people entering these industries and apprenticeships.

It also goes beyond that. What is the future in 20 years' time for an 18-year-old today undertaking an apprenticeship as a mechanic, electrician or plumber? It is inevitable that in 20

years' time that profession will be vastly different. Therefore, at 38 years of age that person's job may simply be gone and taken up by artificial intelligence or robotics. How can we future-proof this?

Ireland is probably uniquely placed to benefit from expanding technology apprenticeships into areas along the lines of tech apprenticeships. We have some of the biggest multinational corporations in the world on our doorstep, some of them within a mile of where we are now. I refer to companies such as Google, Microsoft and others. They are all around us, but are they playing their part in supporting young people to be ready for the jobs of tomorrow?

In many of these organisations, the minimum education requirements inevitably require third level degrees and beyond. That excludes a significant cohort of people predominantly from working-class communities from being able to enter them. If we want to get apprenticeships right, we need to future-proof them. Of course, we need the jobs of today. We are facing major challenges in construction. We cannot imagine that will last forever. How do we get young people, particularly from working-class low-income communities, into those jobs?

In *The Irish Times* list of feeder schools showing who gets to go to third level education, inevitably the top places are held by those who come from the most prestigious parts of the country. For example, in excess of 99% of students from Dublin 6W get to go on to university. Not that many people need to go on to university and we should not expect them to. We should not just expect apprenticeship schemes to go to people from working-class communities. That needs to be factored into our considerations.

Some people do not want to get involved in apprenticeships because the National Minimum Wage Act 2000 excludes apprentices. That is something the Government can correct. When we consider the confluence of crises that exist in the country at the moment, it is impossible for an apprentice who is working for €246 per week to afford rent, childcare, where it exists, or the cost of living. All of these factors matter. We need to be a lot more innovative. We need to be future-proofing our economy. We should not just expect that people from particular locations will go on and fill these jobs and when the economy turns and those jobs are lost to automation or whatever other developments happen in the future, they will simply go back to being under-employed and not utilised. There is a job of work to be done and I hope we can do it.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the strides that have been made in respect of apprenticeships and the apprenticeship system. At the start of this year, we saw a record uptake in the number of apprenticeships, especially among women. Last month, new gender-based funding was introduced for apprenticeship employees, funding which is worth over €2,000 to them. The new apprenticeship scheme opens up further opportunities for women and will, hopefully, increase the numbers that will take up apprenticeship programmes.

The main issues we have at present relate to the uptake of apprenticeship programmes by all genders, the registration process and the lack of available places at college level for apprentices to continue the stages of their programme. I have been contacted by numerous businesses in Carlow over the past year. They have found it very difficult to recruit apprentices and have also found it difficult to register them as part of the programme. There seem to be issues around the registration process and obtaining registration speedily. Can this be looked at urgently? I have also been contacted by apprentices who have found it difficult to secure places in college as part of their programme, which has stalled their progression to the next stages of their apprenticeships. That has meant that a normal four-year programme is taking far longer. A few appren-

tices who have had that experience have attended my office. I believe both of these issues are urgent. We are in a housing crisis and have a construction worker shortage. Addressing these issues will increase the number of apprentices and workers available.

The biggest issue I find when I speak to young men and women who want an apprenticeship is that the pay is very bad. The cost of living, including the cost of fuel and petrol, and even the price of lunch, means that those apprentices are not coming out with anything. We need to consider a funding campaign.

I am a mother of four children and I know college is not for everyone. Carlow now has a technological university, as we know, and we are proud of that. Apprenticeships are valuable. There is not enough communication in schools. Not enough information is provided to children at a young age. We need to go into schools and tell them about the apprenticeships available and the need for them. We need apprentices now more than ever. We need a campaign that goes into primary schools, perhaps fifth and sixth class, and into secondary schools and tells those students about apprenticeships and the wonderful work that can be done with apprenticeships and the need for them. We are crying out for apprentices. I always feel there is a lack of information. While we all think college is great and welcome it, not everyone wants to go to university. It is important we get the balance right. I ask that we consider a campaign.

The funding and payment for young men and women who want to go into apprenticeships must be addressed. If we could move on that, it would play a big part.

Carlow College, St. Patrick's is great. I am always suggesting it would be ideal to do an extensive apprenticeship programme for young men and women and encourage them into apprenticeships. I am fully supportive of the new system and the new scheme. We still have to make some changes but at least we have made a start and, hopefully, we will get more work done.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins; the Minister, Deputy Harris; and the Department are doing excellent work to construct a better future for our young people and notably providing a pathway to education or further learning for everyone. That is welcome. I welcome the apprenticeship action plan, which will ensure we have a modern apprenticeship system that reflects contemporary Irish society. It will support learners and employers undertaking an apprenticeship programme. I often think it is a great shame that in our ambition to champion higher and further education, we have created a society that places too much emphasis on the university route and less value on other routes. That is why I think it is important to make young people fully aware of the apprenticeship routes available to them.

Last week was construction skills week and to mark it, I joined the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Heather Humphreys, and Councillors Baby Pereppadan and Brian Lawlor at a special Intreo construction jobs, apprenticeship and training expo in Tallaght Stadium. It was jammers. When I arrived there was a queue outside that stretched right around the building. It was a queue of young people waiting to get inside and start an exciting new career. It was wall-to-wall with exhibits. Third level courses around traineeships and apprenticeships were being promoted. Companies were enticing people to consider joining their team with everything from autonomous vehicle simulators to traditional pitches. It was incredible to see that level of enterprise, innovation and interest. Well done to Siobhán, Adrienne and all their team. Their idea of hosting this unique event in South Dublin County Council got young people straight into apprenticeships and gave many others that first key step to taking up a trade – their safe pass.

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There are 60 apprenticeship programmes available nowadays which all lead to valuable qualifications in finance and accountancy, as laboratory technicians, in engineering, as heavy vehicle mechanics, in healthcare and much more. The plan is to expand these types of programmes and increase the number of apprenticeships to 10,000 per year by 2025. It is an ambitious target but I welcome it as it will also help to deliver the housing and climate targets set by the Government. I ask the Minister to consider whether any of the apprenticeships could be turned into traineeships.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage last week, we had a presentation from representatives of the Construction Industry Federation who suggested that some skilled tradespeople, bricklayers for example, could learn their trade even quicker than through the current schemes if they were given the opportunity to do it through a traineeship. Getting trained and skilled people out on site, earning a living and building much-needed houses must be our priority.

New yearly grants will help employers to take on apprentices and speed up this process dramatically. Grants are being topped up for those employing a lone parent, a person with a disability or a person living in direct provision, which is welcome and progressive. There is also an additional bursary for employers who take on a female apprentice in a male-dominated sector or *vice versa*. That is key and innovative. It is at the cutting edge when it comes to diversity and inclusion.

There is enormous demand for skilled workers across Ireland. Our improvement to apprentice programmes will give apprentices the knowledge and experience to make them more qualified candidates when seeking permanent employment. Apprenticeships are a great way to get a foot in the door of many different industries and should certainly be a consideration for people who feel that traditional third level education is not for them.

I am passionate about the fact that apprenticeships and alternative pathways are something that our schools should be promoting. After all, apprenticeships lead to nationally recognised qualifications on the national framework of qualifications from level 5 right up to PhD level. The Minister, Deputy Harris, is also very passionate about this and he discussed these issues with many students at St. Joseph's College recently. I know he is pushing the message that college or university is not the only pathway for students leaving school and there are many options that can lead you to the career you want. He is absolutely right.

I recently accompanied the Minister and EU Commissioner on a visit to Youthreach Clondalkin in my constituency. It was an opportunity to showcase the brilliant work they are doing in a centre in the heart of Clondalkin. It was clear from meeting the students in Clondalkin that they are being supported to pursue all kinds of training, apprenticeships, work experience and qualifications. I have no doubt from chatting with them that they have very bright futures ahead. I was impressed by the range of work showcased by the students, from communications and mathematics to graphic design, IT, customer service and culinary arts. Youthreach Clondalkin is a hive of activity. I particularly enjoyed hearing from past students who shared their experience of Youthreach and explained how it helped them get to where they are today. Youthreach is yet another example of alternative education that should be seriously considered by students alongside apprenticeships.

I am delighted that as a society, we are becoming more open to the many pathways to success in life and the opportunities that apprenticeships can create.

3 o'clock

As I have said, the direct route to university is not for everyone and it is so important that students are aware of all the options out there, from level 8 degrees to apprenticeships and PLC courses. We have an unquestioning belief that academic success is directly related to career success but that is not always the case. Students are led to believe that they must achieve a certain number of points in their leaving certificate or go to a particular college to be successful later in life and that if they do not attain those points, they will not get where they want to go. That is not the case.

A horrific amount of stress and strain is placed on the shoulders of our young people as large numbers of students compete for a small number of places. More than 90% of children remain in full-time education until the leaving certificate and 80% of that number apply for a college place through the CAO system every year. More than 65% of each year's cohort go to college through that route. Ireland has among the highest participation rates in third level education in the whole OECD. While this is fantastic, it also speaks to our focus on the college and university route which can be suffocating for students, especially those who do not aspire to go that way. While this is not the remit of the Minister's Department, it also speaks to the need for leadership in the context of reform of the leaving certificate. I am glad this has begun to be debated seriously in this House in recent years because it is absolutely needed.

We must move beyond young people having conversations with their parents, guardians and teachers about the CAO and the points system and start discussing the alternative paths students can take to get where they want to be. We need to allow our young people and their families to discuss what they would like to do with their life rather than just what they want to do in college.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We desperately need more apprentices and to make apprenticeships and trades attractive to people in order to address the problems that our society is facing at the moment. Across the board, the lack of skills necessary to solve big social problems is enormous. Most obviously, there is a desperate need for qualified tradespeople, and that means apprentices, to build the houses we need and to refurbish vacant and derelict properties in order to solve the housing crisis. We also need them in the context of climate change to retrofit homes. Hundreds of thousands of homes need to be retrofitted but we do not have enough skilled people to do this work. We also need them to build new schools.

There are so many other areas where we are desperately in need of talent but we have shortages. Hundreds of thousands of people were working in construction during the Celtic tiger period. However, because of the disastrous approach taken to housing in this country, whereby we let developers, speculators and banks dictate housing development, the housing sector collapsed, along with the rest of the economy and people fled out of construction sector and did not ever want to go back to it. A lot of them are now working as taxi drivers and so on because they did not want to go back into construction. The precariousness and lack of security in many of these areas are critical. In that context, we need a State construction company and our local authorities should be taking on apprentices to train in the areas we need. In this way, the local authorities will have the capacity to build, refurbish and do all of the other things local authorities do in terms of infrastructure.

Lip service is now being paid to the need for apprentices and while some improvements have been made in terms of expanding the number of apprenticeship places, huge problems

remain. Many apprentices are suffering extreme economic hardship. Many of them are older, with families, mortgages and other financial obligations. They have transport costs and have to pay €1,000 in fees. Those fees should be scrapped immediately. When they are going to college they do not have access to SUSI grants. They should have the same supports when they are in college as everybody else. Apprentices must also be given college places near where they live. If they are working and paying rent in Dublin but given a college place in Donegal, or *vice versa*, they may have to get digs and pay for transport to get there. Some apprentices may be getting the benefit of sectoral agreements so their pay is not too bad, but others are not. Mechanics, for example, are particularly poorly paid as apprentices because the sectoral agreements do not really work for them. In many parts of the country apprentices are on poverty wages. They are working for less than the minimum wage and do not have the supports necessary to carry them through. We need to provide those supports. We need to ensure that their college places are near where they live, get rid of fees and give SUSI supports to apprentices.

Deputy Paul Murphy: A genuine apprenticeship programme should be a crucial part of our higher education system and we should be expanding apprenticeships to other sectors. As with other forms of education, we should also challenge the financial barriers that exist to someone taking up an apprenticeship. The then Labour Party and Fine Gael Government scandalously introduced apprenticeship fees in 2014. These so-called registration fees can cost students thousands of euro and should be scrapped.

We also need to ensure that apprenticeship schemes are not used as a source of cheap labour for bosses. Apprentices should have full employment rights and equal pay for the work they are doing. This is not what we are seeing with the new JobBridge 2.0 scheme, the so-called work placement experience programme, WPEP. Two weeks ago, an apprenticeship scheme for bar workers was launched, where workers would do paid bar work and spend one day a week in class learning other skills relating to bar management. While there are some concerns around this, at least the workers are getting paid for their work and will come out with a level 7 qualification. At the same time, bars are advertising on Government websites to get unpaid bar workers on the JobBridge 2.0 scheme. Rody Bolands bar in Rathmines is looking for a bartender to work 30 hours per week for six months, completely unpaid. All the worker will get is €3.43 an hour welfare top-up paid by the taxpayer, with nothing from the employer. Bolands is not alone. The Brandon House Hotel in Wexford is looking for a food and beverage assistant on the JobBridge scheme as well. We need to ban-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: On a point of order, the naming of people outside the House is not in order.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): Thank you, Deputy Durkan. I ask Deputy Murphy not to name people outside of the House.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We need to ban these kinds of unpaid, scam internships which are undermining real jobs. We need investment in real jobs and decent apprenticeship schemes with real qualifications for workers.

We also see it in the food service industry. The multibillion euro company Aramark, according to the website, is looking for seven unpaid JobBridge interns to be so-called food service associates in the workplace canteens it runs. This includes a position in Mayo University Hospital canteen. The State will be paying Aramark to provide catering services-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Deputy is naming institutions. On a point of order again, the continuous naming of institutions-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: This is on the public record-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----by name or in such a way as to make them identifiable is in breach of Standing Orders.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This information is on the public record.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It is not on the record.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): Thank you, Deputy. Please be mindful of your obligations.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This company will have unpaid staff, subsidised by the State, working there and then will be paid by the State. Those workers will be responsible for preparing and serving food, and washing dishes and the company will not pay a single cent. Again, the workers will just get €3.43 per hour in a welfare top-up from the State. This is not just happening in our hospitals. I could name a whole bunch of other companies but I do not have time. This particular company has a turnover of €13 billion and can afford to pay its staff a wage.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I welcome this debate. We have made huge progress in apprenticeships in recent years. Back in 2015, there were just 8,000 people in apprenticeships. By 2019, this had risen to 16,000 and today the figure is 23,000. This is a dramatic transformation.

Contrary to what the two Deputies now leaving the Chamber have just said, the quality of the apprenticeships is increasingly being improved and strengthened as we go. Over 12 of the 60 apprenticeships are at level 7 or higher, with some at levels 8, 9 and 10. These are high-quality programmes for improving people's careers. The failure to reform the leaving certificate over many years has constrained our ability to develop this really important part of the future of work. The OECD has described Ireland's leaving certificate as wholly unfit for purpose and as designing an education for people that would not fit in with the world they were entering. The OECD, the foremost authority, said this about our leaving certificate. We have been too slow to reform it. I welcome the reform that is now starting and I hope it is accelerated.

Blended learning and earning as you learn are a great way to learn, not only when one leaves school but also as part of a lifelong learning strategy. We need to see more employers buy into this approach. Even at 23,000, it is less than 1% of the 2.5 million people who are now employed in this economy. The latter figure is an extraordinary achievement but the 1% must significantly change over the coming years. We need to sell that message.

It is disappointing that the public service has been among the slowest to enter the apprenticeship field. The public service has many needs across health and other sectors where we could see the development of hands-on learning, for example, to help children and older people with special needs. There are so many areas where the apprenticeship would fit in perfectly. People would be learning through practical experience. The grant is welcome but the Minister of State needs to do a deep dive into these sectors, including the multinational companies which have been slow to step up and participate in these apprenticeship programmes. The Minister of State and Minister are on the right track but I strongly urge them to rattle the cage of the public service and some of the traditional employers and sectors that have not bought into this.

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It is welcome that the CAO now provides a link to the apprenticeship scheme but we need to go beyond that. I welcome the announcement today that the Department is seeking to develop blended courses between further education and training and the higher education sector, so there is a more seamless process.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this timely and important debate. Today, we have effectively reached full employment in the State, which is remarkable considering the years of the pandemic and the very many difficulties facing the world. This in itself presents a massive challenge because while we have effective full employment, there are clear skills and labour shortages in a number of extremely important sectors. This is why this scheme and the apprentice scheme in general is so important in alleviating these labour shortages and ensuring full employment does not mean our economy regresses.

The importance of this scheme is evident. The aim is to have 10,000 people in apprenticeships by 2025. That 8,500 people are in apprenticeships this year is a good start and a good sign. We are seeing very progressive companies and employers engaging in this in the knowledge that having apprentices is a benefit. It is not just to ensure they are trained, educated and tooled, but also that they can play their part in a functioning workforce.

I fully agree with Deputy Bruton that the laggards in this regard are many of the public sector and traditional employers which are not embracing apprenticeships in the same way. We must ensure apprenticeships are put on the exact same pedestal and there is genuine equality of opportunity for all, be they school-leavers or people who are transferring between careers, to make sure we embrace the sorts of skills and trades we need. We are moving past the traditional construction skills apprenticeships, of which there is a dearth, and I particularly welcome the announcement today by the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on addressing the serious shortage of hauliers and people working in the hospitality sector, healthcare, life sciences and so many other areas.

It is important that we do not just look at making apprenticeships far more accessible for school leavers. I welcome the new format of the CAO and that it will be so much easier for people to consider an apprenticeship at the same time as considering a course in a university. We must also consider those who want to move career or need to be encouraged to change career. I am aware of many people, both anecdotally and in my own circle, who completed a university course and went into a profession, perhaps as a result of misplaced encouragement by their parents or a guidance counsellor or teacher in school who assumed they must do a university course, and after ten years of career dissatisfaction have taken the opportunity to move into a far more rewarding career. They need the opportunity to come into an apprenticeship later in life, bearing in mind the skills they have from a previous vocation or training, and use that to give them an edge. This will make sure we have not only 18- and 19-year-olds going into apprenticeships but also people who are older and are prepared to change careers or are at a different stage in their careers and want to go into something totally different. That area is crucially important in this also.

Deputy Joe Carey: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, for facilitating this important debate on apprenticeships and the absorption of the apprentice programme into the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Apprenticeships have given lifelong careers to Irish people working around the world. The creation of these vital skills is crucial to the further development and growth of nearly every sector of Irish society.

Apprenticeships have long been the tradition of trainees and individual employers, but this has changed in recent times. Apprentices now receive a broader training in a particular sector, making them more mobile and flexible in their career choices. The pandemic disrupted a lot of apprenticeship programmes. I hope these have all been restored. Perhaps the Minister of State will be in a position to confirm this to the House when he closes the debate.

We need to set new targets for future skill needs in five, ten and 15 years. These should be negotiated with different sectors so we do not have the skills shortage we are experiencing at the moment in certain sectors. Many new skills are needed, an example of which is retrofitting. Very few people had even heard about retrofitting ten years ago but it will be a vital element if we are to achieve our climate change targets.

I welcome today's announcement by the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, on the creation of a new apprenticeship programme in transport operations and commercial driving. I am very familiar with the opportunities that apprenticeships offer in the aviation industry, especially in the Shannon region. Some of these people are now working in all corners of the world. We should encourage a link-up of the apprenticeship programmes in the different sectors to the new technological universities. This would benefit the apprentices and the colleges. It would give the former an internationally recognised qualification, which could lead to further education and training following the completion of the formal apprenticeship.

I note the success of the national apprenticeship of the year awards, which display the skills and excellence of our apprentices. We should encourage our apprentices to participate in and host the European and world championships. I wish the Minister and the Minister of State every success in developing these new exciting opportunities for young trainees.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I thank every apprentice who is currently working, and they are working throughout the State. They are incredibly important to our economy and society. Irish tradespeople are working all over the world. They are building and helping other countries to grow and prosper. Sadly, many of our current apprentices will take an aeroplane and leave our shores when they qualify. Some will go by choice, and sometimes this is a decision that will enable them to build and develop on their skills. That will always be the case. For many, however, it will not be a choice. It will be due to the cost-of-living crisis and the lack of housing.

We need a massive number of apprentices in the State to ensure we have the capacity to deal with developments in housing and other sectors in the future. Leaving this to the private sector and employers has not worked. The collapse of the so-called Celtic tiger also led to the collapse in the number of apprentices. We are now paying the price for refusing to deal with that crisis, despite Sinn Féin calling for apprenticeships during the austerity years.

The serious cost-of-living crisis is causing a massive problem for so many of our young people who have taken the decision to get a trade. They simply cannot afford to live and work at this time. I know one apprentice electrician who has had a terrible experience over the past two years. This has resulted in him having to live on lower wages for another year. This was not his fault but he is paying the price. He is currently in his fifth year but is only paid as a third-year apprentice. This is simply unfair. The Government has called for more apprentices but this call will fall on deaf ears more and more because people simply cannot live on an apprentice's wages at this time. We need action.

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Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It goes without saying that students, and apprentices in particular, are impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. Before the recent hike in home heating oil and electricity, there was the issue of rents, which are a huge cost that are a bane to students and their families. As many have mentioned, we are still dealing with a backlog in apprenticeships. It is unfair that somebody could sign up for a four-year apprenticeship that ends up being five or six years. That has a huge economic and wider impact on the apprentices and their families. These are issues we need to get to grips with. It is as simple as that.

I welcome that we are in a much different world with regard to roadmaps to employment and further education. I welcome the likes of the advanced manufacturing training centre of excellence in Xerox Technology Park in Dundalk, with which the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board was highly involved. We need to deal with industry from the point of view of providing the added training that will be required. We also need to make sure we do the work in relation to apprenticeships and PLCs and look at people who find it difficult to get into that educational framework. I have spoken to the Minister about projects in the Redeemer Family Resource Centre where certain modules were provided in a setting people might have been more comfortable with, before continuing on to Dundalk Institute of Technology, DKIT, or so on. We have a huge amount of work to do in dealing with those sorts of issues.

Regarding climate change and retrofitting, we all welcome the courses that are required but we also need to look at our base apprenticeships, like plumbing and such, and ensure those skills are included within the training framework. That is a necessity. We are back to the same conversation many of us are having about workforce planning. I met lately with people from the nursing and midwifery course in DKIT and I spoke about the possibilities for expansion, which would require capital investment in space and staffing. There needs to be a further audit of what is necessary. We all know the work that needs to be done in research and development. Many of us will have been contacted by the Institute of Physics in Ireland about these issues. We need more of that workforce planning and an audit of the skill sets required in order to ensure we have the training frameworks required for that throughput of people.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Minister, Deputy Harris, for visiting a number of schools in my area in Dún Laoghaire this year to describe to them the new apprenticeship model that is an alternative to going to university, which seemed like the only option for many. The feedback from students, parents and teachers on these visits was excellent. They were a direct way of showcasing the work of the Department and what it is trying to do to open up third level and higher education to many people who had not considered it, or had not had the full range of options available presented to them. The Department is also working to extend those options and create more and more suitable options for people to give them the opportunity to train in different ways.

