



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 31 Bealtaine 2022*

*Tuesday, 31 May 2022*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Government's failure to plan for the recovery of Ireland's tourism sector has come home to roost in a fairly catastrophic fashion. Families are missing out on holidays because of long delays in issuing passports, hotels are charging between €350 and €400 for one night and now the State's main airport is experiencing chaos. Dublin Airport on Sunday was a nightmare for those caught up in the mayhem. People waited hours in queues that stretched outside the terminal buildings. Passengers received no communication, updates or explanations for the delays. Indeed, many had not even made it to the security check before their flights took off without them. More than 1,000 people missed their flights. Big money had to be forked out for hotel rooms, connecting flights were missed and would-be holidaymakers had their holidays ruined. Now, confusion surrounding what any compensation package will cover is sowing further frustration. This is not only about tourism and holidays. As a small island nation, we rely heavily on our airports to ensure our connectivity with the rest of the world. We simply cannot afford this chaos. Last week's events at the airport risk damaging Ireland's international reputation for international business and investment.

All of this has its roots in the laying off 1,000 workers by the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, during the pandemic and the subsequent lack of workforce planning as international travel reopened. At the time of those lay-offs, SIPTU's Jerry Brennan told the airport authority, "you will need to be hiring people because your queues will be extending through the carparks". What foresight. It seems he was the only person with any foresight. Yet, as we speak, Dublin Airport is still only at 70% of pre-Covid staffing levels. How can we expect the country's main airport to operate at such low staff levels at the busiest time of the year? It was entirely foreseeable, after two years of lockdowns, that people would be very eager to get away on holidays again. Sunday's chaos did not come out of the blue. There were warnings in the major delays in March and April. What action, if any, did the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, take then to get ahead of all this? Did he meet the airport authority back in March to work out solutions and prevent an escalation of the problem? He is now calling for solutions in the wake of chaos. He has shown up again a day late and a dollar short.

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Teip thubaisteach ar thaobh an Rialtais agus an DAA a bhí sa phraiseach iomlán ag Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath ar an Domhnach. Ní hamháin gur chuir sé isteach go mór ar thaistealaithe ach rinne sé dochar do cháil idirnáisiúnta na hÉireann. An bhfuil muid ag súil le níos mó den chineál ruaille buaille sin in Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath an deireadh seachtaine seo?

Of course the Dublin Airport Authority should be held responsible for its part in this mess but let us be very clear on this. When the operation of the most important airport in the State breaks down, it is the business of the Government to get ahead of that. The public is in disbelief at this fiasco and those planning to travel through Dublin Airport this bank holiday weekend are now very worried. Can the Minister guarantee today that we are not facing more chaos at Dublin Airport this weekend?

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I thank Deputy McDonald for raising what is such an important issue. The scenes at Dublin Airport that we all witnessed on our screens at the weekend are completely unacceptable. Passengers going through the airport should not have had to endure an experience like that and I can only imagine the stress, anxiety and anger that was caused to so many of them. Many of them had been saving long and hard for a well-earned holiday and, in too many instances, did not make their flight through absolutely no fault of their own. What we saw was unacceptable and it cannot be allowed to happen again.

It is the case the DAA has statutory responsibility for the running of Dublin Airport but of course, as a Government, we take a direct interest in this matter because of the impact it has on the people we represent and on Ireland's reputation, both domestically and internationally, and the importance for us as an island nation of having international connectivity and airports that are well run and well resourced and that meet the needs of the people.

These issues began to emerge in March and there was significant intervention at that point, which continued. In particular, the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Naughton, had very regular meetings - every second day, in fact - for a period with the DAA to ensure this issue was properly addressed. To be fair, for the great bulk of that period, the issues were addressed and the types of scenes we witnessed at the weekend were not evident over that period. Since the weekend, there was a meeting yesterday involving the Minister for Transport, the Minister of State and the DAA's senior management to express the Government's deep frustration and unhappiness with the scenes we witnessed at the weekend. There was a further meeting this morning at which the DAA was asked to come forward with an operational plan to ensure we do not see scenes like this again, and to provide a reassurance to passengers going to Dublin Airport this coming weekend, which will be a busy, long weekend, that adequate resources are in place to ensure it runs as efficiently as possible.

As the Deputy knows, DAA senior management will appear before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications tomorrow. The Minister and the Minister of State have asked that the details of the operational plan be conveyed publicly and discussed at that meeting. Importantly, they have asked that there be an effective communications campaign in order that passengers who are relying on the services at Dublin Airport know exactly what is ahead of them and precisely how long they should allow to safely get through the various stages of check-in, security and so on.

The Deputy is correct to point out a voluntary severance scheme was operated by the DAA over the course of 2020 and into 2021, which was the authority's judgment as to the resources

it would need for the period ahead. It was also in the context of a period when passenger levels had simply collapsed and the DAA was losing enormous sums weekly, and it proposed a severance scheme. In recent months, it has recruited several hundred staff. About 300 of the 370 additional security staff required have been recruited and about 170 of those are fully trained. The DAA has had more than 5,000 applications for the positions since the start of March.