It is perfectly obvious that the university only, or university first, model is not right for everyone and has never been. The Department has acknowledged that and stopped pretending that is the dominant model. It is outdated. We have to reflect everybody's different skills, abilities and preferences and provide different options for people who want to train or retrain at any stage in their lives. The steps taken by the Department with apprenticeship programmes are positive and provide different structures for people of all education levels, skills, stages of life and forms of training to date to develop deeper skills with training or retraining opportunities. It is important for younger people, as we celebrate diversity more and more, that there are so many types of diversity in this regard. Academic and training diversity is important. We cannot simply streamline young people in the way we did through the old CAO process. There is a

very real potential of losing out on everybody's ability and their diversity of skills and training by failing to provide for the different skills they may have.

The new apprenticeship model is a key part of positioning the country for the skills it needs over the next number of years. It is clear that the Housing for All plan requires a huge increase in specialised workers, plumbers, carpenters and engineers to take part in building and retrofitting homes. We have the same challenge with the climate and the green economy. There is an opportunity, through the apprenticeship model, to address many of those skills gaps and provide retraining opportunities. I am delighted to see a specific scheme in place to incentivise employers to take on apprentices, with over 5,000 employers applying to the scheme, which will inevitably benefit more than 7,000 apprentices.

In particular, I commend the Department on its reference to, and inclusion of, the Traveller community. I am heartened to see a reference to Travellers in the action plan, and I commend the Department on its engagement with Pavee Point, which persistently highlighted the barriers Travellers face in accessing apprenticeships. These barriers are also faced by other socio-economically disadvantaged groups but are particularly commonly experienced by Travellers. They include issues of generational unemployment, lack of education and access to apprenticeships. I commend the Department on setting aside a certain number of apprenticeships specifically for the Traveller community. That was a key request of Pavee Point and I am glad to see the Department recognise that. Only 13% of female Travellers complete second level education and only 57% complete primary education. As Pavee Point has consistently highlighted, the practical apprenticeship model is a key part of the education and opportunity programme it believes is important to provide equality of opportunity for people from the Traveller community. I hope that, as the programme continues, there will be oversight to make sure those opportunities are being realised and provided and are not closed out in any way by employers.

I also acknowledge the Department's work with regard to gender. Only 5% of the apprenticeship population is female. I welcome the acknowledgement of that because the apprenticeship model is suitable for everybody. Targeting girls and young women for apprenticeships is a measure of employment activation and will provide retraining opportunities for so many of them at different stages in their careers.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank my colleague for sharing her slot. I acknowledge and congratulate the Minister and Minister of State on the tremendous work they are doing to raise awareness of the need for more apprentices, including highly qualified apprentices, in a way that has not been done before. Today's news that we have 2.5 million people at work is a major achievement that should not go astray. I was a Member of this House when we fought hard to bring the number of people employed up to 1 million. We are now heading for 3 million, which is a great achievement. It is a great economic achievement and credit should be given, and taken, for achieving that landmark at this time.

I agree with my colleague that there should be more apprenticeships for women. Lots of young women nowadays are anxious to go into areas that were not previously a particular area for women and they want to succeed and excel there. They are willing to make their contribution to the economy through that area. We also need to recognise, as we are doing, that this area is becoming competitive on the international market. It is good that it is competitive and it is good that our apprentices might be in a position to compete with all others, wherever they come from. In the past, the polytechnics in eastern Europe were highly competitive and apprentices from there were highly competent when they went into the workplace. Many of them are work-

ing in this country and they are welcome.

There are times when we tend to drop the head and feel defeated. I am thinking of the criticism that came from the other side of the House not so long ago. Several entities from outside the House were identified and named, which is a serious breach. I am just bringing that to the attention of the House once again. It is not in order - simple as that - but it has become customary in this House, and that is a sad way to go.

Incidentally, I never blamed Fianna Fáil, for instance, for the economic crash. It came about for a variety of reasons and it was sudden, swift and colossal, a huge hit on the country. To blame Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Fianna Fáil, the Government or anybody else for everything that happened thereafter is outrageous. It does not address the issues as they were. It is simply selecting somebody to blame. I recall quite well that when all the experts were called on, they all had their say. Some of them left this country and went to Greece to advise the Greeks, who, fortunately, did not take up the offer and ultimately survived. A plethora of people were offering economic advice as to what should be done to help the country recover. Fortunately, it was never followed by anybody.

Economic life has never been easy; it has always been competitive. If a mistake were made for any reason, everybody paid for it. To the Deputies on the other side of the House who like to aim their sights on the present Government and blame it for everything that happened previously, I remind them it took a significant effort on behalf of the current Government, and of successive Governments and of the people, to recover from what happened to the country those short few years ago.

Fine Gael is accused nowadays of having been in government for more than ten years, a recipe for presuming it should not be there any longer. In the first five years, we were accompanied by the IMF, which was in government along with the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government of the day during that period, and the Government could do nothing without its approval. That was not fun. It is a fact that happened and we went through it. All of that happened and it is a great achievement we are in our current position. Some members of the Opposition, as it happens, have been to the fore in dealing with these issues as well, so they should also take credit. At the end of the day, we are where we are, where we had not been since 1845, with the largest number of people ever in employment. That is a major achievement. We can and will do much more, but we need to recognise we have to be competitive.

We learned two lessons during the Celtic tiger era. We learned to be greedy, which was unfortunate, but we also developed qualities we had thought we did not have, such as self-belief and confidence in our own ability. Where previously we had exported our population to help other countries prosper, suddenly we were in a position, as we now are, where we could encourage people to join us and help us make the country better for them and everybody else. We should rightly take a bow and be proud of the achievements on behalf of the people and the Government. We are not as bad as we are made out to be.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I am sharing time with Deputy Canney. I compliment the Minister of State on taking decisive action to develop opportunities in the apprenticeship sector and on taking corrective action to address a much-neglected sector. Apprenticeships have a crucial role to play in the future of this country and technological universities have added to their appeal. The creation of these forward-thinking centres of education has raised both the profile and the appeal of job-focused training in a blended-education and practical format. For example,

outside of what are traditionally considered as apprenticeships, it is now possible to progress to a level 8 masters degree as an insurance practitioner or a level 7 degree in financial services. This is welcome news for both male and female school-leavers. Traditionally, girls have had far less choice when it comes to taking up apprenticeships, but this is continuing to change. It is moving towards being a more level playing field when leaving certificate students consider their options for third level education.

In April of last year, news that the number of apprenticeships will increase to 10,000 places per year by 2025 was a very positive step. This was especially welcome news for centres such as the training centre in Archerstown, Thurles. Once again, I compliment Tipperary Education and Training Board, ETB, on its foresight in opening this wonderful facility. The centre trains apprentices from throughout Ireland in their phase 2, off-the-job training period. Currently, training is provided for apprentices in trades relating to electricity, electronic security systems and construction plant fitting. In 2020, a plumbing apprenticeship was introduced and, last year, a commis chef apprenticeship came on stream.

A measure of the success of the training centre in Archerstown is that it has recorded an increase of approximately 45% in the number of apprenticeship registrations. Numbers have increased from 195 apprentices registered in 2020 to 344 last year. A total of 429 active companies in County Tipperary are registered with the ETB and no fewer than 988 apprentices were employed by these companies in 2021. A notable addition to the supports offered to learners through apprenticeship services has been the provision of mathematics for crafts, as well as the successful piloting of a psychological support service. The national hairdressing apprenticeship is coming on stream this year, and moves are under way to introduce retail and sale apprenticeships while other apprenticeship courses are also in the pipeline.

The training centre in Archerstown, Thurles, is a prime example of the choices available to students considering undertaking an apprenticeship. Increasing numbers of school-leavers are realising that a secure future, excellent earning potential, continuous demand for their skills and, if they so wish, being their own boss are just some of the appealing benefits of taking up a trade. This growing interest in apprenticeships is reflected in the plans the Thurles centre hopes to bring to reality. Tipperary ETB is working with SOLAS to secure capital funding to expand the provision of facilities in Archerstown. These works, planned for 2023, aim to see greater classroom and workshop capacity added to the existing centre, along with additional canteen facilities. The works are part of the fifth phase of the development plan for the centre. Completion of the work will allow for the further expansion of apprenticeship numbers in the centre. Tipperary ETB is also exploring the development of additional new apprenticeship workshop space in a building adjacent to the Archerstown centre. This exploration is at an early stage, with an expression of interest submitted. The plans being considered would provide for eight new apprenticeship workshops and, potentially, up to 200 additional apprenticeship places.

The process of securing capital funding is both challenging and complex. I ask the Minister of State to assist in this process and to support the proven efforts and commitment of the training centre in Thurles. It is already a centre of excellence but, with the necessary expansion, it can play an even greater role in training and preparing young men and women to meet the growing needs of the future.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the opportunity to address the Minister of State in regard to apprenticeships. As a former lecturer at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, now the Atlantic Technological University, I have seen in my work in the private sector how apprentice-

ship courses, and apprenticeships as a facet of construction alone, are a vital component. Unfortunately, in the boom times, the apprenticeship ethic fell by the wayside. People were more inclined to work to make money without getting the formal qualifications required, and when the boom ended, we found many workers did not have the necessary qualifications. Coupled with that, many parents did not consider an apprenticeship a way forward for their children. Most parents aspire to the highest level of education for their children and may have thought that would always be in third level rather than in an apprenticeship, but that is far from the case.

I welcome the fact the Government has expanded the number of apprenticeships and the areas in which they are and will be available. That opens the vista for young men and women to become qualified in a given skill and create a great career. There are certain steps we need to take to ensure apprenticeships as a career choice for young people will be well and truly highlighted in secondary schools throughout the country in order that students and parents will be aware of their benefits.

Employers have a role to play. They must look to the future of their industries, whether it is hotels, construction or IT. They must ensure they have people coming into the business at all times. What is happening in the construction industry is a manifestation of the fact apprenticeships did not happen in the past ten to 15 years and we do not have the skilled workforce at the moment. I am sure we will get on top of it again.

I also believe State agencies have a role. The local authorities need to have apprenticeship schemes. They can play a large role in that. In my own town, when the sugar factory was there, the authority had apprenticeships for fitters and all those types of things. That lent people the skills, which they subsequently developed, and they are now in business themselves as a result.

There is an area that has been missed out. Going back to my time as a lecturer, it is important when somebody wants to do an apprenticeship and then wants to go on to get further education that the apprenticeship course is tailored to suit the programme in the technological university so he or she can progress rather than having to go back to year 1 when he or she starts there. This ensures the person is progressing. Maybe he or she could hop into the final year so the course the person does as an apprentice is compatible with what he or she would be doing if he or she went into third level education.

We also need to ensure the apprenticeship is focused and the apprentice has a certain amount of income. The level of income should be increased, especially in the first year of an apprenticeship. It is very important because we want to attract people into apprenticeships and not for the sake of it. I have seen how good apprenticeships have brought people to being project managers, construction managers and owners of their own companies. That potential is there for us and I compliment the Government on bringing forward the initiatives. We need to continue to do that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm labhairt ar na ráitis a bhaineann le printíseachtaí inniu. Tá sé soiléir go bhfuil béim i bhfad níos mó curtha ar phrintíseachtaí agus cuirim fáilte roimhe sin. I welcome the fact more of a focus is now being put on apprenticeships. It is long overdue. There are certainly many positive developments with apprenticeships, their promotion, the work WorldSkills is doing and the competitions it is involved in. I commend WorldSkills because it is putting high-calibre apprentice from this country on an international stage and they are achieving. That is something very positive and will help us to ensure apprenticeships become a highly valued part of our education system going forward. For too long they have not

been highly valued, as they are in countries like Germany. I would like to see us getting to the same level as Germany and highly valuing our apprenticeships.

Making places available and valuing apprentices is one thing but we must ensure we are retaining the people who are taking up apprenticeships. At the education committee meeting this week we listened to a number of apprentices and they were telling us of the challenges they are facing. That is all related to the cost of living and the fact they are not given any sort of financial assistance or a grant. That is a big mistake. If we are to go forward and ensure we have higher numbers of skilled people and people in trades, we must see that those people are helped to progress through the system and not left with no choice but to opt out of it or be demoralised. It is important we encourage them. If the places are being made available, we must ensure they continue on and that they are helped in that. The committee heard from an apprentice who was doing a course in Waterford. He explained that by the time he travels from the IT in Waterford to his home in Cavan, he has just €30 left in his pocket. That is the danger I was referring to. Some of these people will have no choice, unfortunately, but to leave the apprenticeships, and we do not want that situation. I therefore appeal to the Government to put some incentives, and indeed grants, in place for them.

We know from the experience of the education committee also that there are a number of changes we need to make in the area of apprenticeships. These include ensuring the senior cycle curriculum prepares students for apprenticeships, further education and entering the workplace as the key national priority, with guidance councillors also playing a vital role in communicating the options to students. For too long now we have had too much emphasis on the academic. That has led to a serious gap in the form of skills shortages in industry, so going forward we must ensure we are bringing everybody with us in our education system. I raised this at the education committee the other day, but if we were to involve some of the young people who have taken up apprenticeships in visiting schools and speaking to the students, perhaps those in transition year, to give their personal insight and maybe encouragement, it would be a good and positive thing to do to encourage students to take up apprenticeships.

I understand that under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 to 2025, a key priority is to increase apprenticeship registrations to 10,000 new registrations per annum by 2025. Under that plan, an employer grant of €2,000 for employers of apprentices on consortium-led programmes to help level up the supports that other categories receive has been introduced. I welcome that but we need to ensure these commitments are supplemented by further practical measures to support the employment of apprentices in SMEs and the employment of under-represented groups in apprenticeship and delivery of skills essential to our economy. The Minister agrees with me on this matter, and it is way beyond time we radically revised how apprenticeships are viewed in this State and indeed how they continue to be undervalued in our education system. That is where the root of the problem lies. I made the point at the committee that we must remove the snobbery, elitism and other ridiculous biases that have an impact on the take-up of trades, upon which we all rely and upon which our economy relies.

One specific area that has been receiving significant coverage this week is the lack of chefs available and the impact this is having on the restaurant and tourism sectors in general. I received a reply to a parliamentary question on this very issue on Tuesday, having asked the Minister the number of persons enrolled in the national commis chef apprenticeship programme launched by the Department in each of the years from 2018 to 2022. I have been informed the numbers registered for the programme from 2017 to this year are as follows: in 2017 there were just 25 apprentices registered, in 2018 there were 112, in 2019 there were 62, in 2020 there were

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16 and in 2021 there were 75 registered. The reply states:

Registrations were impacted by the pandemic in 2020 and the associated shutdown of educational and training facilities. However, registrations rebounded strongly in 2021 supported by the Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme exceeding the numbers registered pre-pandemic. Numbers in 2022 indicate that the recovery in apprentice registrations is continuing, with 33 new registrations in the first four months of the year.

We must maintain that momentum.

There are of course other issues we need to tackle. In this regard I accept and welcome the fact the Department announced a new gender-based bursary for apprenticeship employers. The bursary, which is worth €2,666, is available to employers who employ apprentices on any national apprenticeship programme with greater than 80% representation of a single gender.

All that is certainly to be welcomed, but we must do more to present apprenticeships in a positive light. If we have to draw on the education model in Germany, we should do so.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: The apprenticeship programme should deliver an effective way to provide for the education and qualification needs of many of our young people. For too long the focus has been on degree level performance and that is seen as the only way to go in education. Currently in Donegal, outside of Letterkenny, practically the only way young people will be able to secure employment is through having a skill that would be gained by an apprenticeship rather than a third level qualification. That may be about to change, but it will not change for a while. There are needs for those apprenticeships and that must be recognised.

At present, if a person gets a degree qualification, there are very few opportunities for him or her to live and work in Donegal. In fact, if teaching were taken out of the equation, there would be very few opportunities anywhere. The recent launch of the Atlantic Technological University might begin to change that situation, and I sincerely hope it does. However, even if it does, there will still be a need for the skill sets that apprenticeships supply. Apprenticeships are becoming more important in an increasing number of employment positions, so it might mean the need to go away to secure an education and a viable employment option might not be as important. For that to work, employers need to see the value in offering apprenticeships as well. That is vital. It appears the move to a situation where the employer pays the salary of the apprentices during the education block release element is a barrier to securing more apprenticeships. We may have to consider returning to the system where SOLAS pays for the education element of the apprenticeship to see an expansion in the offerings.

Anecdotally, there appears to be a difficulty with employers retaining apprentices in sectors where there is a boom time operator. For example, some employers are experiencing difficulty competing with wind farm developers who poach recently qualified apprentices with big wage offerings. I do not know what can be done to prevent that, but it leaves a sour taste in the mouths of employers. Perhaps in every industry there are boom time employers whose business is on the up and they can pay rates no one else can match. I am not sure what the situation is in that regard. I wonder, too, whether some employers use apprentices as easy income and whether the apprentices have difficulty securing good pay and conditions on the completion of an apprenticeship. It would be interesting to see statistics on the retention in employment of apprentices and an explanation of why they move as well. Those statistics might already be available but I have not been able to find them. If they are available, I would like to see them

because that issue is important.

There is a problem in Ireland with regard to employers recognising the value of their employees to a business. Many businesses would be more successful if they valued their employees and recognised the value they add to the offering. Perhaps that is one form of apprenticeship that should be developed as well - the business owner or personnel manager recognising the importance of the workforce. That would go a long way to a situation where everyone's contribution could be valued.

SOLAS highlighted in a recent Oireachtas committee report the challenge of securing places for apprentices with employers. I have to say that has been my experience as well, more so than workers not staying with employers. Perhaps the change to the payment system I mentioned earlier is a factor in this. To grow the number of apprentices, it may be necessary to return to the system where the State pays for the education element of an apprenticeship. When we realise a successful business depends on good management and good staff working together for the benefit of everyone, then we might see a successful apprenticeship programme.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank all the contributors to these statements. The importance of apprenticeships in society, both now and into the future, has never been more apparent than it is today. The action plan sets out new ways of structuring, funding and promoting apprenticeships to make apprenticeship more accessible to employers and learners. Expansion to date has widened the impact of apprenticeship to areas of skills shortage such as engineering, technology skills, logistics and fintech. Apprenticeship has undergone transformation over the past six years. There is a clear need to broaden the awareness of apprenticeship as a work-based route to internationally recognised qualifications and experience for people progressing in their career, school-leavers and career changers. Growing that message is a key feature of planning for apprenticeship in the coming years.

Employers in every sector are becoming aware of the depth of talent potentially available to them, the benefits of direct engagement with education and training providers, and the ability to leverage that opportunity to create engaged employees and support innovation within their organisations. The simple fact is apprenticeship only exists in areas where there is a demand for skills. They are not approved otherwise. However, apprentice jobs can only exist where employers provide those jobs. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship sets out to support employers to engage with apprenticeship as a key mechanism for building a highly skilled workforce. People learn in different ways and we want to make sure everyone is aware apprenticeship can be a route to a qualification into the future. The actions set out in the plan will deliver clarity for school-leavers, jobseekers, and career changers on the wide range of available apprenticeships.

Furthermore, it will put a structure in place to ensure the apprentice population will more closely reflect the general population through targeted supports for under-represented groups and making sure there is ongoing representation from those groups to advise on specific actions into the future. Empowering people from under-represented and marginalised sections of society to take their rightful place in the system is vital to the success of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship can provide them with a clear route not only to a job but also to a valued qualification and a clear career path, instilling hope and direction that may not otherwise have been readily apparent.

The workplace is changing and the response to Covid-19 has accelerated digital transfor-

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mation, changing the nature and capabilities required for occupations. Certain sectors were greatly affected, particularly aviation and hospitality, and they may take a long time to recover to anywhere near normal levels. Other sectors, including construction and the green economy, are forecast to recover more quickly and to expand. A significant number of people will need to reskill to find alternative employment and to prepare for the new employment opportunities that will emerge. Apprenticeship provides a rapid route to gaining those skills.

The action plan has been live more than a year and this summer I intend to bring forward a progress report on the plan, detailing achievements against the targets that were set to assess what gains have been made in evolving and transforming the apprenticeship system to meet the needs of Ireland's economy and society. Already, I can report that as a result of a €34 million investment under budget 2022 targeting the expansion of apprenticeship, including the development of new programmes and addressing the Covid-related backlogs, tangible progress has been made. For example, eight new apprenticeship programmes were launched over 2020 and 2021 despite the pandemic. These are arboriculture, equipment systems engineer, healthcare assistant, principal engineer, recruitment executive, sales, scaffolding, and supply chain associate. This year more were added: bar manager, wind turbine maintenance, and transport operations and commercial driving. This brings the total number of available programmes to 65 and will help address areas of severe skills shortage. Programme development has been approved for progression in other areas such as farming, horticulture, finance, manufacturing, construction, cybersecurity and ICT, and a number of others are at the initial proposal stage.

Despite these advances, information on and access to apprenticeship opportunities are limited for those who are not already engaged in apprenticeship. Fewer than one in ten registered apprentices had received information on their apprenticeship from career guidance counsellors in schools or other settings, reflecting the 2019 findings on the quality of information on apprenticeships in schools. By far the majority of respondents, 69%, had accessed their apprenticeship through friends and family or through their existing workplace or employer recommendations. A key feature of the responses from the survey of SME employers is a lack of awareness of the range of available programmes and how the apprenticeship system operates. SOLAS has a very successful Generation Apprenticeship employers campaign that supports employers in promoting and sharing their experience with apprenticeship, and we will continue that message into the future.

The Government is also ensuring the public service plays its part by delivering high-quality public service apprenticeship opportunities, underpinning the ongoing reform of our public service. An interdepartmental working group is developing another key action from the plan, a public service apprenticeship recruitment plan. This will set out ways to deliver a commitment to have 750 annual public service-wide apprentice registrations by 2025.

The pathway to delivering the intended growth of the apprenticeship system as set out in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 has been informed by a significant and extensive consultation process.