It is important the public are given a reassurance that what we saw at the weekend does not happen again. The Government has reinforced that message to the DAA directly and the public will see tomorrow the details of what it is proposing operationally to ensure it does not happen again.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister said there was a significant political intervention in March and April, when these problems emerged. I have to tell him, that intervention did not succeed in its purpose and Sunday showed us the evidence of that. The airport is still operating understaffed, at 70% of its pre-Covid strength. The management of the Dublin Airport Authority, it seems to me, grossly misjudged what the capacity requirements would be as travel reopened, as was always going to be the case. I must say I do not hear anything from the Minister, as a Minister in government, that would reassure me or reassure the public that in fact the airport authority or the Government have got on top of this issue. I ask the Minister again to perhaps be more categorical and reassuring for the public. Will he tell us we are not going to face scenes such as those we saw on Sunday again? Is he satisfied that is the case? Is he satisfied the airport authority can and will mobilise the required numbers of staff, including full use of overtime, over the coming bank holiday weekend?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Deputy. The message from the Government could not be clearer. The DAA needs to do whatever it takes to ensure this issue is addressed and that we do not see those kinds of scenes again, especially on the forthcoming bank holiday weekend. That is why the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, reinforced to the DAA executives the imperative to get on top of this because it is just not fair. It is not fair on the members of the public who rely on the services at the airport to go about their business, travel abroad, see loved ones, return home after a trip to Ireland or go on business abroad. They should be assured that if they turn up in good time for their flight, the airport will do its job and get them through the various stages and get them on board. There was a detailed discussion today about what is required to ensure that is achieved, including measures to improve queue management and maximising the availability of staffing resources to increase the number of security lanes at peak times. The DAA is now finalising those operational arrangements and we expect to hear much more about them in the next 24 hours and of course the authority will appear before the Oireachtas joint committee. The message from the Government, as conveyed by the Minister and Minister of State today and by me here in the Dáil could not be clearer, namely, the DAA must ensure this is not repeated.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I also raise the outrageous delays in Dublin Airport over the weekend. Clearly, these have had a devastating effect for so many people. We know 1,000 people have missed their flights and that people missed out on job opportunities, work-related travel, funerals, weddings, holidays and so much more. Clearly, this is a huge issue of consumer rights and a huge issue for those passengers who were so seriously inconvenienced over the weekend.

However, it is not just a matter of poor planning by the DAA, although that is clearly a serious issue in itself, but also points to two broader issues for which the Government must take responsibility. The first is a failure of our national aviation policy, specifically, a failure to

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ensure effective distribution of flights among our airports, because it is not just about Dublin Airport and we are conscious many people are now looking to other airports like those in Cork or Farranfore. They are looking at airports where there is capacity and seeing the contrast between them and the chaos we saw at the weekend at Dublin Airport. It is, therefore, about a national aviation policy that must take into account distribution of workload among our regional airports.

It is also, at a broader level, about workers' rights. That is something our transport spokesperson, Deputy Duncan Smith, has been raising consistently for some time now. We saw the DAA lay off staff during Covid in significant numbers and we saw the Government failing to put in a no-redundancy clause as a condition of the State supports that were being granted. We know the DAA took advantage of those supports, such as the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, that comes to an end today, yet there was no conditionality around workers' rights in that. We heard this morning from an anonymous worker at Dublin Airport about the serious issues around workplace conditions and pay that pertain for the many staff at Dublin Airport. Many of them took the brunt of understandable passenger frustration at the weekend and so many of them are in such a low-paid sector. The real concern we have is we have seen Dublin Airport become a low-cost airport, as the preponderance of low-cost airlines has dominated and we have seen a race to the bottom as a result.

I am asking the Minister first to reassure passengers that we will not see the same chaotic scenes at the airport this weekend. Will he also assure the House there will be a proper and effective national aviation strategy put in place to ensure this imbalance between one airport and our other airports does not occur again? Will the Government also take steps to ensure the serious staffing issues and the low-pay conditions for so many staff at Dublin Airport are addressed and that we see better conditions for staff and a genuine commitment to move to a living wage, as we saw in our Labour Party Bill on a living wage? Last week, we welcomed the Tánaiste's announcement that the Government will introduce legislation on a living wage. We are conscious that Ireland has a serious problem with low pay, with one in five of the workforce low paid. It is not just about Dublin Airport, but clearly that was a major factor in the staffing shortfall that led to such chaotic scenes for so many at the weekend.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The decision of the DAA in May 2020 to embark on a voluntary severance scheme was against the backdrop at the time of a collapse in the aviation industry and the commercial reality that it was losing an enormous amount of money daily. It proposed a voluntary severance scheme and there was significant uptake of the scheme. It is also fair to say that the recovery in aviation has exceeded the expectations of the majority of commentators, and I believe it has exceeded the DAA's own expectations, to be frank. That is why in recent weeks, as manifested and crystallised at the weekend in such a terrible way, it simply did not have the level of staffing resources that it needed. It is a good thing that aviation has recovered much more quickly than was forecast, but it is important that the DAA upholds the integrity of the security arrangements at the airport to the highest possible standards. Its first priority is to ensure the safety of the passengers who are going through the airport and, indeed, those who work in the airport.

There has been significant interest in the recruitment campaign. I heard what the Deputy said about terms and conditions but more than 5,000 applications since the beginning of March indicates a high level of interest in the security roles that are available. It is important to point out that the terms and conditions of employment are negotiated and agreed on a collective basis between the DAA and the trade unions representing the staff there.

Regarding the Government's wider aviation policy, we have a policy that supports the regions. There is a regional airports programme. Just last month, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, announced capital funding not just for the airports that traditionally avail of the regional airports programme and of the public service obligation, PSO, such as Donegal, Kerry and Ireland West Airport Knock, but also included for the first time the State regional airports at Cork and Shannon in the regional airports programme. Both of them benefited from capital funding, which I believe was the correct decision. By virtue of the size of passenger numbers at those airports, they are now eligible for funding under the programme. It is anticipated there will also be a round of operational grant aid under the regional airports programme. Almost €22 million is available in operational support during this year to support measures such as air traffic control, fire services and security-related operations at airports. There will be invitations to apply for that operational aid and it will issue to eligible airports towards the latter half of the year.

The Government's strategy is to support regional airports, including the State regional airports, which all provide an excellent quality of service and provide competition for Dublin Airport, which is needed too.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Minister for his response on the aviation strategy as it relates to airports such as Shannon, Cork and Farranfore. I also heard what he said about the recovery of aviation. However, this was not unpredictable. Airlines sold flights, so the number of people who would be flying out of Dublin Airport last weekend was utterly predictable. Clearly, there was a serious problem, a serious failure of workforce planning.

In terms of the issue of staff conditions and pay, the trade unions at Dublin Airport have been raising this for some time. There is a serious issue again with retention of staff and that is related to the pay levels and the conditions that apply to staff at the airport. That has to be addressed to ensure we do not see these shortfalls on an ongoing basis. I repeat our concern about Dublin Airport effectively becoming a low-cost airport at a time when inflation is rising above 8% today and there is a cost-of-living crisis that is really biting into so many people's pockets and incomes. That is why the Labour Party has been saying that Ireland needs a pay rise and why we have been pushing for enactment of a Bill that would transform the minimum wage into a living wage. We call on the Government to adopt the principle in our Bill. That would bring about a much quicker transformation, a much speedier increase in the incomes people earn and would address some of the issues with low pay that are affecting staff numbers in Dublin Airport and in so many other places around the country.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The DAA has major obligations as an employer. It now has a duty to ensure that it reaches a full staffing complement in order to ensure the safe and efficient running of Dublin Airport and Cork Airport, which also comes under the remit of the DAA. That is why it is in the process of a significant recruitment campaign, which has attracted a lot of interest. It has offered existing security staff contracts with a minimum of 30 hours per week. The contract requires staff to be available to work 40 hours across a 24-7 roster, with employees notified 30 days in advance of their next four-week schedules. In reality, most staff work more than the guaranteed minimum hours, and overtime is available. Permanent security staff are employed on a pensionable and secure basis, and all the DAA arrangements are collectively bargained for.

On the Deputy's wider point in respect of pay, there are, as she knows, negotiations under way on public pay in Ireland. That will impact on 365,000 public servants across the country. I hope we will be able to reach a successful conclusion on that matter in the next short number of

weeks. That is important not only from a public expenditure and an industrial relations point of view but also from the point of view of the thousands of workers who provide essential services to us all.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The recently established Cost of Living Coalition is calling people out onto the streets on Saturday, 18 June, for a national demonstration and day of protest to demand a comprehensive, urgent and radical package of measures to address the cost-of-living crisis that is absolutely crucifying workers, pensioners, students and people on low and middle incomes. It will be a protest against the Government's spectacular failure to address the cost-of-living crisis.

Today, we have more evidence of the Government's failure in this regard. EUROSTAT has indicated that we are facing inflation of 8.3%. This means that the value in purchasing power terms of workers' wages, pensions and incomes will drop by more than 8%, meaning real cuts in income for the people who can least afford them. Then we have the Taoiseach warning of a new era of high energy prices. That is on top of a 42% increase in energy and heating costs for ordinary people in the past year alone.

Against this background of a cost-of-living crisis, the Government acts like a helpless, innocent bystander that can do absolutely nothing about it. The Government is not going to do anything before the budget, and it is totally unclear whether it will do anything at all. That is why people are coming onto the streets.

Even the crisis in Dublin Airport is linked to this problem. In a word, the problem there is that the DAA, which has executives on total packages in excess of €366,000, expects the security workers it hires to operate on rubbishy flexible contracts for €14 an hour. When they cannot even plan and will not even know what hours they will have and, therefore, what income they will have in a week's time, is it any wonder that the DAA has difficulty recruiting people? The chief executive overseeing this is on a package of €366,000 a year. That is the problem in the context of the bigger crisis we face.

More than 600,000 people in this country are suffering deprivation and there are hundreds of thousands of workers are on low pay. However, spectacular profits are being made by the energy companies. Last year, Energia's profits were up 46% and the ESB's were up to nearly €700 million. Even Boris Johnson, a Tory, can introduce a windfall tax on the profits of energy companies to try to get some revenues to protect ordinary people from the cost-of-living crisis, but this Government will not do what even Boris Johnson is doing - and, my God, he is no left-winger. When is the Government going to bring in emergency measures in respect of housing costs, the slaughtering of people's incomes and a cost of living that is crucifying ordinary people? What is going to be in that package? So far, the Government has done nothing.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I do not expect Deputy Boyd Barrett to come in here and give any kind of fair assessment of what the Government has done, but to come in and say it has done nothing is just blatantly incorrect. He knows that. In the most recent budget, and the measures since, we have introduced a package of approximately €2.4 billion of taxpayers' money to support households because we recognise and acknowledge the impact of the extraordinary level of inflation that is currently being experienced. Of course, an inflation rate of more than 8% is a real concern because it impacts on people, living standards and the competitiveness of businesses.

This is a global phenomenon. We have to acknowledge that. In the UK, the rate is 9%. In the US, it is 8.5%. In today's EUROSTAT publication, 12 of the 19 eurozone countries have rates of inflation that are higher than Ireland's. That is why we responded. It is why the Government continues to ensure that we can fund the measures we have already announced, including the reduction in VAT and excise duty. As the Deputy is aware, we have brought in two separate bullet payments for fuel allowance recipients, a €200 energy credit in respect of electricity bills for all households and a cut to the PSO levy from October. There is a major multi-annual national retrofitting scheme. We have put caps on school transport fees for families. We have cut transport fares by 20%, with an additional 50% cut in fares for young people. We reduced the drugs payment scheme threshold to €80 per month, benefiting more than 70,000 families. We brought forward the changes announced in the most recent budget in respect of the working family payment. We completely abolished any hospital charges for children overnight. There are also targeted measures. For example, the 9% rate for tourism and hospitality has, as the Deputy will be aware, been extended. We also introduced specific measures in the haulage sector. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, introduced a suite of measures to support the tillage sector, farmers, and rural communities. I do not expect Deputy Boyd Barrett to give the Government any credit for that. He wants more to be done. That is a reasonable political position to adopt.