4 o'clock

In moving to a single model, the objective is to build on the strengths of both the existing craft model and the consortia-led model. The single model must be capable of delivering apprenticeships that can flex to accommodate the rapid rate of change driven by technological adaptation and digital and environmental transformation, which is inherent in today's economy,

while retaining the high standards required of Ireland's apprenticeship system.

The existing system has seen two major shocks in the past 15 years: first, the 2007 housing and economic crash and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. While those involved in apprenticeship delivery have moved to meet the challenges presented on both occasions, the need for rapid movement has also highlighted the limitations of the more centralised craft apprenticeship system compared with individual consortia, which had more flexibility to adapt delivery and assessment processes to the changed environment.

The existing post-2016 consortia-led apprenticeships operate under a structure whereby the academic content of the apprenticeship is agreed by a consortium of education and training providers, employers and relevant partners, with the off-the-job training delivery managed by co-ordinating providers who are themselves part of the consortium. This approach has allowed for rapid realignment of off-the job training delivery, allowing in turn for apprenticeships to continue insofar as possible during the Covid-19 period, proving resilience and flexibility under testing conditions. Apprentice occupational profiles, including Quality and Qualifications Ireland level and duration, are approved at national level through the National Apprenticeship Alliance, NAA.

Over the period of the action plan, the dual system of programme governance will be replaced by a single distributed system of programme governance, known as the single apprenticeship system. Responsibility for curriculum and apprenticeship content will be placed close to where activity takes place. This will leverage the core strengths of education and training providers, employers and partners who are immersed in their respective industries. It will also foster the integration of apprenticeship within the quality assurance arrangements of the educational institutions across the further and higher education systems. The national apprenticeship office will provide support for the new apprenticeship consortia and will be informed by the NAA, which comprises stakeholder representatives and will have a subcommittee focused on advising measures for broadening diversity in the apprentice population. Therefore, while there is a move towards a distributed model of apprenticeship, there is a significantly changed and enhanced role for national level governance and oversight mechanisms.

As to when the training backlogs will be cleared, the situation is being monitored on an ongoing basis as a priority for SOLAS as we continue to add more training capacity and training staff and to apply emergency measures. At the end of April, there were 3,616 electrical apprentices, 1,162 plumbing apprentices and 844 carpentry apprentices awaiting their next phase of training. Provision and capacity on these three programmes have been increased by 50% on 2019 pre-pandemic levels to address this and to ensure that apprentices are trained as speedily as possible.

Apprenticeship is at the forefront of an integrated tertiary education and training system, helping to break down distinctions between the further education and training and higher education systems for learners and paving a route to a tertiary education and training system that delivers a range of opportunities suited to differing learning styles and interests. The action plan will deliver structural reform that ensures the apprenticeship system of the future will deliver a more responsive and visible offering to learners and employers.

It is an exciting time for apprenticeship. We are at the cusp of really embedding work-based learning within our education and training system as a clear and transparent offering that is available right across the economy. This is happening at a time of radical change for our

country. Employers seeking to engage with apprenticeship will be able to do so in a straightforward and user-friendly way. Apprenticeships will be available, accessible and seen as a real and substantive option for those who learn best by doing and-or who may wish to earn while they learn. By 2025, regardless of the sector, apprenticeships will be a clear choice for people looking for new careers, qualifications or return-to-work options across all areas of the economy. We want apprenticeships to be at the heart of the conversation when employers look for ways to recruit staff. A minimum of 10,000 new apprentice jobs will be available each year and will be filled by learners of all ages and experience. At least 750 of those positions will be in the public sector.

Passport Services: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I am glad to be able to address the Dáil on this important issue. I apologise for the absence of the Minister, Deputy Coveney. He is abroad on important State business.

The passport service has been the subject of much public interest in recent weeks, as always. A passport is a very important document. As a Member of the House, I am fully aware of the number of requests for assistance with passports received from constituents every single day. I also fully support the right of citizens to contact Deputies to make inquiries on their behalf when they have difficulties dealing with any State agency, including the passport service. It is a basic function of our democracy. The level of demand for passports is not unique to Ireland, and there are similar stories playing out in other jurisdictions, but we will concentrate on our own issues today.

There is a large demand for passports at present, given the removal of Covid-19 travel restrictions. Many people are getting away, whether for leisure or for work, for the first time in a number of years. The passport service is at present processing about 25,000 applications per week, so the number is high and there is a continuous stream of new applications every single day and a large dispatch of completed passports being sent out every single day. In 2015 the passport service issued 650,000 passports, all in response to paper applications. There was no online option at that point. By the end of June of this year we will have reached the same number of passports, so it could be said, and we are saying, that the number has doubled. In fact, it has more than doubled.

As with many Government services, Covid-19 presented extraordinary challenges to the passport service. I thank those officers in the passport service who were in work in the middle of the pandemic to deal with emergency applications which had to be granted at different times. In addition, many staff provided consular assistance overseas. Even during the level 5 restrictions, there were staff physically there to deal with those urgent situations. Since May 2021, staff have been working on site full-time. That presented its own difficulties in making sure the workplace was safe during periods of Covid challenges and restrictions.

Despite everything, 634,000 passports were issued last year. Understandably, there is pent-up demand. That is accepted. Based on our forecasting models, we initially thought and we said publicly that the passport service would receive 1.7 million applications this year, and we began to plan accordingly for that. We saw huge demand from September to December of

last year, so that number has now been revised down to 1.4 million, that is, we expect 1.4 million applications. That is still an extremely high number of applications. It is the highest ever received in any year. The Department has therefore increased its resources to address the increased demand for passports. We have dramatically increased the number of staff assigned to the passport service. A major recruitment drive has been under way over recent months. There are 340 extra staff in the service since last June. Recently, the passport service completed its own recruitment competition for temporary clerical officers. I thank them for their work and for offering to work because, in an environment of high employment, it can be difficult to get people to fill such temporary roles. Many of the first officers recruited from that competition are from my constituency because the Passport Office has a facility in Balbriggan. The interviews have concluded and the first officers began work on Monday of this week. Officers recruited from the competition will continue to be assigned as we get them, to deal with applicants' queries on the customer service hub and to work on the applications. This means that there will now be 900 staff in the period ahead. That is double the number last year.

An important point to make, which I think every Deputy will accept, is that it is the statutory responsibility of the passport service to protect the integrity of the Irish passport. It is an important document. First, each application, and especially each new application, has to be checked very carefully. In addition, time and effort has to be given to bring on board new staff and to train them in this process. I have received queries about particular passports where it transpired that the person simply was not entitled to one, or that a parent simply had not consented despite the fact that the form purported to show that he or she did. A number of cases every year, although I have no specific examples, are referred to An Garda Síochána in relation to that. The point I am trying to make is that a level of checking must go on, particularly in respect of first-time applications, to make sure passports are issued properly. We all accept that. We want it done as efficiently and as quickly as possible, but we accept that.

Measures have been taken to improve processing times. New video tutorials have been released to assist citizens in submitting the correct photos and consent forms. They are there to help, because there is certainly an issue in this regard. The passport service needs to continue to make this area as easy and user-friendly as possible. Like every Deputy in this House, I know there is a significant problem in this area. There has been intensive training of new staff and upskilling of existing staff to deal with complex applications and, particularly, with first-time applications.

In relation to the prioritisation of first-time applications, increased resources and overtime have been allocated to process these applications in order to reduce processing times. A new document management system was put in place in the passport service at the beginning of March. Its aim is to improve the processing speed in the passport service and the subsequent turnaround times for applicants. One particular feature of the new system improves the processing time for applicants who have been asked to submit additional documents. We want to see that going quicker. In my opinion, it is still not fast enough. To be fair to the passport service, it has taken measures to make that happen more quickly. That is certainly a bone of contention for citizens who are having difficulties with the service.

I am aware that issues arise when the passport service is unable to verify the consent of a Garda witness for a child's consent form. This is a common issue. All Deputies will have encountered it in our constituency offices. I have been talking about it too. I am glad to have the director of the passport service here in the Chamber, although she is obviously not taking part in the debate. She is here to hear the feedback and to advise me.

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In order to protect the integrity of the passport and the right of people to passports - let us not get away from the fact that it is the right of an Irish citizen to have a passport - it is important to make sure parental consent is verified for first-time applicants. Quite frankly, if one child abduction were to be carried out on a fake passport or on a passport that was obtained incorrectly, all of the queries in the world about delayed passports would be quickly forgotten. There is a balance to be struck between making sure this is done right, making sure no mistakes are made, making sure everyone who is entitled to a passport gets one as quickly as possible and making sure nobody who is not entitled to a passport gets one. I think Deputies appreciate that balance. I have been talking to Deputy Ó Cuív. I will not pre-empt what he will say, but I think he will make suggestions on how to make that even more efficient. I have already passed them on to the Passport Office.

What people should know about witnesses to passports is that there is a long list of people who can witness them. In most cases, you do not have to go to a Garda station. People should look at that as well. The passport service is actively engaging with An Garda Síochána to streamline this process. There were meetings last week and this week to try to reduce the difficulties that are being encountered in contacting some Garda stations that are not manned full time. I would ask people to bear that in mind when they are seeking witnesses.

Since 2016, there has been a reform programme to modernise the passport service. The stand-out achievement of this programme has been the introduction of the Passport Online service to customers. I want to pay tribute to a former legal adviser in the Department, Mr. James Kingston, who was on the co-ordinating committee for introducing and improving passport services. He died some weeks ago. I pay tribute to him for his work, particularly on passports. Passport Online has been introduced. If we could send one message from this Chamber, it would be that people should only apply for a passport online. They should not apply by paper. That is the most important message.

The Passport Online service is dealing with 90% of passport applications, including first-time applications. No application must be submitted on paper. I have told the passport service that many of my constituents have gotten the impression from websites, such as *citizensinformation.ie*, that first-time applications somehow have to be dealt with on paper. That is not true. Every single application may be done online, including an application for a child's first passport. I strongly urge people to do that.

The pandemic has placed constraints and pressures on the service. The Passport Online service has definitely helped things. We would be a lot worse off without it. In addition to Passport Online, the reform programme has introduced other changes. People can apply for a passport card as well as a passport book. This is an important document, particularly in the European Economic Area and the EU. An integrity unit has been established to strengthen our anti-fraud capacity. That helps to move along the regular 99.999% of applications that do not need to go anywhere near that unit. It helps to ensure that the Irish passport remains one of the strongest, most respected and most useful passports in the world.

The focus on digital services has allowed the passport service to collaborate across government. For example, passport applicants can now use utilise the government-wide MyGovID as an optional service when applying for a passport. The digital transformation of the passport service has continued at pace during a period of unprecedented turbulence in the external environment, including with Brexit, which has led to a huge shift in demand over the last number of years.

In the next three years, the Passport Office will continue its programme of reform, change and further enhancements. This will include the transformation of the technology that underpins the system and the back-up of systems that are an essential part of the efficiency of it, but will also help to prevent fraud and other attacks. The technological upgrades are also essential to stabilise and support the improvements for citizens at home and abroad and the roll-out of the Passport Online service has already been delivered.

The Passport Online service, which we are urging every single applicant to use, has brought about tangible changes for the citizen. The existing back-office processing system has remained in place for almost 20 years. We now need to implement a new application processing system. The project is at the early design phase and the new system will be substantially operational in the passport service in the next two years. The new system will complement the customer-facing advancements that have already been achieved through the Passport Online service. It will ensure that the passport service remains resilient and agile in response to future passport demand as our population continues to grow.

The passport reform programme will also encompass the redesign and modernisation of the passport book and card, as well as the replacement of existing passport personalisation machinery.

There are a number of steps that people must take. We have all fallen foul of these from time to time. People should check their passports before booking travel. Over the years, it has happened that I discovered problems very late. This is especially the case with kids who have not had a passport before. People need to apply online, full stop and no exceptions. The Passport Online service is the fastest and most efficient way to apply for a passport. It pains me to tell people not to go to a post office, but in this case they really do need to apply online.

For renewal applications, the Passport Online service is up to four times faster than a postal application. The process is very friendly and straightforward. I had a situation where a constituent of mine was travelling. He rang on a Sunday night and he was travelling later in the week. He could not get an emergency appointment online. I acknowledge that can be difficult too. I suggested to him that he should try to apply online on the basis that in my experience, there was a reasonable chance that the passport would come. It came. He got the passport later in the week, simply by using the ordinary online channels. That will not be the case for everybody, but it will be for many people. He did not need an emergency appointment or any intervention from anybody. He was able to do that.

Sometimes, part of our role as Deputies is to give the best possible advice. I am trying to do that here, so that it can be amplified by Deputies all around the country. We are trying to make the forms as user-friendly as possible. There are some people who make mistakes, although that is not to blame the citizen. That can be a problem from time to time. There is just no getting away from that. It is not all citizens. The level of mistakes is not as high as has been reported in the media.

Deputy John Brady: The figure reported is 40%, which I think is scandalous.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I am not saying that. However, there are some errors. There is no question about it that there are some. People should check the Department website.

It is also important to say that we have published estimated processing times. That processing time does not start when you start the application. The processing time for passport appli-

cations begins once the correct documents are sent into the Passport Office. It is important that people know that.

In relation to urgent queries, a person who needs to travel for urgent or emergency reasons can get an emergency appointment. There are 400 of them available every week. There is no question that again presents difficulties. I would love if there were more such appointments, but that would clearly be very time-consuming and very staff-intensive. I think I am in correct in saying first-time applicants cannot avail of the emergency service, which is to be expected. It is difficult to tell people that because it is an inconvenience, but a first-time applicant has to go through the verification process, which is obviously difficult at the last minute. There is also a service for people who have to travel abroad in an emergency, such as urgent medical treatment or the death of a family member abroad. There is no question but that these applications will be expedited and the passport service will make every effort to prioritise passports for these citizens.

I am a big supporter of Members getting the information they require because they are asked by their constituents to find that information and to help them. While this is a very small minority of applications, it is inevitable that when Members get the same type of queries throughout the country, even if these are a sample or subsample of the applications, it is the canary in the coalmine. It shows us what the problems are. It is very important, when Deputies raise these issues, that they are taken very seriously. I take them very seriously because if those issues can be dealt with, it must lead to a more efficient service. We see the same issues being raised time and time again by Deputies and that should point us in the direction of reform. The Minister has increased the number of queries each Member can make to 20 per week.

Measures have been taken. I will be listening very carefully to what Deputies will say, as will the Minister, who has responsibility for the passport service but cannot be in the Chamber today. I have no doubt that the officials in the passport service will also be listening very carefully because everyone comes here with deep experience of how this service works. I ask people to check the validity of their passports, to apply online in plenty of time and not to make a paper application. There is always a balance to be struck between protecting the integrity of the Irish passport and giving a passport to everyone who is entitled to one, and making sure no one who is not entitled to a passport gets one. It is a highly valuable document. I will listen very carefully to what Deputies will say.

Deputy John Brady: It is rarely, if ever, a cause for celebration for any Minister when Deputies from every corner of the land, including those in the Minister of State's party, talk in this House about particular topics or issues on which they are being hammered in their constituencies. It is safe to say that passports are among those issues. Although the Minister may choose to differ if he was here, the reality is that the issue of delays in the processing and issuing of passports has found itself in the midst of the national conversation on politics. That is never good news for any Minister.

The passport service was able to give the Minister an estimate of the number of passport applications it expected to receive this year. According to him, that estimate now stands at 1.4 million, with in excess of 190,000 passport applications still to be processed. I have raised the many problems and difficulties with the passport service with the Minister for well over a year and, contrary to what the Minister of State said, those concerns have not been listened to or acted upon. The Minister is more than aware of the scale, nature and detail of the problems passport applicants are experiencing. The Minister's decision to finally act has come about as

a result of media and internal party pressure, among other things, and is nothing more than an attempt to deflect attention from his failure to address well-advertised challenges the Passport Office has been facing for a considerable period.

Unfortunately, the Minister is no stranger to failure during this Dáil term. We have witnessed a catalogue of failure and debacle associated with his brief over a sustained period in recent years. His decision to change the title of the Passport Express service to Post Passport is an attempt to more accurately capture the reality of the lack of efficiency offered by the previously titled Passport Express. I wonder whether he gave any thought to renaming it “Passport Pony Express”. In fairness, it took Pony Express only ten days to get from the east to the west coast of the US. The Minister insists the service is working well and that targets are being met. I do not doubt the Minister needs to allow himself to believe that, although I doubt even Facebook would be able to come up an algorithm that would have the voracious dexterity necessary to frame the current experience of applying for a passport in Ireland in the type of terms required by the Minister to sell to an unbelieving public.

I have spoken to many people and heard countless stories, as I sure the Minister of State has, of individuals who have been left frustrated and in a state of despair due to their experience of attempting to apply for a passport in this State. One individual, who contacted my office in a terrible state, attempted to contact the Passport Office more than 600 times by phone in the course of two days in the past week. On one day alone, he tried calling 378 times as he watched the clock tick down on a flight for a family holiday. Needless to say, he did not get a hold of anyone on the phone. Unfortunately, he and his family never made that holiday. This is a reality for many that is resulting in considerable financial loss, not to mention the emotional upset of parents having to deal with crying children and the reality that due to the cost-of-living crisis, they might be looking at the last chance for a family holiday for a very long time. In some instances, they are missing out on the first opportunity to meet grandparents, grandchildren or other family members since lockdown.

A survey of applicants has found the average number of phone calls to the Passport Office before they receive an answer is 80. That is the average number of attempts. People simply cannot access accurate information on where their application process is at. They cannot get in contact by phone nor can they access staff through the webchat service. To understand what passport applicants are going through as the target passport issue date passes, the date of their flight approaches and they are faced with the question of whether to cancel requires a degree of empathy for ordinary people, which is something this Government simply lacks in abundance. Time and time again, we witness indifference and a lack of empathy from this Government for the plight of ordinary workers and families. It has to be said it is an absolute disgrace. Rather than meaningfully engage with the issue and undertake the process of searching for solutions, the Minister has sought to position blame on applicants, stating that up to 40% of forms are being incorrectly completed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I did not say that.

Deputy John Brady: I said “the Minister”; I did not say “the Minister of State”. This is a blatantly obvious attempt to deflect from the bigger problems with the forms and the online process. Even the Minister’s Government colleague, the Tánaiste and Fine Gael leader, Deputy Varadkar, is prepared to concede that by pointing out it is obvious that if 40% of forms are being filled out incorrectly, the problem is with the forms and not the applicants. The reality is the whole process needs to be dragged right into the 21st century. Online processes are supposed

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to make people's lives easier and not drag them right into the pit of despair.

I will also make the point that I have previously met with staff from the Passport Office and have been very impressed with their dedication, professionalism and commitment to the service. I do not blame them because they are stretched and are working extremely hard to deal with a very difficult situation. I am aware that they worked right around the clock through lockdown to try to deal with the backlog of applications during that entire period. The reality is they have to endure a complete failure in leadership from the Minister. The buck stops with him, yet he has again failed to provide the necessary leadership and direction to ensure the efficient delivery of a major and critical Government service.

The primary delays centre around first-time applicants and applications for children's passports, which often require the provision of additional documentation. These delays extend to the foreign births registration system, where a large number of people are left waiting years to have their applications processed.

The problems surrounding passport applications have been so well documented that it is difficult to believe it is only now that the Minister is ready to respond. Even the Office of the Ombudsman felt compelled to offer criticism of the delays being experienced by applicants, describing the situation as unacceptable and stating that it would continue to monitor matters.

The number of applications from overseas has been growing considerably since Brexit, something that should have been expected and planned for. For the first time ever, this year saw more applications in the North for Irish passports than British ones. What more evidence is needed for the argument to open a passport office in the North? This idea needs to be pursued actively.

We have once again witnessed the Minister's failure to respond to another development that has placed further strain on a system that, as has been clearly established, is dysfunctional. The time to act has passed. Families will be left in despair. We need more and swifter action to ensure that more families get passports as quickly as they deserve.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will take this opportunity to thank the Minister's office and those in the passport service whom we manage to get through to on occasion for their empathy and hard work in expediting some of the cases we have raised with them. We all deal with such cases. Similar to many jobs around the country, I guarantee the House that, if someone were to walk into any constituency office in the State, one of the phones there would be set to autodial the Passport Office, such is the level of chaos.

As my colleague mentioned, it should have been predicted that this would happen, albeit perhaps not that it would reach this extent. However, it has reached this extent because of delays upon delays. Previously, I came up with practical approaches and mentioned them, for example, a reminder to people via email that their passports were about to go out of date. This idea might not have dealt with the current chaos, given that some of it is related to Covid and people's passports going out of date, but when someone is booking a flight, there is no reminder that he or she should check his or her passport. That would be a simple change. The State has a responsibility. Passports do not come cheap. People can apply online now, so they provide their email addresses. In nine and a half years' time, a message could go to that email address. This might not catch everyone, but it would catch some.

There are cases of signatures given in Garda stations up and down the country not being

recorded, which leads to chaos and the mother or father running around trying to get things in order. I have dealt with cases from abroad. For example, there are people in England who are willing to travel all the way back to Ireland to collect passports that are not coming. They applied in January and the wedding they are going to in France will be in June, but they were told in May that they did not supply enough documentation. This is crazy. There needs to be a quicker, nearly instantaneous assessment of the documentation when it arrives. An elderly man in my constituency applied for a renewal in February and booked a flight for a major operation in Spain, but he had still not received his passport in May. That is crazy.

I appeal to the Minister of State to put more resources into the service and to ensure that booking sites and the like carry reminders for people who are booking flights or holidays abroad.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject. All of our offices are inundated with people who are desperate because of the disappointment of their children and their financial losses. When they contact their transport providers, be those airlines or however they are travelling, they are not refunded anything. People are losing thousands of euro because of chaos in the passport service. While some of this chaos could not be avoided, much of it could have been.

The Minister of State mentioned that there would be 900 staff in the months ahead, with clerical officers starting last Monday. He rightly stated that they would have to be trained, but who will do that? Will they be trained by the service's current staff? Training takes time. What is happening speaks to how plans were not in place to recruit the necessary people despite the fact that we saw the avalanche of requests coming down the line.

Many Garda stations across rural Ireland are operating on restricted hours and only on certain days of the week. The Passport Office gets back to them twice but cannot get an answer. This is another block in the system.

The situation with photographs is not acceptable. It was mentioned that 40% of forms were wrong. This has to speak to the fact that-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will clarify that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I have dealt with many cases involving issues with photographs. In fact, my own passport was one. Are proper instructions being given? Are we communicating properly to the chemists and others who are appointed to take the photographs?