What we, as a Government, are seeking to do is navigate our way through this. In order to help the country to get through this period, we are engaging in social dialogue with the main social partners, through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, the trade unions and the employer bodies. The national economic dialogue will take place on 20 June. This will provide an opportunity for a wider set of stakeholders and Opposition parties also to set out their positions. However, we also need to be honest with people. These are extraordinary times. This is a record level of inflation. It has never happened before in the eurozone. In fact, it is global. We will do the best we can as a Government to support and assist people, and we have to date, but it is not possible for any government to introduce measures to completely offset the impact of a terrible war in Ukraine, which has caused such dislocation in the energy markets and in relation to so many foods and materials across the supply chain. We acknowledge that it is having an impact and that is why we have responded to date. That is why we are finalising our budgetary position as we move towards the summer economic statement and the preparation of the budget.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The reason so many people have got involved in this new Cost of Living Coalition - pensioners groups, retired workers groups, student unions, single-parent advocacy groups, anti-poverty groups, trade unions and others - is because the measures the Government has been taking are a drop in the ocean; they are making little or no difference to the crucifying increases in the cost of living that people face. The key point is that people are acutely aware that this is a tale of two crises. Ordinary working people, pensioners and students are being hammered with the cost of inflation, but they see simultaneously that some people are doing very well out of it. The Oxfam report published last week shows that Ireland's nine billionaires saw their assets and wealth increase by 55% last year. The energy companies see their profits going through the roof. The billionaires, millionaires and the CEOs of the DAA, who seem to be more interested in setting up airports in Saudi Arabia than in sorting out the problems at Dublin Airport, are doing very well. For workers, pensioners, students and ordinary people, however, the measures the Government is taking are simply not enough. This is because the Government will not address the elephant in the room, namely, the gross inequalities in income and wealth that exist in our society.

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**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The Deputy's statement that what the Government has done is not enough is a fairer comment because that is his view, but to come to the Chamber to say we did nothing is, as I said, completely incorrect. I do not accept that €2.4 billion in measures represents a drop in the ocean. For a country the size of Ireland, the use of taxpayers' money of that magnitude is a major decision. It is not one we made lightly but it was absolutely warranted. To take those interventions outside the normal budgetary calendar, to reduce VAT and excise, and to introduce once-off payments and better social welfare supports is not something any government would consider in normal times.

We also have to be cognisant of the wider picture. There are increasing risks to the global economy and as a small, open, trading economy, Ireland is not immune to those risks. The Deputy will be aware the cost of borrowing for our country has increased significantly in recent weeks. We will work our way through this. The priority now is to agree in the summer economic statement, taking all those factors into account, what the appropriate budgetary stance is for Ireland and how much money we should be spending-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** People cannot wait until then.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** -----and can afford to spend. We will then make decisions as a Government to be as fair as we possibly can in recognising the cost-of-living challenges people are undoubtedly facing but also being honest with people. The Government cannot fully off-set the impact on people's lives of this terrible war, which it had nothing to do with.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** This morning saw the publication of Safeguarding Ireland's comprehensive discussion paper on safeguarding vulnerable adults. It called for the establishment of an independent national adult safeguarding authority, a recommendation I fully support. The chairperson commented:

There needs to be a Statutory obligation on State bodies to do more than respond to crises. They also need to have accountability to take steps which prevent adult abuse and uphold people's rights.

It is a timely reminder for a number of reasons, as this week we debate the Assisted Decision-Making Capacity Bill and, disturbingly, over the weekend, we saw revealed in reports by Maeve Sheehan in the *Sunday Independent*, Kitty Holland in *The Irish Times* and Catherine Reilly in *The Medical Independent* further major concerns arising from the Brandon case in Donegal and the safeguarding issues it highlighted. The latest report, apparently delivered internally within the HSE, now contains allegations of rape going back to 1992. It is also revealed in correspondence between the HSE and HIQA, dated 7 March this year, that HIQA's deputy chief inspector of social services called for "The review of governance structures should not be limited to local... level but should also include the overall national governance and oversight structures used to identify and respond to issues that may arise...".

*The Medical Independent* revealed that a social care risk register for the safeguarding and protection team, SPT, dating from 2021, showed that risks related to staffing were ongoing. The SPT has been operating at 75% capacity since March 2020 due to staff redeployment. There was a risk of the SPT "not being able to continue to provide a cohesive service across CHO 1 if staffing falls any further due to leave or illness of remaining staff". On 28 June 2021, another staffing risk was recorded, which was due for review on 3 July. It read:

Due to 50 per cent reduction in staff there is a significant risk that the safeguarding team

may not be in a position to provide a cohesive service across CHO 1 [again]. We currently have no staff in Donegal and have lost 0.5 of our staff in Cavan/Monaghan.

This was all happening while I was being told by the HSE that everything was fine.

I do not believe these allegations are new to the HSE. They were part of what the whistleblower told me in 2016, they were part of what I brought to the HSE at that time, and were in the available HSE files at Ard Gréine Court. I believe they were suppressed by management within the HSE at all levels, right up to the very top, and only for the dogged determination of the whistleblower, these journalists, myself and, thankfully, the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, all this would have been conveniently swept under the carpet.

I am calling on the Government and the senior Minister finally to stand up to the HSE, to stop accepting mediocre management and lack of transparency and to get the Brandon report and other linked reports published in full, so we can confidently put in place the measures to ensure this never happens again.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I have not had an opportunity to see the report he referenced that was published today, but I can give an update on the initiatives-----

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Nobody has seen it. That is the problem.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I was not aware that the Deputy was going to raise this specific issue, but I will update him on what the Government is planning to do at policy level. We can respond to the Deputy on a bilateral basis in more detail.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 does not extend to people who are involuntarily detained under the Mental Health Act 2001 or detained subject to an order under the Criminal Law (Insanity) Act 2006. The Attorney General's office has identified legal issues that need to be addressed before the 2015 Act can be extended, specifically around ensuring that detention orders continue to be valid in cases where all treatment is refused. The Government supports the extension of the principles and provisions of the Act and its 2022 amendment Bill to individuals whose treatment is regulated by Part 4 of the Mental Health Act. The Government will extend these provisions to this cohort of people through the mental health Bill, which is being drafted.

People accessing mental health services generally can avail of decision-making supports under the 2015 Act, including people receiving treatment on a voluntary basis in approved centres. The Act provides for the introduction of decision-making supports to help individuals with impaired decision-making abilities to make decisions about finances, healthcare and personal matters. The Act is not yet fully commenced. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has prepared an amendment Bill, which is expected to pass through the Oireachtas this month. Its amendments will allow the Act to be fully commenced. Currently, the 2015 Act's provisions do not apply to people whose treatment is regulated under Part 4 of the Mental Health Act, those being, people who are involuntarily detained under that Act and people detained under the Criminal Law (Insanity) Act 2006.

On a parallel track, the Department of Health is progressing a mental health Bill based on the general scheme agreed by the Government last July. It is being drafted by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has put a considerable amount

of work into it.

The Department of Health sought legal advice from the Attorney General's office. While the official advice has not been received, the Department has been informally told that, if the 2015 Act is amended so that its provisions fully apply to people detained under the Mental Health Act, there is a risk that, where such an individual refuses all treatment, the basis for his or her detention may become invalidated. The Attorney General's office has advised that further work is needed to safeguard against a situation arising in which people who pose a risk to others cannot be detained and treated where they refuse all treatment. The office has also advised that this policy work would be more appropriately addressed in the mental health Bill. That Bill will significantly update and overhaul existing mental health legislation, including provisions relating to consent to treatment under Part 4.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes Leaders' Questions. My apologies. Deputy Pringle gets another go.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Yes. I will speak to the Brandon report. This is a long, drawn-out saga and what stands out to me is that HSE management failed the residents of Ard Greine Court, who are vulnerable adults for whom we as a society are asked to care. HSE management also failed Brandon, a highly vulnerable adult. Importantly, in the ensuing mismanagement of the case, the HSE has failed its front-line staff as well. The concealment of the truth at any cost, which to my mind is the only conclusion one can draw as being the *modus operandi* of the management's response, is dictated from the very top of the HSE. This leaves the staff on the ground abandoned even though they were the ones highlighting the problems throughout. This is not a Donegal or CHO 1 problem alone. It is a national problem. Previous Governments tried a similar thing with Garda corruption, in that they tried to box it off and claim it was only in Donegal. We saw where that got us.

The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is conducting a review of safeguarding in Donegal. It should be published when completed and I ask the Minister to ensure that it is. The Minister of State intends to, but the whole of the Government must ensure that it is because doing so would be vital for all of our citizens.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I acknowledge Deputy Pringle's track record on this issue and the fact that he has raised the Brandon report in particular many times in the House and with our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who has taken a keen personal interest in the matter. She has been to Donegal and held a series of meetings on the matter there. She is most anxious that the full details in the Brandon report be published as soon as possible.

Separately, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is introducing a safeguarding Bill. She expects to have it before the Oireachtas before the end of this year. That will provide an opportunity for the Oireachtas to tease out these issues in detail and ensure that we have adequate safeguards in place for vulnerable people who are under the care of the State.

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

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Fourteenth Report of Committee of Selection (*without debate*)
- Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 95(3)) (Variation of title: Chiroprapist) Regulations 2022 (*without debate*)
- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (*without debate*)
- Electoral Reform Bill 2022 — Motion to Instruct the Committee (*to conclude within 60 minutes*)
- Statements on Transport, Accelerating Sustainable Mobility (*not to exceed 145 minutes*)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re Rising Food Prices, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Second Stage) (*to be interrupted, if not previously concluded, either at 6.30 p.m., or 3 hours and 41 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later*)
- Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) (*to be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and to conclude within 90 minutes*)
- Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 30 minutes*)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, selected by the Regional Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Higher Education, Investment in Higher Education and Reducing the Cost for Families (*not to exceed 145 minutes*)
- Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded)

Thursday evening business shall be the Motion re Report entitled "Urban Regeneration".

### **Proposed Arrangements for this week's business**

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that—

- (i) oral Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1) shall not be taken; and

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(ii) Government business may continue after 6.12 p.m. in order to allow the Statements on Transport, Accelerating Sustainable Mobility to conclude, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the items of business following, as well as on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the Motion re Fourteenth Report of Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate;

3. the Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 95(3)) (Variation of title: Chiropodist) Regulations 2022 shall be taken without debate;

4. the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions shall be taken without debate;

5. the Motion to instruct the Committee on the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State 7.5 minutes;

- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group

7.5 minutes per party or group; and

(ii) members may share time; and

6. the Statements on Transport, Accelerating Sustainable Mobility shall not exceed 145 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 135 minutes, following which a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, and members may share time.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the proceedings on the second reading motion on the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted either at 6.30 p.m., or three hours and 41 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later, in order to take Report and Final Stages of the Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022: Provided that, in any event, Report and Final Stages of the Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m.;

2. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to

amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications;

3. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance; and

4. the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Insurance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2022.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that—

(i) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall be taken either at 6.30 p.m., or on the conclusion of Government business, whichever is the earlier, and

(ii) notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 10th September, 2020, the Motion re Report entitled "Urban Regeneration" may be taken for longer than 75 minutes;

2. the Dáil on its rising shall adjourn until 2.00 p.m. on Tuesday 14th June, 2022;

3. the Statements on Higher Education, Investment in Higher Education and Reducing the Cost for Families shall not exceed 145 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 135 minutes, following which a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, and members may share time; and

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Report entitled "Urban Regeneration" shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 135 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for that time, and members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are the arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin:** Not agreed.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Not agreed. I listen to the Minister and I always wish him well but how can the Government sit by and allow 65% tax on every litre of fuel and diesel? The price of these goods is skyrocketing and it is driving inflation mad. We need an urgent debate on this in this House. The Minister talked about the €2 billion the Government spent but that is wiped away on a daily basis because people cannot afford to heat their homes and put fuel in their cars. They have to choose between heat, food and petrol or diesel. Unless the Government grasps the nettle and does something, facing into the late summer and autumn, we will have terrible problems, which we have already. We need an urgent debate on this issue.