Many practical measures could be taken within the system to speed the process up, but there needs to be urgency and the staff who have been recruited need to be trained outside the Passport Office, as it were. The verification issue also needs to be addressed.

No one wants to infringe on the integrity of the passport application process, but right here and right now, people are losing thousands of euro that they do not have in the first place and cannot afford to lose. Many of them have not had holidays for years. There are children watching all of their friends going abroad on school tours, unable to join them. This is the last thing that people need - people who have saved, scrimped and done without to get abroad. We need to fix this problem. I hear what the Minister of State is saying and it is right to put the message out there that people should only apply online, but that message should have gone out much earlier and should have permeated every household.

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Deputy Ged Nash: I will start where Deputy Conway-Walsh concluded. If I am correct, 90% of applicants are applying online now, which is the right approach to take and is what we always encourage constituents to do, but it does not mean that there are no problems. There are problems with the online process, as we have all experienced, especially in recent months. I will go into that in more detail.

There is no way to describe this other than to call it an utter mess. Deputies are referencing experiences from our constituency offices and from interactions with those who elected us to be here. We are doing this to illustrate a wider point about the dysfunctionality of the system. Citizens across the country are entitled to expect better from a public service. I hope the Minister of State will agree that it is unlike me to be critical of the public service and the way in which some sectors of it are managed and respond. He has set out the challenges as well as the plans for investment in the passport service, but we cannot say with any confidence that the service is operating at its best. It pains me to say this as somebody who is a supporter of public service, public servants and the public service more generally. This criticism is not directed against any individual in the passport service. I know that its staff are under severe pressure. They have, by and large, been helpful. That is, when we can get through and reach the right person. One of the problems when a Deputy or constituent contacts the Passport Office is that we often get conflicting information from different members of staff. Consistency of messaging needs to be examined in terms of the requirements that people are being asked to fulfil. I want to offer some examples. I am glad we are having a debate. It was the Labour Party leader, Deputy Bacik, who last week called for this debate because it is important we debate what is an issue of primary importance in terms of public policy and the service the State provides to citizens and taxpayers.

The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, referenced issues in regard to the verification of parent or guardian consent forms, which is a common problem. The Minister of State is very familiar with the area I represent; he is from that area and he has represented a section of it in the past. We have had many problems, like Deputies in my own party and others, in regard to the verification process at part-time Garda stations. The Minister of State knows there is a part-time Garda station at the southern end of my constituency at Laytown, a station he is very familiar with. We know there is a very high density and a high number of young families in that area who will be applying for first-time passports for children. We know that in a situation where there is a part-time Garda station and gardaí are not there to verify information when the Passport Office rings to check, the phone call is transferred to Ashbourne but the garda in Ashbourne does not know the individual constituent and may never have heard of the other garda involved.

This goes to the heart of the problem. We have a Victorian system where the verification details, the details of the passport application, the parent's identity and so on are essentially held in a ledger. As a country that prides itself on being a world leader in terms of the development of tech and IT systems, our public services should be adopting a best-in-class system to ensure we move away from the paper and pen to an online verification system that is safe. We can do that. It is achievable and other elements of the public service can do this very well. We need to ensure the information is recorded properly and then submitted to the Passport Office as efficaciously as possible and in a way that guarantees the integrity of the system. I accept that verification and integrity are critical.

I got a response from the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and a response from the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in regard to a request for the development of a modernised system. I was told that it simply is not going to happen and they referred to the fact there is only a small number of

cases where the passport service has difficulty contacting the Garda station in order to verify the garda's signature. That has not been my experience. I accept that the passport service makes efforts to contact relevant members of the Garda but it is not always possible. It should not be beyond us, with the skills we have in this country, to be able to develop a system that can deal with that, a modernised system to move away from the Victorian system that we have at present. That would make a very big impact on the efficiency of the system.

There are situations where it seems the paperwork is just not checked when it arrives or when it is submitted online. We were dealing this morning with a case in south County Louth where, four to five weeks after the original application, there has been a request for additional information, although that request could have been made four or five weeks ago. Is it the case or, more to the point, is it not the case that there is a group of people in the Passport Office who are going through and scrutinising the information? It would make their job easier in the long run and make the system work much more efficiently if they could weed out those problems at the start. We have been told it takes eight weeks for first-time applications and sometimes the clock has to start ticking again, or at least the system is not moving as efficiently as it might because of the delay. The idea that people wait for five weeks and there is no word, and when they check where their application is in the process, they find there is a bit of outstanding information or the Passport Office is not satisfied with the information received and is not then able to process it. That is bizarre in this day and age.

There simply has to be a better way to deal with this. I look forward to the Minister of State's response and to some new proposals emerging from the Department of Foreign Affairs as to how we can make this process and system much more user-friendly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, who is sharing time with Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Like every Deputy's office, my office has been inundated with calls and emails in regard to passports. As we know, there is a serious backlog in the passport application process but there are further problems that have not been addressed. The online application system is welcome and 90% of people are applying online. However, the system is indicating dates of arrival of people's passports but the passports tend not to arrive for weeks after the date specified on the link. Many people have missed holidays as the date could be two weeks out. I tell people to check their dates and they believe they will have it the next week, but they then come back to me to say that while they were to have it on, say, 16 May, it has not come and they are going on holidays the following week. I understand that the dates are an estimated timeframe but it is a concern. Although I have not had many such cases, I have definitely had a few. The concern is that we allow people to get their hopes up that they will get the passport. They are disheartened because it has not arrived on time and I have to tell them it has not been processed or printed. That needs to be addressed.

People are finding it extremely difficult to make contact with the Passport Office due to busy phone lines. We have to be mindful of the staff. I am sure they are working extremely hard, answering phone calls and looking up information when people ring. However, when I ring, I sometimes get conflicting information about a passport and I can be told one thing today and another thing tomorrow. We have to be mindful of that.

The biggest issue for me is the requirement for further information. We speak about an eight-week timeframe after the information has gone in but further information can be request-

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ed after six weeks, although it might be something simple. I ask that, when somebody applies, all of the information is looked at within a few days or a certain timeframe, and if the information is not right on the application, further information can be requested. I am very mindful of this issue because I and my staff members can be on the phone trying to find out exactly what is happening.

We have to be mindful of GDPR. I recently had to ring the normal Oireachtas line. I told the lady dealing with the call that it was an emergency as it was for a student's school trip. While the lady could not have been nicer, she said she was sorry but she could not give me the information under GDPR. I told her that I could answer any questions she might have because the student's mother had given me all the details. While I understand we have to be mindful of GDPR, in particular with regard to children's passports, we are in a situation where many people are looking for a break or students are looking to go away.

I have been saying for months to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, that this was expected. I firmly believe this is not something that happened overnight; it has been going on for months. Every time the Minister is in the House on the issue of passports, I will come in. Whether I get a speaking slot or not, I will wait until it comes up and I will come in and say to the Minister that we have huge issues with passports. Again, I am not blaming the staff and I think they are doing the job to the best of their ability. However, there is a lack of staff and a lack of walk-in services. Can people go and walk in? No. I accept people can get an emergency passport and I have dealt with a few cases in regard to deaths or where people had to go for an operation. The system for emergency passports is working well. I compliment the staff because emergency passports are being dealt with very well.

I had a case two weeks ago where half of the family went on holidays and the other half could not because two of the kids did not have their passports. I felt so sorry for them. I have had other cases where people thought they were going on holiday only to find, all of a sudden, that they could not do so because their passport would not be ready on time, which left them at the loss of the money paid for the holiday. At this point in time, people really need a break. Is there any way, even for the next few months, to find solutions that will sort out these issues? I do not expect the current delays will continue to arise on an ongoing basis, but we are coming out of a period, because of the Covid crisis, in which people could not go anywhere for two years. It was great that some of them holidayed in Ireland during the periods when restrictions were not in place. At this point, however, I am seeing people, including students, who are disappointed because they cannot go abroad.

The passports for the two students I mentioned in recent days are being printed today and will be picked up at 11 a.m. tomorrow morning. There are good stories and I do not want to be just harping on about the people who have not got their passports. It is very hard for those who think they will get their passport in time and who may end up losing money. We need to try to find an easier solution, not only for the families and children who are in difficulty but also for the staff of the Passport Office, who could not be nicer or more obliging when one deals with them on the telephone. They can only do the best they can within the system that is there. As I have said to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, the system is broken. We need to fix it or get a new one that works.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Less might be more on this occasion, so I will be brief enough. To put the issues in context, I have been looking at average passport processing times for our European counterparts. In the UK, for example, there are significant delays, with people look-

ing at anywhere between ten and 12 weeks to receive their passport. The same is true for many other countries in western Europe. I was amused to read that people in Germany are complaining that the average waiting time has gone from 10.4 days to 18.1. Given how renowned the Germans are for efficiency, they are not best pleased with this. This is a problem that is happening right across the Continent. We need to be cognisant that there is a surge in applications.

Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects of the passport service that we can work on and improve. I acknowledge that there has been a major recruitment drive over the past few weeks. I understand the target is to get to 900 employees and that the competition is not yet completed. Will the Minister of State advise us as to where that competition is at and how likely it is that the remainder of those 900 jobs will be filled as quickly as possible?

I note his comment that gardaí are not the only people who can witness a passport application.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will clarify that for the Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: In fact, a whole litany of people, including politicians, solicitors, peace commissioners and others, can witness applications. Obviously, any of us would welcome anybody who needs that service into our offices. If we can be of help, we will try to oblige.

I have several criticisms of the current process. The Oireachtas helpline was established to assist Members in making passport queries on behalf of constituents. While we were initially restricted to five calls per day, I must say that the service is used very rarely by my office. We have not found it as efficient as we hoped it would be. I did a test on Monday to see how many times the telephone would ring out before somebody answered it. I will not say what the number was, although I might tell the Minister of State after this debate. The helpline is just not as efficient as it should be and it needs to be reviewed.

The natural reflex is for people to go into a Garda station to get their form stamped because that is what they always have done. However, there are difficulties with this, including in my constituency. A number of stations serving a large urban population, like Glanmire, are open only on a part-time basis. My understanding is that staff in the Passport Office will make three attempts to contact a garda on behalf of an applicant. If they fail to make contact, the application then has to be issued with a new link and a new consent form must be submitted. This has a knock-on effect of applications taking an additional three to four weeks to complete, which seems like a complete waste of time and resources. I ask that this apparent practice of a limit of three attempts to contact gardaí be reviewed. Staff should be cognisant of the part-time hours being operated by many Garda stations and the times when gardaí are available to take calls.

I would encourage people to renew their passports online, as the majority already do. I know of a number of people who have received their passport only a two or day after completing the online renewal. However, there is a certain percentage of the population who, no matter the public service in question, will always resort to a paper application. It is neither fair nor equitable that they should be restricted in obtaining a passport just because they submitted their application in one form rather than another. That is not right.

Many Deputies have said repeatedly in the House that the staff in our constituency offices often feel like they are working in the Passport Office, such is the level of interactions they are having with the service. It would be helpful if more of the personnel in the Passport Office were

dedicated to manning the public telephone lines. Much of the time, people are coming back to us because they cannot get through to the office and we then make representations on their behalf via email. We need to look at the telephone and web chat services in the Passport Office. There are stories of people waiting many hours for assistance. Resources must be directed to address that.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I am sharing time with Deputy Ó Murchú. I have lost count of the number of people who have come to my constituency office looking for support in trying to obtain their passport within the timeframe they were given by the Passport Office. They are being left in limbo because the service seems to be at breaking point. The staff in the Passport Office are doing their best in very challenging circumstances, but we need to look at an overhaul of the service. A campaign may be needed to show people how easy it is to use the online system. In doing so, however, we must be mindful that there are people who are not computer literate. Additional supports may need to be put in place to assist them. The Minister of State said that the majority of delays relate to application forms not being filled in correctly. We need to simplify the form and make it easier for people to complete.

The majority of people who contact my office about passports are complaining that the passport tracker system is not reliable. They also tell me that it is next to impossible to get through to the webcam chat facility or the telephone service. People have told me they took a day off work and made hundreds of calls but still did not get through. This is causing a massive amount of stress. We must get real about what is happening. People are losing out on holidays, which is costing them a lot of money because they have already booked airline tickets and paid money to travel agents.

Could something equivalent to the national car test, NCT, system be introduced, whereby a reminder email would be sent to people telling them when their passports will expire? This might prevent the big rush that happens in summertime when large numbers are trying to access passports. In addition, the logbook system used by the Garda needs to be integrated with the Passport Office system. The systems that are in place do not seem to be communicating with each other. There is a job of work for the Minister of State and his officials to do to address these problems. I hope we can get them resolved as soon as possible and that we do not have any more people stressed out trying to get their passports.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have been in the position before of there being a problem with the issuing of passports. We were told on that occasion that the number of staff in the Passport Office would be increased, if not doubled. I accept that this work is being done at the moment, which is absolutely necessary. However, we need a very quick audit of how many staff will be needed to deliver the service we require at this point in time. That needs to be done straight away.

I am repeating what every other speaker has said in pointing out that my constituency office is inundated with complaints from people who cannot get through to the passport service on the telephone lines or via the web chat facility. They have given up on doing so and they are particularly perturbed that they cannot necessarily trust the tracker system. They come to us for help but we cannot always get through to the Oireachtas helpline. I acknowledge there is pressure on that service. I requested that extra slots be afforded to us for dealing with constituents' passport applications and I am very glad the Minister allowed that. However, it means the helpline will be choked up to an ever greater degree. We must be able to deliver for our constituents in this regard.

5 o'clock

One member of my staff on her day off set aside considerably more time than it should take to make sure she phoned the Passport Office, accepting the situation that people are finding themselves in. This is just not working in any shape or form.

We have also been told there will be a streamlining process for first-time child passport applications. We all accept the necessity for due diligence. I do not need to repeat what has been said about guardian consent forms at Garda stations. The Minister of State spoke about the need for a new memorandum of understanding. I am very glad there is interaction involving the Minister and the Garda. We need to reach a solution on that.

We are getting various pieces of information. Sometimes we are told the Passport Office will ring twice and sometimes we are told it will ring three times. We need to get clarity on that. That comes directly from the Passport Office.

I do not know what age we are in that this information is being entered into a book. Even in my constituency there have been issues with busy Garda stations. That is an issue I brought up specifically with the Garda itself. There needs to be some sort of electronic tracking of that with information sent in by email or by a bespoke system because what we have does not make any sense whatsoever.

In Dundalk in my constituency, we are absolutely inundated with Northern passport applications. We need a facility for Northern elected representatives because otherwise they are coming in through us. In the long term, we need a passport office in Belfast. We need solutions as quickly as possible. I apologise that I will not be here for the end of this debate, but I would appreciate it if the Minister of State were able to give me an answer to those matters.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for joining us today. I am very conscious that in a debate lasting over two hours, parliamentarians across the Chamber will be standing up and effectively saying the same thing. While that is frustrating for us, I imagine it is more frustrating for the thousands of people who have been left frustrated by this issue. We all accept the Passport Office's consistent lack of communication and accessibility to the public affects thousands of people throughout the country and has been a continuing source of exasperation. This is no reflection on the Passport Office staff in place at the moment. I know they are as exasperated as we all are. They do a great job. We just want more of them.

Passport representations have become the number one reason for people to contact my office. Constituents are desperate as they are unable to reach the Passport Office themselves. They cannot get through on the phone, through web chat or email for weeks if not months. Some families who have finally saved up enough money for a long-awaited trip away end up not receiving their child's passport that had been applied for months in advance. I heard of one case where half the family is going on holiday and the other half is not able to go. That is devastating for the morale of the family, especially coming out of a pandemic where people had to stay at home for so long. These are real issues.

There are new parents who desperately want to introduce their babies to grandparents who live abroad. There are family weddings and important work trips. The list goes on. We are at the coalface of hearing these stories. I do not want to highlight a single case or a constituent issue. The issue with the Passport Office is widespread and indiscriminate. We are not just talking about holidays, but I am very conscious how important these are. We are talking about

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people not being able to change their visa or access social welfare payments because they cannot get a passport for their child. In one case a woman who was breastfeeding contacted our office because she needed to travel for work purposes and was told she could not receive her child's passport and was not able to travel. This case was considered not to be an emergency. It is very difficult to have to convey that message back to a person.

Constituents contact their Deputies when they cannot get a public service they have paid for and to which they should be entitled as citizens of the country or people who live here. Deputies' offices are now becoming an extension of the Passport Office. As other parliamentarians have done, I pay homage to the staff in my office who are dealing with these issues almost hourly.

The news this week that the number of staff assigned to the urgent Oireachtas passport line was increasing from seven to 11 and the number of representations a Deputy can make on passport queries was increasing should not be welcomed because it is an admittance of failure of the system. Shockingly, 10,194 passport queries were raised by Deputies through the dedicated Oireachtas line for urgent passport queries between January and April of this year. We have a job to do in this Parliament, which involves scrutinising legislation and shadowing Departments. That alone indicates the lack of communication from the Passport Office to the public. The Ombudsman, Ger Deering, stated poor communication and lack of availability of somebody in the Passport Office to speak to the public are at the heart of the complaints his office receives.

I received a reply to a parliamentary question that stated approximately half of all applications currently with the Passport Office were first-time applications for children, and of those, 48% were considered to be incomplete. That would indicate a problem at the source. Parents do not want to delay the child's application. It is not their fault the system does not function correctly, but the issue is not being acknowledged by the Passport Office as a whole or by the Department. I hope our debating the matter today brings some degree of acknowledgement and, more importantly, a solution to the issue.

Deputy Catherine Murphy received a reply to a parliamentary question in which the Minister stated that, regarding incomplete first-time passport applications, the Passport Office makes every effort to contact applicants but its experience is that many applicants take weeks and sometimes months to send in the necessary documents. People are fastidious with these documents. When somebody is making a passport application, they take great care to ensure every line is filled out in detail. In every representation my office made, this has proven not to be the case, and I doubt it is the case for most Deputies making passport representations on behalf of their constituents. My experience is that applicants are trying multiple times a day every day for weeks if not months to make contact with the Passport Office. It is essential we stop blaming applicants and acknowledge there is a genuine fault in the Passport Office as a whole.

Given the level of discussion and scrutiny generated yesterday, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the lunacy that came from no particular individual but from the Government itself in announcing the name change of Passport Express to Post Passport, as if that is something to be welcomed. It suggests that because the system does not work, we have changed its name. It is a complete joke that the name of Passport Express is causing the bulk of complaints and upset. Over 90% of all passport applications, including first-time applications, are now being made through the passport online service. Let us not make out that all these issues are because people are using the postal option for their passport applications nor that it is a name that gives

people an idea they should be able to receive a modicum of communication and timeliness from the Passport Office once they are submitting a paper-based application. Is the Minister, the Department or the Government also looking to drop the word “urgent” from the urgent passport appointments given that the turnaround time to issue a four-day urgent passport is more than ten days at this point and no same-day appointments are available?

A number of constituents have also been scolded by the Passport Office that they should not have booked or made any future plans until they had passports in their hands rather than trust the information they were given by the service itself. Passports have been applied for months in advance and were well past their estimated arrival date, an arrival date that is presented on an online tracking service with rarely accurate timeframes and well past the stated turnaround times. The total expenditure in the passport reform programme over five years from 2016 to the end of 2021 was €13.4 million. I am not sure if that money has been worth it to date. The Minister and the Department need to stop blaming the public for the issues with the service and show some self-reflection and leadership. They need to just get the problem sorted.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I also welcome today’s discussion about the Passport Office. At the outset, I acknowledge the work undertaken by the staff at the Passport Office. Like every organisation, during the pandemic it adapted its practices. It kept an emergency service going throughout the pandemic. Some of the Passport Office staff supported colleagues in the Department of Social Protection. I am sure all Deputies in the House are grateful for their efforts.

With a relaxing of those Covid restrictions, more people need to get passports for the first time or renew existing passports. This, combined with issues relating to recruitment and staffing, has resulted in the backlogs and delays we are discussing today. We are now at a point where thousands of families are approaching summer travel dates and are very worried about having passports issued in time, particularly for children. To be fair, it is clear the passport online processing system for renewals is generally the best and most effective way. I welcome the Minister of State’s statement on that today. We need to ensure that is communicated to the public.

The main issue arises where people are making first-time applications, especially for children. The processing time for children’s passports is having a significant impact on families as holidays loom. The process of checking the information on those applications can take several weeks, which leads to parents being alerted to problems weeks after the application, which they assumed was okay, becoming a problem. This can then result in a further delay for those applicants and is causing significant distress for parents. This is compounded by the difficulties people are encountering trying to get through to the Passport Office to get further updates on their applications. I ask for the procedure to be reviewed early, perhaps involving early checking of that documentation to resolve any issues relating to pictures, consent forms or other issues that may arise, especially with children’s applications. The Passport Office needs more staff to clear these backlogs. I know the Minister prioritised this and staff are currently being recruited but we need to consider an immediate temporary redeployment of staff.

I ask the Minister of State to look at the online tracking system and the information it gives applicants. It needs to be reformed because I am sure it actually causes some of the queries to the Passport Office.

I also ask the Department to arrange a media campaign to raise awareness about the online service and to promote the urgent appointment service at Lower Mount Street. The one-day

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and four-day services are useful when people need a passport quickly for a non-emergency issue. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, for being here today. I know he will take these suggestions back to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, the Department and the Passport Office, which is ultimately responsible.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Minister of State for being with us. I ordinarily begin statements by noting my appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to such a debate but, to be honest, I have absolutely no interest in contributing to this debate. I am utterly exasperated with the situation with the Passport Office. I do not speak alone. I am sure every single Member of this House, the other House, the vast majority of representatives in Northern Ireland, the Minister, the Passport Office and many members of An Garda Síochána around the country are sick of dealing with a system that is broken. By the time the hundreds and hundreds of people who have been contacting our offices for months get in touch, they are utterly exasperated. They are understandably stressed, frustrated, upset and at their wits' end. They are coming as a last resort, oftentimes through a friend, colleague or an MLA in Belfast, to their local representative hoping desperately to secure a passport not for the stated emergency reasons but for very important personal reasons. Many people are seeking the sheer fulfilment of a basic right as an Irish citizen, that is, the right to one's passport and identity and the right to travel.

I welcome the comments and genuine good intentions from the Minister of State but good intentions simply are not enough at this stage. We are talking about additional resources and recruitment. Are those additional resources going to lead to actual change anytime soon? Will there be change this year? Rather than leaving people on the phone for 100 rings, will they only have to put up with 50 rings? That is still not great. Representatives are not necessarily facing those waiting times. Those waiting times are for people who are sitting up through the night often mistakenly pressing the refresh button on an online tracking scheme because they are desperate to get that passport. They do not want to turn around to their seven-year-old child and tell them they cannot go on the trip of a lifetime that was promised because the family could not get passports, despite the fact the forms were put in 24 weeks ago. Perhaps the family made an error but it was not identified until ten days before the flight. It is all adding to a system about which we must be honest.

A recruitment campaign sounds great but, as Deputy Devlin said, why can we not have a proper redeployment? The Department of Foreign Affairs has some of the best public and civil servants this State can possibly produce. They are scattered around the world and doing amazing work that some of us do not see and we hope we will never see. They are involved with consular assistance, political influence, economic development and much more. They are the best and the brightest. The best and the brightest need to be fully deployed to fix a system that is becoming absolutely chaotic. I do not say that only because we, as public representatives, are getting it in the neck every day. I say it because the system simply is not working. There is no comparable state around the world that is encountering these levels of difficulty. The excuse of the difficulties presented by the pandemic does not cut it. The other 27 EU member states, the UK and comparable countries around the world are not suffering the same problems we are. We talk about issues such as inflation and the cost of living and say it is a global phenomenon and outline its impacts. This is a problem that is acutely specific to Ireland. The good intentions are welcome. However, if we look back to couple of years ago, before the pandemic, there was efficiency in the online renewal system and the passport express service. Our passport service was working excellently.

I have no interest in coming back to the Chamber before or after the summer recess and

making the same single transferable speech about the hundreds of people who are contacting my office when, ultimately, they expect and want delivery to have happened months ago. All of us in the House are compelled to work with the Government to ensure that is done as soon as is humanly possible or faster.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Tá áthas orm cúpla focal a rá ar an ábhar seo. Years ago, I was selling fencing stakes and ran out of them. A purchaser who was looking for a lorryload of fencing stakes in a hurry rang me. I started to explain the problems I faced with supply and so on. He told me that was not his problem. He said he was not looking for excuses; he was looking for fencing stakes. The same thing could be said about the people looking for a passport. We can give all the statistics and reasons but people have to go abroad, for whatever reason, and if their passport does not come in time, they are at risk of losing their fares and bookings etc. The people do not care. They just want to get their passports in time.

I hate when Ireland is in second place. We should always strive to have the best public services in the world. International comparisons do not do anything for me. I want the best because I think we can do the best. It is about systems.

My view of the problem here, looking in from the outside, is that we need to analyse where are the commonest problems we are coming across. The first one is simple. It is a pity an instruction was not sent to the Garda six or eight months ago saying that gardaí in stations that are not open 24-7 should not be signing passport forms. An alternative would be to put a system in place whereby if a garda did sign a form, it would be logged in the 24-hour station in their area. The situation now is that a garda signs a form in good faith but the station cannot be contacted. I can absolutely verify that in most places in rural Ireland, the window is two hours per day. That problem could have been solved already and could be solved tomorrow. I hope something is being done in that regard. Let us get on and do it.

I know of cases that go back to February and early March for somebody who is travelling at the end of May. In most of those cases, there was supporting documentation involved with the application. It seems that when there is supporting documentation involved, the application is put aside until it is got to. If you make a planning application in any local authority, the first thing the local authority does with the documentation is to triage it to see if it is all there, and if it is not, the application fails. Any passport application that needs supporting documentation and is sent by post should be triaged to see if all the documentation is there at the beginning. If that had been done, a vast number of the inquiries I have received would have been taken out of the bundle and the issues would have been solved.

More staff working in an analytical system that is not the best never solves the problem. We know that 80% or 90% of applications are going through quickly. It is the outstanding 5%, 10% or whatever percentage that are being very held up that are causing the grief. They are the ones on which we need to focus. We need to find the reason for the delays, change the system and deal with the problem.

The tracking system is good but I understand two things about it. When the system states an application is processing and there is a progress bar included, that is an average thing and does not relate specifically to one's own passport application. Am I correct on that?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, Deputy.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My second point about the system is that when the application

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gets to printing stage, it is absolutely critical that the tracking system is kept up to date with news about when the passport will hit the post. If it is going to hit the post today, the applicant will have it tomorrow because the postal service is very good. That is when people are most dependent on the tracking system.

I thank the Minister of State. I am sure there are a lot of solutions available. We need to become solutions-based, analyse the problem and solve it.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Having listened to the debate, it is right to say that people are very frustrated. We are probably now known as *lastchance.com*. I have listened to the stories that have been shared in the course of the debate. I have a pain in my head because I have spent the past three quarters of an hour on the phone trying to sort out issues for one lady. Another issue that has come up again and again is errors in applications not being identified in one fell swoop. Some errors are identified, the person fixes them and then other errors are identified, all of which adds to the whole time.

There was a suggestion today that the passport postal service may be abolished entirely. I agree that we should have a preference for the online process, and that we should make sure to encourage people to do it online where they can. Obviously it is a quicker and more efficient system. In my opinion it is very clear that we must have the service available for those who cannot go online such as some people with disabilities and some older people. They cannot and should not be discriminated against because they cannot go online. We cannot just get rid of that service. The answer here is not to improve the Oireachtas urgent query service, but to-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is only a very small part of it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is, however, a big feature of the discussion here. It is a basic function of democracy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We can find ways around the problem and try to solve it. That is the point I am trying to make.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us not have an across the room conversation.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The basic point is to improve the service so people can get the service they are entitled to.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I agree.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are due now to go to a Government slot where Deputy James O'Connor was to share with Deputy Joe Carey who is not present. Perhaps in his absence we will take Deputy Bernard Durkan.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, for being here. At the outset, I acknowledge that we arrived at this situation for very clear reasons. There is a sharp increase in the number of people who want to renew their passports. In addition, there have been some international circumstances that have driven demand for Irish passports. It is important that solutions are brought forward in this debate.

It would be an idea for the Department of Foreign Affairs to give priority to existing passport applications by those people who currently hold Irish passports. It is worth recognising that 45% of passports issued are done within a one-day timeframe. This puts the whole debate

into some degree of perspective. Many people have heard of the more difficult and complicated cases around the registration of new children in order to get their first passports, which obviously is quite complicated. There is also the aspect of applications from people based outside the Republic of Ireland. Although they may be entitled to passports, in many cases for legitimate and proper reasons, it is important to recognise from an international point of view - and particularly driven by Brexit - that there are many people in the United Kingdom who want to get swift access to an Irish passport under the existing rules. Perhaps this should be a lower priority.

I believe that priority should be given to people living in the Republic of Ireland, who are based here, for whom this is their place of residence and where they are paying their taxes. It is one particular point. I understand this may, to some degree, be controversial for those who are living abroad but the Passport Office is trying to deal with an extraordinarily large backlog and we need to be co-operative to some degree with the Passport Office. I acknowledge the work being done by the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, has been very helpful with some very serious cases down through the last months.

From my own perspective as a back bench Deputy in government, I recognise that Deputy Paul Murphy may have a different view when it comes to emergency situations but I do like to be able to assist and help in getting access to the system when there may be a bereavement or for somebody who may need to be given a passport swiftly for necessary reasons. This is an important part of parliamentary democracy. We are very fortunate to live in an open and free democracy in this State where people have quite open access, which is quite unprecedented access in western Europe, to their Members of Parliament who are the Members of the Dáil and the Seanad. Obviously, this also applies in accessing social services and other services the State provides. I believe this is an important function of the work we all undertake. Dealing with the issue in front of us is going to be frustrating.

One other area I want to identify is improving the links between registration offices around the processing of birth certificates. This has been quite problematic but, from our experience, it seems to be causing the most difficulty when it comes to the emergency line and making contact with the passport service. When a person is trying to get a first-time passport it is, unfortunately, remarkably difficult to get those situations sorted out. It will cause a lot of upset for many families travelling over the summer months for summer holidays. I would like to see some degree of focus on that. I am aware that not everything can be done but that is one particular area where further investigation and further resources would be very beneficial.

We do appreciate the work being done by the passport service. There is a habit in this House of people getting unnecessary criticism. There is a huge backlog. More than 5,000 passports are issued daily. That is nearly the population of Fermoy in the context of the number of passports that are handed out daily. They all need to be scrutinised. It is a very precious document. There are significant rules and regulations around them being lost. We must also bear this in mind when we are having this discussion. It is not something that can just be put through a computer and done automatically. It does need background checks and there needs to be a level of security around them. As we have seen, internationally the Irish passport is an extremely valuable commodity. We must be very conscious of that also. These are just my own views on the issue. I hope that the passport service and the Department of Foreign Affairs will be able to get over the next couple of weeks and months, which it would appear will be quite difficult.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Like other speakers, I am glad to have an opportunity to say a

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few words on this subject. It is a very sensitive subject for the people for a number of reasons. Many people and many families have not had a holiday in up to ten years because when they were ready to go the Covid lockdowns came about and they could not go anywhere. Families have changed and there are more people involved. Babies have been born and, in some cases, babies who were born one or two years before the pandemic have never been on holiday anywhere outside the country because of Covid and the difficulties we all had to comply with. There is no doubt that this has caused a huge problem.

There is now a huge backlog. More resources must be applied in a way that is strategic in order to remove the waiting list. We have become accustomed to waiting lists in this country. It is not just the Passport Office or the Department of Foreign Affairs: there are waiting lists for health services and for almost every service in the country at the present time. We make excuses all the time. The time has come when we must deal with the issue and not spend so much time dealing with the excuses. I am aware that the Minister and Minister of State are extremely busy. They have been busy as a result of Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol, and around the intransigence on the part of other governments in other jurisdictions. That all has taken its time and taken its toll. We must recognise that this is the case and, at the same time, we need to compliment them for the work they are doing in those areas. It is a very tough task.

Notwithstanding all that, there is the issue of the people. The people need to expect a first-class service, simply because it is a sensitive time, simply because they have been locked down for so long, simply because they were frustrated for so long, and simply because they feel the urgent need to make a little trip, get out of the country, and relax with their families. They feel this in a personal way. They feel that it is attacking them in a personal way. It is not meant to be like that but that is the way it is. Whatever needs to be done in the redeployment of staff needs to be done as a matter of urgency, not in six months' time or in one year's time. We need to do it now.

The challenge now is how quickly we can deal with it. Can we do it now? Can we deal with it in a way that will at least give us the clear knowledge that the issue is in safe hands? I am not happy criticising Departments, their offices or the public services in general. We all rely on them for the delivery of services and we have to appreciate that. The fact is that the service is not sufficient to deal with the demands at the present time. It is as simple as that. We can talk around it. We can walk away from it and pretend it is not happening. We can become impatient with each other as a result of the difficulties created. We must do something about it. To my way of thinking the answer to it is simple. Whatever it is, it needs to be dealt with now. Let us deal with it now. Let us remove the waiting list. Let us give the people a little break on this one. They have not had too much over the last years for a whole variety of reasons, which were not in the control of the Government or anybody else. We now need to deal with it. It comes back to the same spot. This is not a criticism of the Minister or the Passport Office or anything else. It is about the people who have been locked down for so long and have felt deprived. Kids will be going back to school again at the end of the summer. There is not much sense telling them in September that we have resolved the problem. We need to resolve it now to allow families to have a little bit of enjoyment and a break and an opportunity to be together in a relaxed fashion after the past two and a half years. I am conscious of the pressures on everybody. I am not being dismissive in anyway but the fact of the matter is that the issue is there. It will not go away and has to be dealt with.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As the Minister of State has heard over and over, the Passport Office is in chaos. The service is at breaking point. One of the most frustrating things is that

we are now into peak summer holiday season. This has gone on for a year and the frustration is primarily about the fact that nothing was done up until this point. We are now here at the eleventh hour trying to put additional resources in place to cater for these numbers. All of this was foreseeable. There had been ample time up until now, the end of May, to do things. The waiting list for first-time passports is growing and is absolutely huge. One family were asked to provide a birth certificate for their child three times because the Passport Office claimed, wrongly, that they had sent photocopies. That is how frustrating it is for people.

Concerns have been raised with me that the equipment in the Passport Office is having trouble reading the watermarks on some official documents. I do not know whether that is accurate so maybe the Minister of State can clarify. I have been told by somebody who deals with the issuing of those official documents that is the case.

There are several other operational issues that could easily have been addressed some time back and which are compounding the delays. For example, when the office requests additional information and that information is given over, that applicant is treated as a brand new one and is put back at the end of the queue, despite how long it might have been since their original application. Surely that could be addressed immediately, given that it was not pre-empted-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Three weeks.

Deputy Imelda Munster: This was prior to that. Another constituent of mine applied for a passport in early March and was due to travel on a date this month. That date came and went with no word from the Passport Office. When she eventually managed to make contact, it transpired there was a problem with her passport photo and she needed to provide a new one. That raises the question of whether the Passport Office only looks at the application on the set target date. That needs to be looked at. If it is only looking on that set target date, that is probably why so many people are not getting their passports before they fly. Again, these are simple things that could have been prevented. Resources could have been put in place to prevent this backlog.

In another case, the person applied on 9 December and was given a target date of 13 May. On 16 May they were told they needed new consent forms as the number eight on the date on the form was not legible. They were due to travel on 9 June. Despite the fact that the target date was 13 May, their first contact from the office was on 16 May, which was after the target date. They applied back in December. That is insane.

Communication is another problem, as we all know. People can spend hours and hours on the phone. I thought one constituent was grossly exaggerating when she told me she had tried to contact the Passport Office 162 times, to no avail. This is affecting families, and workers in particular. Many workers in this State are told when their set holiday dates are. One person might have to take their holidays in first two weeks of June and another in the first two weeks in July. They apply for their passport in ample time and miss their holiday because the passport never arrives. That family then has no holiday for the following year. They have been robbed of their two weeks away after being through Covid and all of that. They probably have been looking forward to it since last summer, thinking that this time next year they would be up and away. They are robbed of it because of a lack of resources, proper planning and not foreseeing the foreseeable. It is totally unfair.

The other issue I want to raise is the establishment of a branch of the Passport Office in the

North. I cannot for the life of me understand why that has not happened or why there is a reluctance to provide one. There are more people applying for Irish than British passports in the Six Counties. We have been calling for this for years now. It is compounding the delays. Why not open an office up North and relieve the backlog here? It is a win-win.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: What is happening with passport applications is unacceptable. There is bad communication, people are not answering the phone and applicants are sometimes waiting for hours with no reply. I rang the office myself last week. Someone on the phone says you are number five on the list, then number four and then all of a sudden you are number 40. It is crazy what is happening. People think this is just about people going on holidays but it is not. There many people who have medical emergencies, deaths abroad or family members who are sick and they just want to visit them. In fairness to them, they apply for the passport in plenty of time. They are told the passport will be ready on 4 May and they are going on 6 May. Then 4 May comes and there is still no sign of it. They are panicked and frustrated. Many people will not have sympathy for Deputies and Senators but we are the ones getting the brunt of this. For the past number of years every phone call I received was about housing, but at the moment, nearly every phone call to my constituency office is about passports. People are shouting and roaring. They are frustrated and are giving out. The problem is they apply in plenty of time but there is no communication from the Passport Office. Nobody is answering the phone and it is frustrating people. That is totally wrong.

Another serious problem is that when a child applies for a passport, especially a first-time passport, one of the parent's passports has to accompany the application. When there is no sign of the passport, one of the parents will ring up and be told there is a problem with the passport and the office needs A, B and C. The parents then have two options. They can cancel the passport for the child, get their passport back and reapply, or they can go ahead with the existing application. It can be very frustrating and it is not fair.

The number of people's holidays that have been cancelled is unreal. It is not one or two holidays. People think the passport is coming on a certain date, and when it does not come, they get on to the travel agency and pay an extra bit of money to get the dates changed. Then it does not come the second time. It is causing a serious amount of frustration. People just want to know the truth and what is actually happening. With first-time passports for children, the main problem seems to be with the child's photograph. People could be waiting up to six weeks before they know if the picture was accepted, and then if there is a problem, they may have to start again. It is causing real problems. The application is scanned when it comes in. I do not see why they do not check the documentation there as the first port of call and then, if there is a problem, let the people know. It is all to do with frustration and bad communication.

The Minister of State said earlier that 340 extra staff had been employed since last year. Thanks be to God for that because I would hate to be coming in here today if there were not an extra 340 staff there. Nobody is blaming the staff. It is the people at the top causing the problem. It is just bad organisation. I accept that about 500,000 passports have been issued so far so far this year, and I believe the Passport Office is doing an additional 5,000 passports a day. I know the staff are doing their best. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, spoke about online applications. He said it would take ten working days for a single adult, 15 days for a complex child renewal and 30 working days for a first-time application. He went on to state that applications submitted by post will take eight weeks. That was a lovely letter that I received from the Minister and I thought it was great, but it is not reflected in the many phone calls I have been getting to my constituency office.

We knew two years ago that this would happen, given we always knew the pandemic would one day subside, but we did not plan for it and that is the problem. I appeal to the Minister of State and everyone in the Department to resolve this, whether that requires hiring more people or just sorting out the people at the top. Please get it right.

Deputy Seán Canney: Most of the workload coming in to most Deputies' offices in recent weeks has comprised queries about passports. I thank the staff of both the Passport Service and the Department of Foreign Affairs for trying to deal with the applications. The aspects that are amiss are at a management level. There needs to be a better communication structure to deal with applications, as virtually every Deputy has noted. When somebody calls the office, the phone should be answered within ten or 15 minutes. People should not have to ring multiple times. If we can get that right, it will help people because if they know they cannot get a passport in time, they can do something about that. The great anxiety and worry for people relates to not knowing what is happening. They have to rely on the tracker and will get an email, perhaps two days or even one day before the passport is due, stating there is a problem with their application, and that is what is creating the problems. That 500,000 passports have been issued this year demonstrates what has been put through the system, and 5,000 per day is no mean achievement. Nevertheless, we need better communication.

I come from the west of Ireland and represent Galway East and it always annoys me that we do not have a passport office in the west. There is a passport office in Dublin and in Cork, and to hell with the rest of the country. There is a huge population in the west, and it is high time it was recognised that we are citizens equal to everybody else. I ask the Minister of State to relay to the Department of Foreign Affairs that it is high time a passport office was set up in Galway in order that if we want to get an emergency passport, we will not have to travel to Dublin or Cork but can get it in Galway. Similarly, if somebody wanted to walk in with information or documents, he or she would have a place to put them and somebody to talk to. It is a simple ask. One Deputy stated they wanted one in the North. I think we should start in the Twenty-six Counties, serve the country properly first and put one in the west. It is important we do that.

I get a lot of queries from people intending to travel to the UK. This is an issue the Government might take up with Mr. O'Leary of Ryanair. There is a common travel area between the UK and Ireland. The only airline, as I understand it, that looks for a passport as a form of identification is Ryanair. Perhaps Mr. O'Leary should use some of the common sense he professes to have, remove that requirement and line up with every other airline, including Aer Lingus, all of which accept other forms of identification. That, in itself, would release at least some of the pressure for people.

There is, indeed, an onus on everybody to ensure his or her passport is in date, but there is an onus on the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Passport Service to put in place a serious campaign to ensure people will check their passport before they book a flight, except for emergencies. We have to get out the message that indicative processing times are indicative only, and that if something is wrong with the application or the documentation, that will delay it further. That message is not getting out. It is important we seek solutions. If the Ryanair issue is sorted out, many of the problems affecting people travelling to the UK and within the common travel area will have been solved. If we resolve the communications issue for people submitting applications and if we set up an office in Galway to serve the west, that will help get the communication right. Everybody working in the Passport Service has done Trojan work over recent years. We are going to get many more queries as Deputies, which we must foist back onto the Passport Service. That is doing nothing but leading to more people having to

answer more questions.

I thank the Minister of State for hearing me out and hope he will take my suggestions into account.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sharing time with Deputy McAuliffe.

When I was driving to the House this morning, I saw a queue outside the Passport Service office at 8.45 a.m. It was a long queue and it reminded me that today would be another day of passport issues to be dealt with by the team in my office, who are at their wits' end. I thank them, as well as the staff of the Passport Service, for their work. Every Deputy in the House will have a team who are plagued by having to try to navigate a system that works sometimes, which I acknowledge, but in many cases is very difficult.

It might sound ridiculous, but members of my team have lain awake at night worrying about individual passport cases. One lady in my constituency, for example, who has stage 4 cancer had to give birth at an early stage. There is only one opportunity for her to travel before getting treatment and we had to fight to get a passport to enable her child to accompany her. It is those types of very personal cases that keep my team awake at night worrying about their resolution but they also know they will be spending the majority of the next day redialling the Passport Service phone number, sometimes 100 times, waiting on hold before finally speaking to somebody, and while a couple of people at the office are very good, there are others who give the bare minimum, merely directing callers to the tracking website. All too quickly it is 4.30 p.m. and very little else can be done about other constituency queries. My team lie awake thinking about individual families, weddings, christenings, first holidays away after the pandemic, school trips and, for some people, what is a once-in-a-lifetime holiday opportunity that might end up being cancelled if we cannot get passports for them. Our staff are having to triage and make very difficult personal decisions about which applications are the most important to raise in light of our office limit of five queries per call, or 15 per week. Last week, we had used all of our queries by lunchtime on Tuesday.

The requests are not ridiculous. They do not relate to people applying for a first-time passport and expecting to receive it the following week. They are people coming with legitimate concerns and problems. I secured a child's passport whose application had been in the system for a long time, and it arrived with the wrong date of birth printed on it. Of course, it was not the mother who got her child's date of birth wrong. In another case, an adult was making his second application since February. I have no idea what happened at the Passport Office but he was eventually advised to submit a second application. He received numerous calls from the office, one of them stating that he had misspelled his own name, another advising that his stated date of birth was wrong and still another advising that the application form had been ripped. He had not ripped it, nor had he got his name or date of birth wrong. This is a perfectly competent citizen. The final straw was that the instruction that he would need to submit a new application because he had used Tipp-Ex on the first one. Of course, he had not used Tipp-Ex on the application to correct something he had not got wrong in the first instance. These are the sorts of frustrations being experienced. The man has now sought reassurance in respect of the new timeline because he is about to sit his leaving certificate and just cannot spend the same length of time trying to organise a passport.