The Rural Independent Group has written to the Minister's colleague to take action and he has refused point blank. The Government should take a leaf out of Poland's and other European

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countries' book. They have taken strong action to try to help their people, which this Government was elected to do.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Statements on higher education are planned for Thursday but we only had statements on an area of higher education last Thursday. We need statements on special education. We are not sitting next week and there is a crisis in special education school places across the country. It is the last day of May and SNA allocations have yet to be published. I understand the warehousing plan of the Minister of State at the Department of Education with responsibility for special education and inclusion has been scrapped. We do not need statements on higher education this Thursday; we need statements on special education and we have written to the Business Committee to seek that. It is important.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I want to add my voice to the call for statements on special education this week. It is a real shame that on the last day of May, SNA allocations still have not been announced. This is a sad indictment of how the Department treats those at the front line who are providing essential services to children in our schools. It is vital that we have statements on these issues towards the end of this week.

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** On Deputy Mattie McGrath's point, there is a Private Members' motion before the House today from Sinn Féin on the cost of living so that provides an opportunity for further debate on fuel costs and the costs that people are facing.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The Minister is in government.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** Yes and the Government is providing time every week to facilitate debate on all these issues.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Action.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** On Deputy Ó Ríordáin's point, the debate last week was on apprenticeships and this week's debate is on third level education. On Deputy Gannon's point, my understanding is that the SNA allocations will be confirmed this afternoon by the Department of Education.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Is that a "No"?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** It is not necessary. We stand over the proposed Order of Business.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** If the Ceann Comhairle was an SNA he would think it was damn necessary to have a debate on special education this week-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Or a parent.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** -----or a parent, or somebody seeking a school place. We will be calling a vote on this issue. We demand statements on special education this Thursday to replace the statements on higher education.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The Chief Whip has indicated that statements on special education can be facilitated the week we come back.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** The Dáil is not sitting next week.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The debate can be facilitated the week we are back.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The week after next.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We will facilitate all the other requests in the order they come in.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I want to make it clear that at every meeting of the Business Committee statements are requested on a variety of issues. To give the Government its due, it has tried to facilitate all those requests over a period of time. If the Whip is saying he will do it the week after next, we can take him at his word.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I doubt there is a Deputy in this House who would suggest that statements on higher and further education this Thursday are more pressing than statements on special education.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I would suspect that they are all pressing issues-----

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** Exactly.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** -----and that the people looking to go to higher education and wanting to know what their future is-----

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** There is a particular issue in the country that the Ceann Comhairle will appreciate. The issue is that SNA allocations have yet to be announced and I understand that may happen at 3 p.m. today. School places have still not been found and there is an issue around the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion's dealings with this issue. This week is the week for us to deal with it. There will be no sitting next week and waiting two weeks is just not acceptable to us.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Bríd Smith is indicating.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** No, a Cheann Comhairle. I was just asking for a glass of water. I have nothing to say.

**A Deputy:** For the first time ever.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That is most unusual, Deputy Smith. Is the proposal for dealing with this week's business agreed to?

**Deputies:** No. Vótáil.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 51; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	

<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Durkan, Bernard J.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Farrell, Alan.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Nash, Ged.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Naughten, Denis.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	

<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Duncan Smith and Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** On Friday we had another very depressing sense of *déjà vu* in respect of family homelessness when the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage reported that we are now back to pre-pandemic levels of homelessness, with more than 10,000 people in emergency accommodation, nearly 3,000 of whom are children. This is the sharpest edge of the housing crisis that has been created, perpetuated and presided over by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Make no mistake, this scandal is of the Government's making. It consistently fails to provide an adequate level of real social housing, refuses to address the problems in the private rental sector and also refuses to introduce rigorous protections against eviction. It is now time to see sense. I do not know what will shame this Government into action, if these figures and almost children 3,000 children in homelessness do not. People are sick of kids growing up in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation. When will we see sense? When will we see the Government take the actions that will work to address this crisis?

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Any increase in the level of homelessness is deeply regrettable and disappointing and warrants action from Government. That is why we are acting. This is the number one priority for the Government. We are investing a record amount of money to increase the supply of all forms of housing, including public and cost-rental housing as well as the introduction of new affordable schemes. We are also working with the private sector and the Land Development Agency. We are seeing progress in relation to supply and that is ultimately the solution here. Nearly 35,000 homes commenced construction in the year to March 2022 which is the highest rolling 12-month figure since records began. We will deliver close to 12,000 social homes this year, of which 9,000 will be new builds. The cost-rental model is now being rolled out. It is about delivering as much as we possibly can to address the homelessness challenge, which is growing and is of serious concern.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Truly shocking figures on homelessness were released over the weekend, with over 10,000 people without a home nationally, almost 3,000 of whom are children. There are more than 7,000 people in Dublin without a home, a shocking figure. We also have obligations to the Ukrainian community here. I welcome the Ukrainian Action in Ireland representatives who are in the Public Gallery. We are all very conscious of the need to deliver on housing and to deliver an effective housing policy.

Earlier I attended the re-launch of Raise the Roof and commend all those involved in this very broad-based coalition which has put forward very reasonable and sensible proposals to ensure that we see a supply of affordable homes coming on stream and that these affordable homes are delivered swiftly in order to address the really serious and chronic needs of so many communities across the country and in our capital city.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I also welcome the Ukrainian representatives to the House. I share Deputy Bacik's view about the level of priority that this must be afforded. The Government is investing a record amount of money and that has to be translated into the delivery of homes. Ultimately, what will make a difference here is the breadth of different types of tenure and making progress on that. This includes cost rental, which is a very welcome innovation in Ireland. It is good to see individual schemes coming on stream now. There will also be affordable purchase schemes, including in Cork city, coming on stream in the coming weeks. That is very welcome. Private supply is increasing as well. We are investing in tackling voids. We had over 5,200 exits from homelessness over 2021. Additional local authority homes are being brought on stream, with more than 6,000 delivered across 2020 and 2021 via the voids programme. A further 2,000 homes will be remediated this year.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I want to ask about the Government's plans to give €450 million in subsidies to developers. These subsidies will be used to build apartments that, according to an analysis by the *Business Post*, will only be affordable for people on the top 15% of incomes. In the Dáil and the national media, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has repeatedly stated that the subsidies will be going directly to homeowners and not to developers. This is simply not true. Documents published by the Housing Agency state clearly and unambiguously that these subsidies will be paid straight into the accounts of developers' solicitors. When the Cabinet signed off on this, were Ministers aware that these subsidies would be paid directly to developers or were they given the same incorrect information that the Dáil has been given? Were the Minister and his colleagues misled and told that the subsidies would be given to homeowners?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Deputy. This is one aspect of Housing For All. The starting point is to acknowledge that we have a problem in that we are not seeing build-for-sale apartments being built. We are not seeing them in Dublin to any great extent and we are not really seeing them elsewhere throughout the country to any extent at all. In my city of Cork, the last private sector development where apartments were built for sale was finished back in 2008. Since then, the only apartments built in the city were those built by local authorities or approved housing bodies, supported by the State. We have a problem. If we want to implement our national planning framework, if we want compact development and if we want all of these exciting, brownfield regeneration sites to be developed in our cities, we are going to have to do something. This initiative is designed to ensure that apartments are built for sale for owner-occupiers and will make the development of such apartments viable where that would otherwise not be the case.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Earlier, the National Traveller Mental Health Network held a protest outside the Dáil in respect of Traveller mental health. It held a similar protest five months ago. One of its main calls at the time was for a meeting with the Taoiseach. At today's protest, there was a sense of music and a sense of poetry but there was also a deep sense of hopelessness and despair within the Traveller community regarding Traveller mental health. It is an atrocious situation. On "Morning Ireland" earlier, a member of the Traveller community spoke about the 29 members of her extended family who have died by suicide. That is an absolutely atrocious situation. I have two questions. Will the Taoiseach meet with representatives from the network immediately? Will the action plan for Traveller mental health be implemented as soon as possible?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank Deputy Gino Kenny for raising this matter. I will not speak for the Taoiseach, but I do not believe he would be reluctant to have a meeting. This is an issue that we will refer to his office. I wish to reassure the Deputy that the finalisation and publication of the national Traveller health action plan is a priority issue for the Department of Health and the HSE. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Mary Butler, and the HSE expect to publish the Traveller health action plan in the coming weeks. We look forward to seeing that published and implemented.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** Budget 2022 contained an announcement regarding free GP cards for the under-sevens. Some 80,000 children will be able to avail of the scheme. The problem for my constituents is that not all GPs are accepting these cards. People are being told that if GPs are not going to accept the card or are not taking on any more patients, they have to find other GPs who are doing so. Families are familiar with their own GPs. When can we expect these GP cards for the under-sevens? How will the parents of these children get GPs to accept the cards?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, is very keen to advance the extension of free GP care for children aged six and over. He has had ongoing dialogue with the representative bodies of GPs to ensure that this can be implemented as quickly as possible. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy with the specific update as to the timeline involved.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There are many crises at present. I refer to those relating to housing, mental health, the Passport Office and other areas. I welcome Mr. Tom O'Callaghan, of the Independent Postmasters Group, to the Public Gallery. Our post office network is forgotten about. Fianna Fáil supported the previous Government by means of the confidence and

supply agreement. Now that it is in government, it is paying lip service - not even that - to the private contractors who are operating the post offices. Throughout the Covid situation, they dealt with everything. They ponied up as always. The Government has interfered with them now as regards passports. What is the Government going to do? Will it take any meaningful action to save these post offices? Hundreds of them will be lost to the service. Is mór an trua é sin. It is a great pity because these are the people who are in the communities looking after people daily and looking out for them. They provide that service for a pittance and the Government is paying lip service to them. They are not even being mentioned now. Hopefully, the Government will do something. We have had report after report. We need action.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I too welcome Tom O'Callaghan to the Public Gallery. The Government strongly acknowledges the important role of post offices in urban and rural communities all over the country. Sometimes they are held up as being important only in rural areas but they are important in urban areas too. The Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, has been working on this issue and is about to bring a proposal to Government in respect of it. We are conscious that the transformation payments that were in place are due to end at the end of this year. The Government is very anxious to support the post office network. I expect confirmation of a Government initiative with a view to safeguarding as many post offices as possible around the country very shortly.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I joined my colleague, Senator Eileen Flynn, earlier outside the gates of Leinster House, where the National Traveller Mental Health Network held a protest calling for accountability in relation to Government commitments. In particular, the programme for Government includes plans to publish a Traveller and Roma mental health action plan. That has not happened yet, halfway through the term of this Dáil. I understand that it is to be published in the next few weeks, and I welcome that. Will the Minister, who has responsibility for public expenditure, commit to funding that action plan when it is published?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The action plan will be published in the coming weeks. It will certainly be published by September, if not sooner. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, informs me that it will be September at the latest. Funding is a matter for the HSE and the Department of Health when they set out their priorities in the Estimates process. That process will get under way in the next number of weeks. The Government policy in this regard is clear. If we are going to publish a health action plan for Travellers, it will need to be resourced and we will do the very best we can to make sure it is adequately resourced and can be implemented. We acknowledge the very serious health issues the Travelling community are facing with regard to life expectancy, mental health challenges, addiction challenges and so on. We will do the best we can to ensure the plan is properly funded.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** In the days ahead, secondary schools will be finishing up and primary schools will also finish their terms in the weeks ahead. School secretaries will be finishing work as well. A great deal of background work has been done in getting an agreed plan together, and I acknowledge everyone who has been involved in that. There are more than 3,000 schools involved across the country. Time is very tight. Is it envisaged that the new pay system for school secretaries will be in place for when they finish up? What kind of work is involved in that? Will some secretaries get it as soon as it is up and running or will all the schools come on together at the same time? I ask the Minister to give an indication on that. It is especially relevant for people who are retiring.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** There is an agreement in place and the focus is now on implementing it. Work is ongoing with Fórsa. It involves a complex process of assimilating information to capture accurate data in respect of each individual secretary and the application of these data to ensure each secretary is correctly assigned to the new terms and conditions if they so choose. Secretaries will also be provided with an opportunity to confirm whether they wish to move to the new terms and conditions or retain their current terms and conditions, as the benefits of either option will be determined by their individual circumstances. I am assured by the Minister for Education that additional resources are being put in place to provide capacity to manage this process. I cannot give an exact timeline but it is a priority to get this implemented as quickly as possible.