The tracker page often does not match the information the Passport Service has. A basic adult application seems to be taking more than one month and a half to be processed, although

I acknowledge that is not in every case. I have been dealing with a child renewal application that was submitted on 4 May and is somehow going to take more than one month to be processed, with an issue date of 7 June, three days after the family is due to travel. The application has been assigned to a checker but, in our experience, that can mean anything from a quick resolution on the same day, which is wonderful, to no news for a week. That is far longer than the stated 15-day turnaround for a child renewal. In the case of one of two first-time passport applications I am dealing with, a request was made for new documentation after 30 days had passed. New documentation was submitted and the estimated issue date adjusted, which, as it stands, will mean the application will have been with the Passport Service for more than 60 days and the family will miss the travel date by three days. The second application was due on 21 April and more than a month later, it is still being processed. I was told two days ago it had been elevated to the priority list, which I communicated to my constituent, but when we called today, we were advised it will be added to the priority list. There has been no further update, and the action supposedly taken two days ago is now about to be undertaken.

I have delivered, as I am sure other Deputies have, the very bad news that a passport will not be available in time, only for the family to cancel their holiday and the passport to arrive the next day. Likewise, I have been told a passport is being printed and will be in the post the next day, only to be told it is at the same stage two weeks later. These are inconsistencies I cannot stand over. I cannot believe we are having this sort of process-level conversation at this level in the House for so long. These are the sorts of processing inconsistencies we have regarding the Passport Service. I recognise there are good people at the office doing good work and that they have been processing more passports than was previously the case, and I acknowledge the Government has hired more people, but these are basic State processes.

6 o'clock

It is taking up too much time for everybody. It is creating too much stress for our constituents and citizens of this State who are entitled to their documents. Whatever needs to get sorted out just needs to get sorted out.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: When a debate of this nature occurs in the House it is due to a failure of a State service to deliver the service people expect. Whether that is medical cards, access to services for people with disabilities or older people, or, in this case, passports, the issue is an important one. It is sometimes thought that access to a passport or travel is a frivolity or luxury and other issues are treated more seriously. We should not judge the reasons people want a passport. People are entitled to apply for a State service and to have it provided in a reasonable period of time. That we are having these statements demonstrates that the Department of Foreign Affairs has failed to do that. There could be very valid reasons for that failure but we must acknowledge it. I say that because statements were made again this week that suggested there was nothing to see here, there was no problem or backlog and that, actually, in 40% of cases, the problem lies with others and is not our problem. I know that is not exactly what was said but it was what many people heard. Of course there is a problem in the Passport Office. That is why it has been given additional resources. Of course there are issues. That is why every single Member of this House is being contacted about this.

The second issue we need to tackle is the view that Teachtaí Dála like being involved in the passport process because it somehow allows them to curry favour with their constituents and it is some sort of electoral trick to make us seem more relevant. As one member of my parliamentary party said, he did not get elected to the democratic Chamber of this country to process

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passports on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs. I think every Member of this House will agree with me on that. We want and should try to be constructive. In the first instance, the Government should help the Department by providing additional resources. I am pleased the Minister of State has outlined that it will do so, and it is welcome. Second, Deputies have first-hand experience of this, having been contacted by people, and we want to pass on some of that experience in order that innovations and changes can be made.

The most egregious failure was the return of first-time registration passport applications that had exceeded the six-month waiting period. Late last year and early this year, some people's applications were not processed within six months, resulting in the application form being returned to them. It is unacceptable that someone has an application returned for no other reason than the ability of the Passport Office to issue his or her passport.

There is the matter of the issue date. We have heard much talk about renaming things when it comes to passports. We should rename the "issue date" the "first time checked" date because that is the date on which the application is checked for the first time. Of course there will be issues with passports but if we only check the application for the first time when we tell people we are going to issue the passport, we are not going to discover the problems with the application until it is too late. If someone is told the issue date is going to be 31 May, it is reasonable for that person to make travel plans for that date. The issue date we all get on the tracker is not the issue date but the first-time checking date. We should be honest with people about that.

Of course there will be issues with passport applications. Issues related to photographs are the most frustrating because the website will indicate a photograph has been accepted and it subsequently turns out it has not been accepted. It is difficult for applicants to find out what the problem is or to engage in any meaningful way with the Passport Office to identify the problems and try to get them solved.

One of the biggest frustrations is the contact with witnesses. Some work has been done with the Garda to try to improve this. Outside Ireland we allow other people to witness first-time passport applications. In the North, for example, many people use their local priest, school principal, school secretary and so on. We do not allow that in the Republic. Perhaps that is one way of resolving the backlog in the Passport Office. Gardaí have enough to do, as do Teachtaí Dála, without processing passports.

It is difficult for people to use the web chat facility. It does not really function, if I am honest. There is no meaningful interaction and it needs to be improved.

There is also an issue with the return of documents. When parents apply for a child's passport they are obviously travelling together because the child is clearly underage and not in a position to travel alone. However, the issue date and the return of document dates are different. We need to be clearer with people about that. It is a service failure not to point that out and very frustrating in some ways. I had such a case this week. A passport was kindly issued to a child on time and we were able to get it but the passports of the child's parents, who live in my constituency and applied through the Passport Office in Balbriggan, were sent to Cork for redistribution. The parents had to travel to Cork to get the passports so the family could travel together. It is very difficult to explain to members of the public how that is a sensible process. Perhaps it would be sensible and more efficient if people had ample time and the luxury of having a couple of days spare for it to be transported. However, when a passport is crucial and the child and parents are clearly going to need to travel together, we need to find a different way of

doing it.

I return to the point about communications. If we get these communications right and we are able to communicate more clearly, people in stressful situations will be less stressed and anxious and will ring fewer Teachtaí Dála. Having six or seven Deputies call about one application must be so frustrating but it is happening for a reason. I urge the Minister of State to adopt some of the good ideas and innovations this House is bringing forward, not in a defensive way but to help improve the system.

Deputy Carol Nolan: We have a crisis here. It is absolute chaos. Some 195,000 applicants are still waiting for their passports, as the Minister of State knows. In my constituency offices in Laois and Offaly the volume of correspondence coming in is on a par with that related to housing and health, which I thought I would never see. Housing and health, in that order, have always been the main issues coming into my office. I acknowledge that 300 additional staff have been taken on in the Passport Office since last June, bringing the total to 760. However, I am disappointed greater efforts were not made to take on more staff because we knew this would become the huge problem we now have. It is unfair on individuals and families and a source of great stress and disappointment. I can only imagine what the stress levels are like for staff in the Passport Office, which is totally unfair. This problem is no fault of the staff. It has to do with the whole organisation and the system as it operates. The system needs to be improved, brought up to standard and move with the times.

A number of Deputies alluded to the need for more passport offices. Having passport offices in all the regions would be a logical solution. We need this type of State service in the midlands because we have been left behind many of the other regions. The fair thing to do would be to have more offices and ensure every region is represented. That would certainly alleviate the pressure on the staff trying to deal with huge numbers of applications and working with a system that is not fit for purpose.

The real disappointment is that this has been going on for over a year. There was ample time to do more and perhaps redeploy staff from other Departments, in addition to hiring 300 people. There was definitely scope and time for planning but, again, a failure to plan has led to this problem reaching this point.

This is one of the few times that every Deputy of every party is in agreement. That speaks volumes. Most of the time, Deputies are at odds on issues and have different opinions and perceptions of how bad things are but on this issue every Member from every party is saying there is a serious crisis. It is totally unacceptable that a family will be given an issue date and then make plans, perhaps using savings, and book different activities for a holiday abroad only to discover that the passport has not arrived. That is very disappointing and totally unacceptable. Again, it is about the system in place and not the staff. The other issue is that people should be given the communication in time, with a more efficient system. There is, and has to be, a better way of doing business. Certainly, the redeployment of staff is one way to try to help clear the backlog.

The Minister of State spoke about encouraging people to do online applications. I agree with him, but all the applications I have dealt with have been online applications. There is still a problem. It is not due to the hard copies going into the office, but a problem in the system. It is not all down to the applicants making mistakes with their forms either. There is a multitude going wrong, but I believe the core reason we are in the current position is a system that is not fit

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for purpose. The Government has to be more proactive in opening more State services around the country and not just concentrating in particular regions, as it always has done. It definitely has to be more proactive in that regard and, as I said, have a passport office in the midlands and offices in other regions to get through the backlog.

I hope that the communication will improve. I call on the Minister of State to take urgent action and to ensure that the communication with people improves. It is unfair to have working families saving money and ploughing their savings into a holiday only to lose that money, their deposits or their flights. We have to find a better way and we have to move forward. We also have to ensure that this does not happen again. We must learn from this and make sure to plan properly, not wait until things are failing and falling asunder as they are now. Again, there is no excuse for that. There was plenty of time for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to intervene and there were lots of options that could have been pursued.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The next speakers are Deputies Joan Collins, McNamara and Pringle.

Deputy Joan Collins: Deputy McNamara is not in the Chamber so I will divide the time with Deputy Pringle.

I listened to the Minister of State's update on the passport service and the unprecedented number of passport applications that have been received and processed by the Passport Office. I accept that to a point, but the fact that we are a year into this means that patience is beginning to get thin. As we have heard, many Deputies are representing large numbers of constituents who are in a panic as they wait for passports to be issued. I have dealt with a number of families who have had to cancel holidays. Some have insurance, but some do not and that has caused financial losses. Needless to say, there is a great deal of anger about that. These are families who have been given their holidays from their workplace on a certain date and they put in their applications well in advance, but they had to cancel their holidays. It is just not good enough.

It should not be up to Deputies to make these representations. There is a Passport Office and workers are getting paid to do the job. A huge number of passport applications are coming in so we should get more staff in to deal with them more quickly. A member of my staff said to me yesterday that there should be separate verification to check that all the verifications are up to date. We are just hitting brick walls with people waiting six months. I can give two examples that I am dealing with at present. The main issue appears to be first-time passports for children and adults. The other area where there is a problem with delays is in the General Register Office where, when the child is born, one has to wait for the birth certificate to come through. The holiday is booked and there are panic stations getting the stuff in. Then there are calls from the Passport Office for more information or about the need for something else. The idea of even temporarily redeploying staff for three months into the verification area is something that should be examined very quickly.

With regard to the hotline, there are days one cannot get through while on other days one can. A man rang me about it on Monday morning. I do not have time to say much more, but I have been dealing with people who applied in January and had an issue date in April but then they were informed that they had to provide more information. It is just ridiculous carry-on; it is just not good enough.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: It is unfortunate when somebody does not turn up as it throws

everybody's timing haywire.

I will take this opportunity to commend my staff in Donegal who have been dealing with a continuous stream of passport issues over the last few months and who have been struggling with an unresponsive passport service. It is nearly impossible to get through to the passport service through the normal channels and the Oireachtas line is rarely answered in our experience. Often days go by without being able to get through.

There is also a serious issue with inconsistency in the passport service. The information given on the criteria for escalating a passport varies considerably depending on who takes the call. Something has to be done. My staff are still calling on behalf of constituents waiting for passports since February. That is unacceptable. The system appears to be completely unequipped to deal with the demand. One wonders why this is the case. We knew this was going to happen so why did we not prepare for it? A passport lasts for ten years and there is a limited number of Irish people in Ireland so it is probably the one service for which it is possible to plan accurately. If there are 50 million people in the world entitled to a passport, that is 5 million per year and so many per day, so one knows exactly what one has to do. It should be possible to plan properly for this service and to respond in a timely manner so people can actually get the service.

I am also aware that, as Deputies, we only deal with the problem cases. If people do not have a problem, they do not come near us. However, the number of problem cases increases according to the volume of applications that are received, therefore one gets this response. These are issues that are very important to people at the time they are applying. It is something they only apply for once every ten years and it is something the system should be able to deal with. There is no doubt about that.

It is clear that the Government has not taken this issue seriously. There is talk about people being taken on to respond to it. The video released yesterday by Deputy Higgins could have been mistaken for a parody. Instead of fixing the problem with the postal service, the Government has instead changed the name of the service to reflect its refusal to fix it. Not only that, it then proceeded to celebrate this as if it is a fantastic achievement. It is no wonder @MallowNews is no longer running on Twitter; it is clear this Government is doing a good enough job of making a farce of itself. Are we going to change the names of all services and Departments to truly reflect their work? Perhaps we will have a "Department of housing crisis" next, rather than the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

It is time the Government took this seriously. Issues with the passport service have to be addressed. This has been going on for too long now. At one time, it was people who were not applying for their passports in time to get them processed. Now, the passport applications have been with the Passport Office for an awful long time, but nothing is happening with them. Something needs to happen, and it needs to happen quickly.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. The sentiments they have expressed are sentiments I know only too well. I apologise for the absence of the Minister, Deputy Coveney, but I am glad that the director of the passport service has been in the Chamber throughout the debate.

Many suggestions have been made by Deputies during this debate. There were some good suggestions and many of them have already been applied. I remind people that we want them

to apply online at this time, not to go to the post office. The passport service has been engaging this week with the Department of Justice. Deputy Ó Cuív's suggestion is excellent, unfortunately. We do not say it with any joy or celebration but people will have to reconsider going to part-time Garda stations. Deputy Nash made the point that the station in Laytown in my constituency is a part-time Garda station. However, if people want to be absolutely sure, they will have to go to the full-time Garda stations. It is not a cause for celebration, and I am not saying it is, but at this particular time that will have to be done. There are other methods that have been suggested and that should be examined in terms of electronic records and the like. They all are things that should be happening.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh made a very useful point about a reminder service. That will be a part of the reform of the passport service and it will happen.

Deputy Conway-Walsh made quite a good point, which I will answer now. She welcomed the new staff, I think, but asked if the existing staff's time would be taken up training them. That is a valid point and it has been taken into consideration in respect of the number of staff it was felt was needed.

Deputy Pringle made the probably valid point that we should be able to plan for this, but it is also the case that there has been a massive increase in the number of applications this year compared with the number pre Covid. We are processing record numbers of passports. In the run-up to Covid, which was unpredictable, we had the Brexit-related increase. That has levelled off a bit, but I think the number going through at present is unprecedented.

As for the idea that has been out there that the public are being blamed for the 40% of applications at issue, I will be very clear. I am not blaming the public. We should not do so. I will clarify the 40% figure. It is not that 40% of applications have mistakes on them. Let us be clear about that. If that message went out, it should not have. Approximately half of the 40% relates to people who have applied and then just have not submitted the documents. There will be many people in that position. They may not be in a rush. They are included in that 40%. Those are not mistakes. A huge proportion of the 40% does not involve mistakes. There certainly are mistakes - there is no question about that - but they are not at that level. We may need to look at this issue when reviewing the forms just to see exactly how many mistakes there are.

The Tánaiste has suggested that people go online only for renewals but, effectively, we are already asking people to do that. Deputy Paul Murphy said that some people should be given the option of using paper. That option is there at present. The truth is that, no matter what our best intentions are, an online system, in principle, should be a lot faster than paper or the post because it is done instantaneously and the applicant does not need to wait for the post office to post the application. Again, we do not want to blow too many trumpets, but it should be noted that more than 40% of online adult renewals are done within two days. There are problems, and I acknowledge them and am not being defensive about them in any way, and I do not want to be here either, with all of us making cases for our constituents, but the online process has brought huge success. While people question the extent of the need for witnesses and the series of provisions in that regard, they are probably necessary because of the seriousness of the document. However, I cannot answer Deputy McAuliffe as to why a member of the Garda Síochána is required here while there are other categories allowed for applications done outside the Twenty-six Counties. It is a fact, however, that the more stringent the witnessing on the first application, the more efficient subsequent renewals can be done, so there is a method in the madness. We just want to get it done as efficiently as possible. Witnessing does allow all subsequent applica-

tions to be done much more quickly.

Deputy John Brady: Not if your passport is five years out.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I accept that, but that will not be the majority of cases. That will be a small number of cases.

A significant number of issues have been put forward in the debate. I have no doubt but that the passport service will take into account all those issues and all the really good suggestions that have been made.

I agree with Deputy Paul Murphy that we should not have to do this on behalf of our constituents. Sometimes I see people complain about Deputies raising issues, but it is absolutely essential that when issues or problems arise, people are able to communicate with their local Deputies, who can then not just help resolve the individual case but try to get changes to the whole system, which I think is what everybody has been trying to do here. I fully agree that we should not be some sort of extension of the Passport Office. That is not what we want. That situation did pertain in certain counties for many generations. Deputy Pringle's county was notorious for it. People there would almost go to their local Deputy's office before going to a passport office. We do not want to get to that stage. I have seen some representations come in where it is clear that people have applied for passports and then maybe rung Deputies almost immediately. There is no need to do that. The more Deputies in the constituency one rings, the more people have to answer the phones in the Passport Office. If people want to ring their Deputies, that is their entitlement, and they should do it and I encourage it, but the more people they ring and the more phone calls that are made, perhaps the less it helps the system in the background. We are trying to get a reasonable balance, all the while trying to improve the system.

As for staffing, recruitment has been going on for the past year. I think I am correct in saying that it is not always easy to get people in the current environment. The training has been required and it is happening. We cannot just land people straight off recruitment into the Passport Office. I know individuals who did temporary clerical officer work for years in Balbriggan. They are people who live locally to me. Many of them have just got full-time jobs because of the temporary jobs. I am really grateful to people who do that work.

As to what will happen with the Oireachtas line, it is currently limited to 20 calls a week. That is only a question of staffing. What is being worked on at present is that there will be an online hub where Deputies should be able to get information on behalf of constituents much more efficiently, but it will be done online. That will come in in the next few months. It will mean that Deputies will be able to do more than 20 queries but they will not necessarily be phone calls. That will make it easier for staff and make the system more efficient. The Minister is not directly responsible, and I am not trying to run away from this as I am part of this Government, but I know that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, will be listening carefully to what has been said here.

There were a lot of thanks for the staff of the Passport Office and how friendly and professional they are. I know that the director beside me will pass that on. We have heard this in a non-defensive way and in a way that seeks to give the best possible public services. I completely agree with Deputy Ó Cuív that we want to be number one, not second best, in everything. There are comparable jurisdictions. Other countries are having a problem. We are not part of

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the Shengen area, so if we want to go on our holidays, we by and large have to have a passport if we are leaving the island.

Deputy Canney raised an important point that I will undertake to raise with Ryanair, although I believe that conversation has been had before. We have all told people that if they changed to Aer Lingus, they would be able to go to Britain at least because Aer Lingus will not require a passport for that because of the common travel area rules. A passport should not be required in the common travel area. That is why it is there.

I thank Members. I have no doubt but that the foreign affairs committee or whoever else will pursue this. I certainly will within the Department, and I will give a full report to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, of what was said today in order that he can bring this forward for further action at Government level.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.28 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.31 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.28 p.m. and resumed at 6.31 p.m.

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 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the need to secure the site and buildings of the former National School, Clonalvy, County Meath; (2) Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - to discuss when the national medicines agency will be established; (3) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss special education teaching, SET, allocated hours being reduced; (4) Deputy Gary Gannon - to discuss alternative sittings for leaving certificate 2022 for students with epilepsy and other health needs; (5) Deputy James Lawless - to discuss the risk of poisoning to the drinking water supply in Kiltel, County Kildare; and (6) Deputy Paul Murphy - to discuss the plans for "special education centres" for vulnerable children.

The matters raised by Deputies Darren O'Rourke, Paul Murphy, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Lawless have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Enrolments

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the Minister of State. I know that the Minister for Education is not available, but the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, is my constituency colleague and the Minister's party colleague. I know he is familiar with this issue, but I will lay out some of the detail here. We need to discuss the need to secure the future of the site and buildings of Clonalvy national school. This was a national school in rural County Meath that

was closed in 2019. It is important to say it was not closed due to a natural lack of demand or need or lack of children of school-going age in the area. There were artificial reasons. The demand is there for a primary school. It was there and it still is there.

My understanding is that the diocese divested of the school in February 2022. The Minister of State might confirm that. I have a concern about the nature of the pre-closure consultation by the diocese or by the Department. My sense in all of this is there was never support to maintain the *status quo* or to return to the *status quo* before 2019. However, there was always, in my opinion, the opportunity if the right proposition was put forward for the continuation of a primary school. There is a lack of diversity in the area generally in terms of patronage. It is now the case that the school is on the open market. It is for sale. A proposal was made after some time from the community after significant work with ourselves as public representatives and particularly within the community. They have confirmed that the Louth and Meath education and training board, LMETB, is interested in acquiring the site for a community national school and an education campus. I think there is huge potential there.

I attended a public meeting - the Minister of State sent his apologies - that was very well attended. The demand is there. People are interested. They will avail of it. The LMETB as a patron is confident that it would make a success of this. It has done similarly elsewhere. The question is how to join those pieces together with the Department and the Minister. I believe the Minister and the Department need to lead on this. Is it a case of a sale or a transfer? What will the nature of the transaction be? Ultimately, it is important that action happens quickly. Time is of the essence here. The site and buildings are for sale. The price is probably going up day by day. It is important that we have action on this.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I want to thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this issue. As he rightly said, I am very familiar with it. I did give apologies to a public meeting that I could not attend last year. I fully support the Deputy's proposal. I was at a public meeting three years ago when I put forward the exact same proposal. I tried to get action on it then. Unfortunately, people were not listening at that time, when the school was open. At that time, it could have been saved. It is a disgrace that it was allowed to close. I completely agree with Deputy O'Rourke.

St. Finian's national school at Clonalvy is a former national school which closed on the basis that no pupils were enrolled for the 2019-20 school year. The Bishop of Meath took that decision at that time. If I may be honest, this is a pattern that I fear in other areas where there are two or three schools in a parish, one becomes the dominant or popular school and pupils start to peel away from the other school. That puts pressure on the school that pupils have peeled away from. That is exactly what happened in Clonalvy. People started moving to the other school in the parish in Ardcaith, which extended its buildings. There are also other schools close by in Naul. I see that happening in other areas too and I am very concerned about it. The problem is that I do not see the church's patrons dividing the catchments within parishes to protect all the schools. The Department of Education tends not to deal with those issues at that grassroots level. It is really left to boards and management. However, we all need to keep an eye on this. As the Deputy rightly said, St. Finian's National School is not in the ownership of the Department. On that basis, the Department accepted the termination of a small charging lease, which dated from 1953 in respect of the former school property. I do not have further details on that.

The Government and the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas to try to plan for school demands. To be fair, that has been working much better in recent years.

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Project Ireland 2040 also has population and housing targets. They inform the Department's projections of school place requirements. At national level, primary enrolments peaked in 2018 and are forecast to decline overall by 20% in the next ten years, despite overall population growth. However, there will of course be local variations. We all know that. Indeed, the arrival of Ukrainian children has added to the pressure on school places. It has added to primary school places and has allowed for more teachers to be employed in certain areas.

Clonalvy, as it happens, is in the Ashbourne school planning area. The Department's most recent demographic projections indicate a decline in primary enrolments in that planning area over the next ten to 15 years. This is on the basis that the national and local plans are looking towards Drogheda, Dunboyne and Navan as areas of population growth. The village, as we know, is close to the Balbriggan school planning area and to Stamullen. Again, the forecasts for that are similar.

In the school planning area of Ashbourne, for example, which I know is not directly adjacent to Clonalvy but it is part of the planning area, new schools are being opened to cater for demand. The Department will continue to keep the primary school place requirements in the area under review. This will be informed by current and planned residential development, the housing and population targets and the enrolment of children from Ukraine. The Department engages with a range of stakeholders in this respect. I personally undertake to work with the Deputy on this, because I think the school should not have closed. There was an opportunity three or four years to keep it open. I thought it was a perfect candidate for divestment from the Church. At the time, I did not seem to be getting interest in that.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I know the Department prepared some notes for the Minister of State on this topical issue. That is the bit I am hanging on for.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The official script.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Exactly, yes. The mood music is not great. It says that it will keep the demand under review and it mentions the potential implications of incoming Ukrainian refugees. The Minister of State knows that time is of the essence in this. If we are going to do something, it cannot be a case that we keep it under review. It will either happen or it will not. If it is going to happen it needs to happen soon. We need to see something from the Minister and the Department. I wrote to the Minister seeking an engagement with local Deputies. I will put on record my commendation of the local community, especially Mr. Nick Reilly and Ms Patricia Rogers from the Ardcath Clonalvy Heritage Society and the Clonalvy Revival Programme. It is clear that this can be a success story. It is only a matter of whether the will is there. There are details to be worked out and technicalities. If people want to hide behind those technicalities they can, but I firmly believe if there is a will to make this happen, it can be a success story. All the ingredients are there in the community and the education system locally. The Minister of State knows the potential of it. I am available at any time, day or night, to play whatever helpful role I can in this regard but time is of the essence. I ask him to take that back to the Minister and update us as best he can on what the next steps are as the Minister of State understands them. I cannot say it any clearer than that. Time is of the essence. We need the Minister and the Department to lead on this.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Deputy for mentioning the Ardcath group. I had good engagements with Mr. Nick Reilly, who I have known for a long time. I will engage with the Minister next week and will inform the Deputy in advance of that. We need to work on this

together. It is something that can happen. There are things going against it because the school is closed. It is for sale so, presumably, money is being sought. It is a lightly populated area but has major potential for multi-denominational education. It is in the Ashbourne planning area but it is not very close to multi-denominational school. Special education is another potentiality because, quite frankly, we are looking for premises for special education schools. I undertake to work with the Deputy and the entire committee. I again thank him for raising the matter. We will see what potentialities come from the Department of Education next week. I have discussed this with the Minister for Education. I have no doubt we will all do the same next week.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will raise the issue of the Government plan for special education centres as an emergency response to the shortage of appropriate school places reported in *The Irish Times* last night. It caused significant alarm to the organisations representing parents and children with special needs, and the parents who have been campaigning very hard to get their children the places in school they need, which may be supports in mainstream classes or special classes in mainstream schools. The idea people will just be put into these special centres caused a lot of alarm. There is also the worry that they will be forgotten about and this will be institutionalised. There is a meeting with the Minister today that includes groups such as AsIAM. I am interested in hearing about that.

I will go through the concerns the groups and I have. The first is there was no consultation before this was announced. It seems very strange. It has been only a matter of weeks since we had an indication from the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan, that we would be going the route of section 37A of the relevant Act by directing the schools to open classes. That was generally welcomed by parents because that is what they feel needs to happen, but all of a sudden these special education centres were announced, which seems to be a 180-degree policy turn with no consultation.

The second major point is the real concern that what is presented as an interim measure becomes permanent. We know of circumstances like that too often in this State. Many things still with us today - direct provision is perhaps one of the worst examples - were interim measures. There is also concern about the numbers included in the plan. It states there will be five schools with 24 pupils each, which amounts to space for 120 pupils, but there are 80 children in Dublin waiting for a special class at this stage and those numbers relate to Dublin. That also gives rise to alarm about why we have an extra 40 spaces. Is it because they will be filled over a number of years? Is this how long it is planned to be for?

Another important point is the danger this will be a move away from integrated education for students. Where will these buildings be? Clearly, if they are meant to be in use by September, they will not be new buildings and they exist somewhere. If they are not existing schools, we will not have potential for integration time for students without additional needs. That is a very important and recognised thing that is necessary for students. The Tánaiste stated earlier that some students need special schools. I acknowledge that and have no problem with it, but *The Irish Times* story certainly does not refer to those students and their needs; it refers to those children who are waiting for a special class in Dublin, that is, a special class in mainstream schools. That is what has been diagnosed for those children as most appropriate for them and that is what would represent a vindication of their rights.

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The fundamental point I will make is this is a way of not doing what is necessary to vindicate these children's rights, including under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and the route of going down section 37A by directing schools to open places. It is then about resourcing the schools appropriately, but that is what is necessary. This is a way of getting away from the pressure by saying at least people have a place - it may not be the best place but at least they have a place - and we avoid this question of needing to get many more special classes opened in mainstream schools in primary and post-primary education.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I very much thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I am glad the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Rabbitte, is present to listen to his comments. There was not much we disagreed with on the substance of his points, quite frankly. In fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, there was not much she would disagree with either. The bottom line is no decision has been made about this. I apologise on behalf of the Minister of State that she is not present. She is attending the Middletown Centre for Autism today, which is another place that does essential work on a North-South basis. It is very important to remember that.

Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a constitutional right and a priority for this Government. This year, the Department of Education will invest €2 billion, or more than 25% of its budget, in the area of special educational needs support. The truth is the number of special education teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, special classes and school places are all at unprecedented levels. In budget 2022, we provided for the creation of 287 additional special classes. There are many more special classes than there were. I accept there are not enough but there are a lot more and significant progress has been made. I thank those schools that have co-operated with the Department in looking for these classes, which will provide 1,700 new places this year. That brings the total number of special classes to 2,435. In 2011, there were 548 special classes in mainstream schools and there are 2,148 in this particular school year.

In line with the demographics and as part of forward planning, it is envisaged that special classes will be required at most, if not all, post-primary schools in Dublin. A range of measures to meet additional special education needs capacity demands have already been put in place, including the utilisation of spare capacity in existing schools and the delivery of additional capacity within the scope of existing school building projects. Additionally, it is now general practice to include a special educational needs base in the accommodation brief for new school buildings unless there are exceptional local circumstances. However, the extent of provision made at these schools is informed by the level of demand in the area as well as the size of the school.

The NCSE is currently engaged in a process of establishing new classes for next year and beyond.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister of State's time is up.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I had better continue this because it is the important part.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The Minister of State will have a chance to speak again.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Yes, but this is important. One of the options being discussed-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): It is important that we keep to the deadline as well.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I accept that, but this is the nub of the issue. One of the options being discussed by the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, is to open-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As I said, it is a proposal, not a decision.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes. The line is that the proposal is a temporary option for those who are waiting. It is a draft, etc. I get the message. Nonetheless, there is a proposal. AsIAM put a statement up on Facebook after the meeting saying that, like here, the Department had sought to assure it that no decision had been made and that the Department had listened to the concerns, but AsIAM makes the point that the current proposal - which means there is clearly still a proposal - is not something that its organisation could ever support. The Department needs to go back to the drawing board and examine how this proposal was devised.

I welcome section 37A and it needs to be used, although that is not easy to do. It has only been used twice, but the need is great. I will use the example of Dublin 24, which is part of where I represent. The situation with post-primary schools there is phenomenal. A couple of weeks ago, the Taoiseach described it to me in the Dáil as “crazy”. There are 17 primary schools with a special class but only one - it will increase to two - such schools at post-primary level. Generally, the ratio across the country is 2.2:1 or 2.3:1, so this area is out of whack. I was in touch with a campaigner who told me that she had a list of six families without a school place for next September. They all applied for schools across Dublin and received multiple refusal letters. That there are this many secondary schools without ASD classes is not on.

The proposal is one of putting people in special education centres as opposed to saying that they have to be educated in schools and providing the resources to ensure that happens. It cannot be a case of only getting an ASD class when a new school is built. It is great that there will be a class in every new school, but we are not building schools quickly enough to deal with the situation.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As the Deputy noted, the draft proposal is an option, not a decision. That is what the Minister of State emphasised to me today. This is very much at an early stage and subject to further engagement. I am glad that some engagement has already happened, with strong views being expressed at the meeting and in public statements. Clearly, further significant work is required to progress this matter.

The key goal is for the constitutional right to education for children with special educational needs to be fulfilled. That must be our guiding objective in all of this, alongside our international obligations under the various UN charters, as the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has reminded me. She is committed to that. A school is not just somewhere to go, but a constitutional right and an international obligation of the State. The Government takes that seriously, as does the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan. We will see where this goes. Serious concerns have been expressed, so I want to be clear that no decision has been made.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): The next Topical Issue matter is in the name of Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan.

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Deputy Thomas Byrne: May I propose that the fourth Topical Issue matter be heard next? I am taking that as well. I believe I have agreement from the Deputies.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the House.

Water Quality

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue debate, which relates to the quality and contents of the water supply in Kilteel, County Kildare. In the constituency of Kildare North, Kilteel borders counties Wicklow and Dublin. It is in an important corner of the constituency where there are decent people and strong communities.

Sixty houses connect to the group water scheme that services the area. The scheme has been in place for a considerable time. In January, what was effectively a “Do not use” notice was issued by Kildare County Council due to suspected arsenic poisoning in the water. It seems incredible that something as nutritious and necessary for life as the water that comes into our homes is would have poison in it, but that is what appeared to be the situation.

Some temporary measures were taken, including tankers being sent to the area and water being made available on a temporary basis, but we are now into May and rapidly approaching June, which is almost six months into the year, and those 60 households and all belonging to them are still grappling with this poisoned water in their homes. I spoke to Ms Kathleen Lambe this week. She is a decent lady who is involved in the local arts and creative scene. More in hope than expectation that the issue had died down, she had consumed the water, perhaps mistakenly. She ended up in Naas hospital with suspected arsenic poisoning. Others have complained of being sick, with symptoms ranging from nausea to more serious complaints. Some have been hospitalised. We often discuss rural areas like Kilteel getting access to broadband and other services, but one of the most fundamental services of all is water for drinking, cooking and people’s day-to-day needs.

Engagement is ongoing with Kildare County Council and Irish Water. I have also been engaging with those bodies. However, I believe a Government direction will be required. Perhaps the Environmental Protection Agency could be directed to get involved and carry out an investigation. It is possible that Irish Water could connect the group water scheme to a wider scheme, allowing for continuity of supply and for the old supply to be rerouted from the poisoned well. This would require funding, as the residents cannot be expected to fund all of this under their own steam, particularly after being badly let down by State agencies. I ask that the Government consider a subvention to Irish Water, Kildare County Council or both to remedy this situation.

This situation has been ongoing for nearly six months and people are facing into the summer with its droughts and weather changes and when water is a scarce commodity. Decent, clean and non-poisoned drinking water seems like a fundamental requirement. The Minister of State’s constituency of Meath East has many similar rural areas that are reliant on such group water schemes, so he knows how important they are. I look forward to his response and what guidance and solutions he can offer as regards this problem.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an ábhar seo a ardú agus an deis a thabhairt dom, ar son an Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht, déileáil leis. I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and giving me an opportunity to address it on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, who cannot be present but who sends his apologies.

Group water schemes are independent community-owned enterprises and an important means of providing piped water to rural areas where no such supply exists. In the interest of public health, Kildare County Council, as the supervisory authority under the drinking water regulations for private water supplies, issued a “Do not consume” notice to the Kilteel group water scheme earlier this year. The notice prohibits the use of the water supply for either drinking purposes or the preparation of food.

As this is a private supply, primary responsibility for its resolution rests with the management of the supply. The Department’s multi-annual rural water programme provides capital funding under a number of measures, including for group water schemes, to enable the resolution of infrastructural deficiencies, in particular those that are causing or risk causing water quality issues. The council has informed my Department that it continues to work with the management of the supply to assist it in addressing its water quality issue.

Given the public health concerns, the Department has asked the council to examine and report back on the most appropriate approaches for resolving the issues with the supply by examining solutions in the short, medium and longer terms. In the short term, the council is examining the options for the supply and providing a temporary water supply for the area by using a tanker. As a medium-term solution, the Department has asked the council to examine the feasibility of providing a supply using an alternative groundwater source. The council, after obtaining expert advice, will provide the Department with an initial assessment on the feasibility of doing this in the coming weeks.

Of course, the more sustainable long-term solution for the supply appears to be its interconnection to the public network and taking in charge.

7 o’clock

To progress this, the council submitted a connection application to Irish Water on 4 May last. Given the public health concerns with the supply and following the Deputy’s representations, the Department separately requested Irish Water to prioritise the request. The Department will continue to engage with the council on the matter of this supply and it will be providing my Department with regular updates on progress.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Minister for the reply and welcome the progress. I have been in touch with the Minister’s office on this throughout and I welcome that those representations are beginning to bear fruit. I note the commitment that the Department will receive an initial assessment on the feasibility of an alternative groundwater source arising from tonight’s debate and the representations in the next couple of weeks, as well as the fact the Department has instructed Irish Water to prioritise that request for the connection to the mains. I want to be positive and I want to welcome the progress that is being made. There is an urgency about it, naturally, given the type of issue it is. There was a situation where people had to buy bottled water for themselves in the shops and a tanker was occasionally being sent up, although perhaps not as frequently in recent days.

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As an observation, at the outset of his reply, the Minister of State said it was a private supply and, effectively, was a private issue. I know he went on to explain that the State will intervene, which I acknowledge. However, it is only a private supply because of the lack of an alternative. If people could connect to the mains, they would have done so years ago, in particular if that had been an option when they were building their houses. Some have access to private water wells but many do not. Therefore, while it is a private group water scheme, it is only so because of necessity. I commend the community on organising itself in this manner and making these provisions for itself. It has stood them well for many years but, unfortunately, no longer.

In conclusion, I will keep in touch with the Minister and I look forward to those actions being taken. The long-term solution really is the connection to the mains supply, albeit it is a somewhat rural and isolated area. It has to be done and we have to find a way to do it. I recognise that the Department will now prioritise that through working with Irish Water. I also look forward to a progress update on the ground water supply. All of these things are necessary and important. As I said, we cannot allow 60 households in a rural community to just grin and bear it for any longer than is necessary. I thank the Minister of State and his office, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, with whom I have been working, for their inputs. I look forward to a swift resolution.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas arís leis an Teachta as an obair atá á dhéanamh aige i gCill Chéile i gContae Chill Dara maidir leis an uisce lofa atá ansin agus chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh agus feabhas a chur ar an uisce sin.

I thank the Deputy again for his comments. His interest and representations are very much appreciated in the Department. The Department will be announcing funding for its multi-annual rural water programme and we will see details of that shortly. I urge the Deputy to, as he said he would, keep in touch with the Department because there are actions listed that will start to happen. I know his interventions are highly appreciated.

Medicinal Products

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who has been here on more than a few occasions to answer questions in regard to rare diseases and orphan drugs, and now this issue pertaining to the establishment of the medicines agency. As the Minister of State is aware, this is a commitment in the programme for Government. We are over two years into government and while I can probably guess the answer that has been given to the Minister of State, very little work has been done in this area. The purpose of the question is to see exactly what has happened up to now in terms of delivering this agency and the Minister of State might give a timeframe for the establishment of such an agency. I know the Minister of State is well aware of the issues in this sector, particularly with regard to the question of access to drugs for rare diseases.

I would like to acknowledge the work the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has done in this area. He has provided the largest budget over the last two years in terms of approval of new medicines, which is to be welcomed. However, I must preface that commendation by saying that in this sphere the Government has made very little progress, and we need to acknowledge that and be truthful about it.

It is welcome that the programme for Government allows for the establishment of the na-

tional medicines agency but it is regrettable that the focus seems to be solely on lower pricing and reimbursements. Obviously, this is important. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics already has this job and continues to conduct assessments of new medicines and getting the State bang for its buck. However, a national medicines agency needs to be more ambitious, to my mind. It needs to take on the entire reimbursement system and make sure patients get quicker access to the drugs they require. It needs to ensure greater budget predictability. I mentioned that the Minister has supplied the largest budget in this space over the last two years but at various times in the past decade, no money was given over to the budget in this space. Greater budget predictability is a must.

We also need to ensure greater patient involvement. I have met a number of patients groups which complain about the lack of transparency in decision-making for approval of these medicines. They do not feel involved in the process and there is not very much interaction between them and the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics. We need to develop a specific pathway for orphan drugs because no such pathway exists at present.

The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, attended a cross-party grouping on rare disease day on 28 February last, so she is quite aware of the issues. Going forward, this agency needs to focus in particular on consulting with various stakeholders, patients, patient groups, clinicians, the industry and health economists. Ultimately, this is part of the wider picture in terms of rare diseases and orphan drugs. As I have said in the House in the past, one of the hardest conversations I ever had was to sit down with somebody face-to-face. We can make all the excuses in the world but I want to give some statistics to the Minister of State. In Ireland, the latest data from the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries ranks Ireland 24th out of 39 countries in terms of timely access to medicines for all diseases. The same report ranks Ireland 29th out of 39 for access to orphan drugs and 27th for oncology medicines. The most galling thing about all of this, as we noted previously, is that all the large pharmaceutical companies that are providing these drugs worldwide are here on our doorstep. We are shipping drugs to every corner of the Continent and of the planet, yet we are one of the laggards when it comes to approving and getting reimbursement for those drugs. I am interested to see if the Minister of State can give me an update on the establishment of the agency.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is right when he says the 2020 programme for Government includes a commitment to establish a national medicines agency which will seek to reduce the cost of medicines for the State and for patients. As the Deputy is aware, the existing pricing and reimbursement process for medicines involves the work of a number of individual bodies and agencies. The collective contributions of these agencies are crucial to the HSE executive management team's decision-making with respect to medicine reimbursement.

First, the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, is responsible for the regulation of health products, including medicines, in Ireland and maintains a register of authorised products. Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act, reference pricing involves the setting of a reimbursement price for a group of interchangeable medicines. This has enabled greater cost-effective dispensing and continues to contribute to cost avoidance. The Health Products Regulatory Authority's role under the 2013 Act includes the maintenance of a list of interchangeable medicines. This supports pharmacists to substitute medicines prescribed, provided they have been designated as interchangeable by the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

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The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics advises the HSE on the cost-effectiveness of new medicines. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics carries out health technology assessments in order to make recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE's corporate pharmaceutical unit is an important interface between the HSE and the pharmaceutical industry on application for reimbursement and the pricing of such medicines.

The HSE drugs group is the national committee that makes recommendations to the HSE's executive management team on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. Such recommendations are based on the outputs of the entire assessment process. As part of that assessment process, the national cancer control programme technology review committee, which was established in 2011, reviews funding proposals for new cancer drugs. It then makes recommendations on the reimbursement of new drugs to the HSE drugs group based on clinical need and cost-effectiveness. In 2018, the rare diseases technology review committee was established by the HSE leadership, with similar responsibility for reviewing proposals for funding of new drugs for rare diseases. That committee also contributes to the development and implementation of clinical guidelines for relevant drugs.

The establishment of a national medicines agency would require a significant body of work to be undertaken to integrate all these various work streams under a single function. It would also require extensive consultation and primary legislation. That work has yet to commence because the priority and focus of the Department up to now has been on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. I am acutely aware of the Deputy's involvement in, and knowledge of, rare drugs. Sometimes when I read replies such as this, I feel I know very little about the subject at hand and perhaps less than the Deputy who is asking the question.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The real answer to my question was near the end of the Minister of State's response, when she said that "a significant body of work" needs to be undertaken and it will "require extensive consultation and primary legislation". Halfway through the life of the Government, if there is substantive work to be done, we really need to start doing it. That is the reality. If legislation and extensive consultation are needed, we are looking at needing a couple of years to do it when we are already halfway through the Government cycle. The message must go back to the Department of Health that we need to get real and that action on this issue needs to be instigated immediately.

I have looked at other responses that have been given to questions on this subject. I knew the Covid crisis would rear its head as an excuse at some stage. Surprise, surprise, there it is at the very end of the Minister of State's reply. However, the pandemic did not have an impact on some of the great announcements the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, has made over recent weeks, including, for example, in respect of women's health services. Nor did it have any impact on this week's announcement of the expansion of the human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine programme in schools. When it comes to the issue of orphan drugs, however, the Covid crisis is given as a reason for lack of action. It is very frustrating to see the pandemic being used as an excuse in this regard.

As I said, we need to get real. We are talking about people's lives and their quality of life. The statistics I roll out every now and again about Ireland being a laggard in the European context should be a source of embarrassment to us nationally. Those statistics are referred to so often now that they roll off the tongue and seem to matter very little. It is embarrassing that Ireland, which is one of the largest pharmaceutical-producing nations in the world, ranks 24th

out of 39 countries in Europe in terms of our provision of these drugs.

Provision regarding the health technology assessment, HTA, process is the substance of the Bill I am trying to progress. It is currently on Committee Stage. We are using an antiquated, outdated system and pretending it is achieving all these savings, as the Minister of State referred to in her response. The reality is Ireland spends a higher percentage in comparison with countries like Germany, Scotland, Sweden and many others on the drugs that are claimed through our reimbursement system. In those other countries, the medicines are supplied upfront, but we make patients wait a torturous 800 to 1,000 days. I would argue with the statistics claiming we are saving €700 million or €800 million because we are such great negotiators. It is a load of codswallop in my view.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I am happy to share some of my time to have allowed the Deputy to get in his last few words. He is correct in what he said. We must move away from the practice of saying why we are not doing a particular aspect of work. There is no denying that action on this issue is included in the programme for Government. As Minister of State, it is something I would like to see commencing, for all the reasons the Deputy outlined. First and foremost, orphan drugs make a significant difference to the lives of individuals. Second, what we all should be about is ensuring longevity for people. The fact we have access to these drugs in this country makes the current situation unbelievable.

Having said that, the Deputy will be interested to know that as of the start of May, the €30 million provision that was allocated in budget 2020 has enabled the HSE to approve 24 new medicines. The executive's robust assessment process and commercial engagement ensured as many new medicines as possible were made available to Irish patients in that period. This shows it was possible to access the budget quickly. I would love if my budget for disability services could be spent in June or July each year. The speed of expenditure in this case shows the great need in respect of orphan drugs and in terms of bringing more medicines on stream, which has a great benefit for the wider population. I will take the Deputy's remarks back to the Minister, who sends his apologies for not being able to be here this evening.

May I ask the Ceann Comhairle's indulgence to speak for a further 30 seconds?

An Ceann Comhairle: Of course. I am always happy to facilitate the Minister of State.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: As the Ceann Comhairle knows, I spend a lot of time in here on a Thursday evening.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State does indeed, and a lot of time on other days as well.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his indulgence. I welcome Bill O'Brien and Ming Chang O'Brien, who are accompanying my sister, to the Visitors Gallery. They are visiting from the US and have called in this evening to have a chat.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is good to have the Minister of State's guests with us.

Following on from the Minister of State's response to his question and with a view to being helpful to Deputy O'Sullivan, it appears to me that targeted questions focusing on the final part of the Minister of State's response and addressing the leadership, progression and timescales around the establishment of a national medicines agency could be very helpful to him. Any

such questions should be carefully targeted.

Property Services (Land Price Register) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I thank the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for attending this debate. I may not use the full 15 minutes afforded to me. I have heard people say that before and not necessarily stick to it, but I will do my best. I thank the people who contributed to the huge amount of work that went into drawing up this Bill. Paul Cassidy did the initial draft and Pádraig Rice did quite a lot of work on it. In addition, we had very comprehensive support from the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, which really is an excellent resource. Staff there put a huge amount of work into the Bill and I thank them for that. I am bringing this Bill forward in a constructive manner and, I hope, a helpful one. I hope the Government is able to respond positively to it in order that it may proceed to Committee Stage. I am hopeful the huge amount of work put in by the OPLA in drafting the Bill will help to see it progress. I look forward to working through any concerns the Minister might have on Committee Stage.

The Bill will play a small but significant part in helping to address the housing crisis we are facing, which is why I have brought it forward. It is substantial legislation that would help to create much-needed transparency around land transactions. While it is quite a technical Bill to amend the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011, the issues around its provisions relating to land transactions are not technical. Indeed, they strike to the core of the devastating effect the housing emergency has had on families across Ireland. Rents have doubled over the past decade. House prices have become ever more unaffordable and having risen by 15% are about to pass their Celtic tiger peak. Rents and house prices in Ireland, in Dublin especially, are among the highest in the European Union. Homelessness has skyrocketed - it increased by 22% in the last year alone. Rates of home ownership have fallen year after year. This is having a devastating effect on families.

I mention that because this Bill needs to be seen in the context of how it might address some of these issues in a small way. As we all know this from our constituency work and people we are trying to assist, it means that children are living in emergency accommodation, often hostels that are completely inappropriate sometimes with very poor standards, miles away from their schools and their friends. Their parents try to put a brave face on this and tell younger children that this is some sort of adventure to try and reduce the amount of trauma they are going through. They can only do that for a limited amount of time. Let us be very clear that our failure as a country to ensure that land is available at affordable prices for affordable housing has devastating consequences and the Bill aims to assist in that regard.

Issues with land ownership, control and costs have haunted Ireland for generations. If we are serious about tackling land hoarding, land speculation and land price inflation, we must have robust data on who is buying development land, how much they are paying for it and how long they are holding it for. There is a black hole of information in this regard in Ireland. Effective policy legislation needs to be informed by data and not by guesswork. Decisions on

housing policy would be better if we had more robust data on it.

Ensuring that land for housing is available at affordable prices so that the housing is affordable is key to solving our current crisis. The Bill seeks to create a new land price and ownership database. The Bill would create a new publicly assessable and searchable electronic register that would capture and make freely available information on land transactions, including the date of sale, the location of the site, the zoning, the price paid and the ownership details. The Bill also broadens and updates the current residential property price register to include the size of property and ownership details where these properties are not a principal primary residence.

What difference will these measures make? If passed, the Bill would create transparency on land prices and give us some insight into developers' profit margins. When it comes to construction costs, we have precise data on labour costs, building materials and professional fees. However, without knowing the price developers pay for land, we cannot independently assess the breakdown of construction costs and developers' profit margins. This is extremely relevant to current concerns about measures to address construction viability.

The Bill will also help to tackle the cost of delivering housing. The cost of development land is one of the key reasons that housing in Ireland is so expensive. However, we lack independent data on land prices and the rate of land price inflation. It is a massive black hole. If we want to tackle the cost of land and implement effective policies to tackle land speculation, we need accurate data and a land price register would provide that.

Land hoarding and land speculation are two of the key causes of the housing crisis. According to the Government, 8,000 ha of zoned land is sitting unused. That is enough land to build 250,000 homes. A land price register would provide the data for setting a land hoarding tax at an effective level to help deal with that issue.

My next point goes across housing and all major areas of public policy where we need reform and solutions. While it is important to take immediate actions and while resources are often an issue, immediate responses and firefighting often in emergency situations are not enough. We must always have an eye to structural changes and reforms. That is as important with housing policy and land prices as anywhere else. Because we have been in such a crisis with housing in recent years, many of the measures and interventions have been in that firefighting and emergency mode rather than looking at structural reforms and changes that are needed.

I say this as constructively as I can. Some of the interventions in housing have had the effect of increasing land prices, increasing house prices and increasing rents. That has never been the intention, but it has happened. We have seen evidence of that with today's detailed analysis published by the ESRI and prepared by Dr. Barra Roantree and others which shows that some of the housing interventions were caught in this vicious circle of Government, for prudent reasons, not wanting to increase thresholds because it felt that would have an inflationary effect but then we see more and more people reliant on housing assistance payment, HAP, being completely priced out of the market.

I mention that because while these measures must be taken in the current crisis, they are not the long-term structural reforms we need to sort out the housing situation. Rather than creating upward pressures on rents and house prices, we need to implement policies and reforms that create some downward pressure. That is very much what is needed. More than €1 billion in State funding now goes into rent subsidies and long-term leasing which is a colossal amount

even compared with a few years ago. However, those measures which are putting more money into the system and having upward pressure are only increasing. It is crucial for housing and land policy to have those long-term reforms. They need to be done now but will have a long-term effect. The number of newly built homes available to buy in Ireland is decreasing each year. Fewer than 6,000 newly built homes were available to purchase last year. We are seeing the effect of some of those policies and not having the structural reforms to make more land available at affordable prices for affordable housing.

To increase the supply of affordable homes, we should be looking at Vienna. Vienna has introduced affordable housing zoning to help ensure enough land is available for affordable homes with price caps and rent caps per square metre attached to the land. I have introduced the Bill in that spirit because the more data we have on land, the better equipped we will be to implement policies like that. My colleague, Councillor Catherine Stocker, in Dublin City Council has been spearheading the attempt to introduce zoning similar to the one in Vienna in the Dublin City Council area. We can take tangible action in the here and now to ensure that land is available at more affordable prices.

We owe it to people who are struggling to pay rents and who are being locked out of home ownership, and the almost 10,000 people who are now living in emergency accommodation to do everything we can on housing. The Bill is put forward as a small part of the solution and a small part of the structural reforms that are needed. There is no good reason for the Government to oppose the Bill. I hope the Government will agree to it moving on to the next Stage. I look forward to working through any concerns the Government might raise on Committee Stage.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am aware of the standard procedure, but since only three speakers are offering, would it be acceptable to the Minister for Deputy Nash to contribute now? Rather than asking her to speak twice, she would be able to respond once to the debate. That seems to be a more practical approach. Is that acceptable to Deputy O’Callaghan?

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Will I get the right to respond, if necessary?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will get the right to respond anyway.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Perfect.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am delighted to speak in support of Deputy O’Callaghan’s Bill. I believe it has considerable merit and addresses a yawning gap in the measurement of wealth in this country. All the evidence suggests that land, property and housing generally are inextricably linked to wealth inequality. We know from successive reports from the Central Bank and from various reputable think tanks that the vast bulk of wealth in this country is held in assets and most of those assets are property. That includes not just housing but also land. As the saying goes, we can only manage what we measure. We do not adequately measure land wealth, the value of land transactions and how lands can be speculated upon and flipped, making people millionaires many times over and sometimes overnight. It is something in which our society must take a closer interest. The Bill aims to create transparency around land transactions to tackle land speculation and to address the hoarding of development land.

I bring the attention of the House to a Bill the Labour Party introduced last year, the Acquisition of Development Land (Assessment of Compensation) Bill 2021. The Minister may be familiar with this because what it sought to do was essentially to tackle the issue of land hoard-

ing and speculation by finally implementing the recommendations of the famed Kenny report, capping the price of land and allowing local authorities to compulsorily purchase land at capped prices. That is something we hope the Oireachtas can further consider in greater detail in the next period of time.

This Bill will create a new publicly available electronic register to provide information on land prices, ownership, location, zoning and so on. In addition, it broadens and updates the current residential property price register to include the size of the property and ownership details where these properties are not a principal primary residence. The establishment, in the first instance, of the residential property price register a number of years ago was an important intervention. This Bill builds on that important intervention to give us more clarity about the nature of the property market and who owns what.

As I say, we welcome the Bill. I thank our colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, for the work he has put in. We support it and hope the Government will too. We hope the Government will not merely take the opportunity to sit back and wave it through because it would be useful if the Government would express practical support for it and organise for the Bill to be scrutinised on Committee Stage at some point soon. This is an important Bill and there is a necessity for the Government to respond to what is in it in the context of the housing crisis we are facing.

Transparency is something we, as a society, should always welcome. Where this relates to land prices, it is even more important given that land is such an important source of wealth, hidden wealth and generational wealth in this country. It is equally important that the information is provided independently, clearly and in such a way that the public, researchers, policymakers and legislators such as ourselves can have faith that it accurately represents the true position as it relates to land value and, thereafter, land costs in Ireland.

We are currently in the position that the Government, Opposition, researchers and, most importantly, members of the public are too often reliant on data and statistics produced by private organisations, surveys and research projects that may be initiated by private interests to see the reality of the housing crisis for renters, buyers and, in this case, developers. While the work of those organisations is often excellent and robust, and nobody is suggesting otherwise, it should not be needed. The State should be collecting this data, using it to guide policy and providing it freely and accessibly to everyone. This Bill seeks to do that with respect to land cost but we believe that similar measures must be taken in other areas of public policy, establishing easily searchable, accessible and independent data.

There is undoubtedly a problem across the country of land being purchased, planning permission sought and granted and land being sold on, often at a very significant profit, without anything actually being built on that land and only for the cycle to continue almost into perpetuity. That cannot be allowed to continue. We recognise that the Government has stated it will make some efforts to end this cycle through certain measures contained in Housing for All but further measures are needed, including those contained in this Bill. It is a modest and moderate Bill. It is not revolutionary. It is just asking the Government to do something simple and straightforward; something it should be doing in any case.

Construction and land costs are consistently cited as significant issues in delivering homes quickly and affordably. It is vital that we are able to track land prices and to be able to clearly see the profits that have been made from land, often with no homes to show for it, with a significant amount of money lining the pockets of those who purchase land and move it on.

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The Labour Party is pleased to support this important piece of legislation. I pay credit to Deputy Cian O’Callaghan and the Social Democrats for developing this legislation. It is important and it arguably should have been done a long time ago. It is one of the missing pieces of the jigsaw that we are required to implement as we continue to tackle the housing crisis that is bedevilling our society.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Minister, if she requires them, has 20 minutes.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I might not take all of my 20 minutes. I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Deputies Cian O’Callaghan and Nash. I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government’s position on this Bill.

At the outset, I want to inform the House that the Government must oppose this Bill. I will set out the reasons for that. It is not because we do not support greater transparency with respect to commercial property transactions because we do. It is not that we do not want to deal with the issue of hoarding, land prices or anything like that because of course we do. The Bill would consider significant legal and practical difficulties, and I do not believe it is the suitable vehicle through which to try to achieve its stated aims. Even more importantly, I am concerned that this Private Members’ Bill would also require extensive publication by the State of the personal details of private individuals who are involved in perfectly innocent and ordinary property transactions and have no involvement in land speculation or land hoarding. I will provide some concrete examples of these problems later.

The stated aims of the Bill are to create transparency around land transactions and that transparency is to tackle land speculation, unsustainable land price inflation and to address the hoarding of development land. The Bill seeks to achieve this aim by providing for publicly available registers of all transactions in residential or non-residential land or property. With regard to residential property, we already have a residential property price register which publishes online the sale prices of residential properties. The Bill would significantly expand the scope of that register to also cover gifts or inheritances of residential property. It would also significantly expand the content so that not just the sale price and the address of the property would be published, but also the name and address of the vendor and purchaser or in the case of a gift or inheritance, the donor or deceased person. The name and address of the person receiving or inheriting the residential property would also be published.

The Bill does provide a limited exception for a person’s home. If a person involved in any of the ways I have mentioned in a residential property transaction contacts the Property Services Regulatory Authority, which maintains the current residential property sales register, to formally declare that the property is their own principal private residence, then they can request exemption from the publication requirements. I have taken account of that exemption in the examples I am considering here. However, the remaining requirements of the Bill still seem to involve an overreach into private information in many ordinary situations that have absolutely nothing to do with speculation.

Let us take, for example, a separating couple who have a modest holiday home in Ireland. As part of the separation agreement, they decide to sell the holiday home and to split the proceeds. The Bill requires publication of the name and address of each of the spouses and the sale price of the holiday home. If a person dies, leaving a small plot of land in a rural area to be shared between their three adult children who agree to divide it equally, the name and address

of the deceased, the name and address of each of the three children and the value of the plot of land would all have to be published online. This seems unnecessarily intrusive where none of these transactions relates to property speculation and all these details will already have been provided to the Revenue Commissioners under existing legal requirements. The exemption for a principal private residence does not apply to any of these transactions.

With regard to non-residential land or other property transactions, the Bill proposes setting up a new online database of all non-residential property transactions which again would publish extensive information. My concern again relates to the degree of overreach that is provided for in the Bill. I am not sure if that was the intention of the proposed legislation. Consider, for example, a retired small business owner who decides to let out their former shop on the main street of a small rural town or an elderly farmer who decides to sell a modest plot of land to help make ends meet. In each of these examples, section 6 of the Bill requires that the elderly person's name and address, and the amount of rent or sale price they have received, to be published online in a readily accessible and electronically searchable online format. This raises safety concerns with the publication of the address of an elderly person and the amount of money they are getting in rent or the significant amount of money they may be getting from selling land, not to mention the evident privacy concerns I have already mentioned.

There are also data protection concerns given the extent of data that would be published. Article 36.4 of the general data protection regulation, GDPR, imposes an obligation on member states to consult the national data protection supervisory authority, the Data Protection Commission in our case, during the preparation of legislation that involves the processing of personal data. Therefore, there is an obligation under GDPR to consult the Data Protection Commission on this Bill.

In addition, there are significant concerns about the availability and compatibility of much of the data that is proposed to be collected and published under the Bill. It essentially provides that the expanded register of residential property transactions and the proposed new register of non-residential property transactions would be housed in the PSRA. Sections 5 and 6 state that the PSRA is to receive, maintain and publish online the extensive information that I have referred to, where such information is duly filed with statutory bodies. However, the Bill does not specify who should provide the information to the PSRA, either the statutory bodies or an owner, as broadly defined by the Bill, nor does it give any statutory body the power or obligation to share such information with the PSRA. These omissions appear problematic. The lack of a specific legal basis for the public bodies to share all of this personal data would also give rise to data protection issues. Even if the Bill were to be amended to empower or require statutory bodies to provide the specified information to the PSRA, it appears unlikely that it would work effectively in practice. The required information, where available, would have to be obtained from more than one statutory body and probably from a number of bodies. However, the PSRA has indicated that this would raise compatibility issues between the data collected and provided by different bodies. For instance, it may not be possible for the PSRA to match information provided by different statutory bodies where no common identifier is used across all bodies. Compatibility issues are also likely regarding the interoperability of the different IT systems operated by different statutory bodies. Furthermore, it is not clear that the PSRA would be the most appropriate statutory body to host such extensive databases on land transactions, including land ownership. The primary role of the PSRA is to regulate property services providers, namely auctioneers, estate agents, letting agents and property management agents. For all these reasons, it is not at all clear that publicly available registers containing all of the

extensive information required under the Bill would be the most appropriate or effective way to achieve the objectives of this Bill.

Conversely, a number of commitments in Housing for All would be more appropriate to address the issues of the hoarding of development lands and land speculation, which I agree we need to deal with. As stated in Housing for All, the Government's objective is that everybody should have access to sustainable good quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and located close to essential services, offering a high quality of life. The biggest challenge to delivering more affordable housing and mixed-use urban development in Ireland's cities is the need to tackle the supply of land and, in particular, the nature of the urban land market, which is one of the biggest drivers of cost and of constraints on housing delivery. For many decades, Ireland has experienced the impact of hope value. This arises from public decisions around zoning of land or investment in infrastructure, where the uplift in land value goes to the landowners or developers who are in a position to benefit but is not shared adequately with the State. As a result, land values have been inflated, contributing to higher development costs that result in higher house prices. This has also constrained the delivery of key infrastructure required by the community and necessary to support further development.

Through Housing for All, the Government is committed to tackling this issue and is bringing forward a system of land value sharing to enable local authorities to secure a proportion of the uplift in value when land is newly zoned for residential development or mixed-use development that includes residential use. The money will then be available to support the cost of providing social housing and improving social infrastructure.

Regarding the use of development land, there is only a one in six chance of zoned land being developed within the six-year cycle of a local authority development plan, with the lack of certainty as to which land will come forward for development resulting in an inability to plan for infrastructure provision. It is currently difficult to assess and monitor the extent of zoned and serviced land and track land that is brought forward for development, including the value of such land. The residential zoned land tax, another commitment in Housing for All, was introduced in Finance Act 2021 to incentivise the activation of land that is zoned and serviced for residential development but remains undeveloped. This is primarily intended to influence behaviour towards increasing housing output rather than to raise revenue. This tax, which will replace the vacant site levy, will come into effect in 2024.

Housing for All also mandates the provision of a national zoned lands register, which will be a central database on lands zoned for housing development. It will be based on the statutory development plan of each local authority and will underpin the residential zoned land tax and land value sharing measures. The national zoned land register is being established by my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and his Department in conjunction with the 31 local authorities and is being supported by Ordnance Survey Ireland, OSI. It will ensure that the geographical location of zoned land is digitally captured and that the created register is updated on an ongoing basis.

These measures brought forward by the Government are a much more appropriate mechanism for dealing with the issues that the Deputy seeks to address than the Bill we have before us. There are also technical and drafting difficulties with the Bill but the challenges I have outlined are the main reasons for not accepting it. We could get over technicalities but the fact is that so much work has already been done through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which is probably the most appropriate place to deal with the very relevant

issues that Deputy O'Callaghan has raised.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you very much Minister. That is probably not the response Deputy O'Callaghan wanted to hear but sin é an scéal.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive response. Indeed, it is not the one I wanted to hear but I appreciate that significant work and analysis went into it.

In terms of the way we brought forward this Bill and the intention behind it, we would have been happy to work through with the Government and compromise on the issues that she raised. We are aware of the different issues she raised and discussed them in detail with the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Advisor, OPLA, in preparing this Bill. It would be possible, through Committee Stage debate and amendments, to deal with a lot of the issues and I would certainly be willing to do that and to engage constructively on it.

The difficulty and challenge in dealing with this is determining where to draw the line. I am acutely aware that if the line is drawn too wide, it could bring in too many people but if it is drawn too tightly, one simply would not get an accurate picture of what is happening with land.

I will touch on a couple of the issues raised. The lack of data on this is costing us as a country and is hampering our decision-making. I welcome the land value sharing tax that the Government is bringing in. It is a positive measure but it does not address the core issue raised in the Kenny report from almost 50 years ago. It provides a mechanism for helping the State to recoup some of the uplift in land values which, as the Minister correctly said, can then be put into social housing and infrastructure, which is a very welcome move. However, it does not help to cap land prices for housing or infrastructure. That failure to cap the prices is costing us dearly as a society and a State. If we had better data on what is happening with land, the gaping holes in our policy and decision-making that are costing us so dearly would not continue. This is something that has been on the radar since the Kenny report, which was published almost 50 years ago. We have gone for decades without implementing the right policies on this and one of the reasons is that we do not have the right data. I am happy to work through issues that need to be resolved in this Bill but by not progressing this Bill at all, we will continue not to have the full data on land that we need.

Another area where policy and decisions around this issue have failed us in recent years is the vacant sites levy that is being replaced. There are two issues with that levy that explain why it did not work. The first is the loopholes in it and the difficulties with its implementation, which hopefully will be tightened up with its successor. The other reason it was utterly ineffective is that we do not know what land price inflation amounts to. How can a levy on vacant land to stop land hoarding be set if the real rate of land inflation is not known? If the levy is set at 3% and land inflation is at 5%, then it is not going to be very effective. More importantly, land price inflation in Dublin could be anything from 5% to 9% but it could be much lower in other parts of the country. That is why it is important to set different rates in different parts of the country to reflect the reality on the ground. There is no point in having a tax to stop land hoarding set at 5%, 6%, 7% or 8% in areas of the country where land price inflation is at 0% or 1% or in having it below the rate of land price inflation in other areas. As a State, society and people in a housing crisis and housing emergency that has been going on for years and is creating huge trauma and stress for people, we simply do not know. In one sense - and I mean this constructively - I can criticise the Government for the wrong policies on this, for making the wrong decisions or for not doing enough, but when we do not have the correct data, all I can

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do as a parliamentarian and as a housing spokesperson in opposition is make the best informed contributions that I can. When it comes to land price inflation I, the Government and everybody else are in the dark. It must be addressed.

I appreciate the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has put forward the case as to why the Government does not want to support the Bill. While I disagree with that, I respect it. I must urge, as strongly as possible, that if the Government believes this is not the way to address data around land price inflation and land costs, then the onus is on the Government to bring forward legislation that will do it, and which it is happy with. The Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers and I have put forward our attempt at that. If the Government is to reject this, then I want it to bring forward similar legislation in this space. We cannot wait another 50 years to address this. These have been live issues since before many of us were even born.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 80(2) the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 1 June 2022.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.52 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Máirt, an 31 Bealtaine 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.52 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 31 May 2022.