**Deputy David Stanton:** Given the volatile nature of oil and gas supplies in Europe at the moment, and given that we get more than 70% of our natural gas through a pipeline from the United Kingdom, has the Government any contingency plans in place in the event of a reduction or curtailment in the supply from the United Kingdom? If not, does it plan to put plans in place? It is a case of being ullamh and having other plans.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The answer is “Yes”. This is a matter of ongoing consideration, led by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan. His Department is working with my Department and other Departments to make sure the issue of energy security is fully addressed, particularly in the current climate where there is a greater question mark than before regarding the secure supply of energy. This issue underlines the need for us to accelerate the transition to renewables. As a Government, we passed legislation in respect of offshore wind and modernised the licensing and regulatory system. The straight answer to the Deputy’s question is that contingency plans are in place and continue to be worked on by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications in particular.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** I too raise the National Traveller Mental Health Network, which is protesting outside Leinster House today and demanding urgent action from the Government on mental health. Senator Eileen Flynn has previously highlighted that the suicide rate is six times higher for Traveller women and seven times higher for Traveller men compared with the general population. Life expectancy for Travellers is 15 years lower than that of their settled counterparts. The protest is seeking accountability from the Government over the lack of culturally appropriate mental health services for the Traveller community. The programme for Government contains a commitment to publish a Traveller and Roma mental health action plan. What progress is being made and what can we expect in this regard? I am aware of what the Minister said in response to the other Deputies who raised this matter but we cannot leave these people waiting for months on end. The Minister stated that he is not responsible for the Taoiseach, but will the Taoiseach make a commitment, at the very least, to meet these people and talk about their concerns?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I reassure her that the Department of Health is fully committed to providing leadership and resources to ensure the implementation of the Traveller health action plan once it is agreed. The priority now is to get it finalised and publish it and then make sure it is resourced. As an initial step towards implementing the plan, the Department provided €270,000 to expand Traveller health units last year and further measures will be considered in the context of the budget. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will be meeting with Pavee Point in the next number of weeks to further discuss how we can help and make sure this agenda is progressed as a priority.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** Tomorrow, the wider Defence Forces community, including veterans, spouses, families and friends, will again campaign on behalf of serving members for the implementation of the working time directive. For well over a decade now, successive Governments have known they were in breach of employment rights legislation. There have been years of talking about implementing this directive and repeated commitments to doing so but very little in the way of action to actually do so. This denial of basic employment rights cannot continue. Is it the Government's intention to honour the recommendation of the Commission on the Defence Forces to end the free labour aspect of service? Will the Government act on its commitment in the programme for Government to amend the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 in order to bring the Defence Forces within the scope of its provisions?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I assure the Deputy that the work of the Commission on the Defence Forces is being taken very seriously by the Government. The Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, and I are in dialogue on that issue. The Minister will be bringing a proposal to Government in the coming weeks in the context of its response to the commission's recommendations. That proposal will set out how we intend to move forward into the future. As the Deputy knows, it is the right of all workers to have their legal rights upheld. We will be responding to the commission in all respects when that memorandum is brought to the Government in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** Yesterday, patients of the GP practice in my village of Stepside became the latest to be subjected to an act of sheer obstruction and intimidation by so-called protesters, simply because that medical practice offers full maternal and reproductive care, as per the laws of this land. I am by no means the first Deputy or Senator to raise this in these Houses and I fear I will not be the last. When will the Government bring forward genuine safe-access zone legislation to protect all the patients of this land? Will the Minister condemn those who engage in these acts of destruction and blatant intimidation?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I understand the legislation to provide for safe-access zones is being prioritised by the Minister for Health and is actively being worked on. It is a priority item of legislation and will be brought to Government and published and will commence its legislative journey shortly.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I begin by congratulating Derry on its terrific win in the Ulster GAA final at the weekend and extend my commiserations to Donegal. It was a terrific game of football.

With the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, in the Chamber, I want to refer to the wonderful and buzzing weekend in Clones with the excitement of the Ulster final. There were almost 30,000 fans in St. Tiernach's Park and that makes a huge difference to the local economy in a town such as Clones in a Border county such as Monaghan, which borders Cavan. A conservative estimate would be that this can bring about €3 million to the local economy.

While it will be really welcome when the redevelopment of Casement Park happens, the Ulster final will then be moved there. Will the Minister consider speaking to the Ulster Council and the wider GAA in regard to whether it would be possible to have a rotating Ulster final, whereby Clones would not completely lose its 100-year tradition of holding the Ulster final and, perhaps, as is the case in Cork and Kerry, a rotating final could be considered?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. That is a novel question.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** It is, indeed. I say “fair play” to the Deputy and share her congratulations to Derry on a magnificent victory after extra time. I know the limits of my powers, but I am sure the Minister of State will have a discussion with the Deputy offline and see what can be done on that issue.

**Deputy Patrick Costello:** I have been working with a variety of families who are facing the consequences of foetal valproate syndrome, caused by exposure to sodium valproate medication during pregnancy. This issue has been raised in the House numerous times and there are issues in the past that need to be looked into, but there are also issues that need to be addressed to prevent harm into the future. There are to be six specialist nurses to support people who take sodium valproate medication but only two have been appointed. The final four positions have been outstanding for some time. When will they be appointed?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** I thank the Deputy. I will be honest, I do not know the answer to his question about the appointment of the additional specialist nurses for people who are taking sodium valproate, but I will ask the Minister for Health to revert to him, having contacted the HSE.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** We are all aware of the many cheerleader Deputies who want to see liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminals built, but I want to come at this from a different angle. The Taoiseach was recently lobbied by Wesley Edens of New Fortress Energy, and only last week the same company distributed leaflets in the Shannon and Clare area promoting the use of liquefied natural gas and quoting all three coalition party leaders as being supportive of it. Are we walking into the building of LNG terminals in this country, which will blow up any hopes of us reaching our climate targets or of staying within the Paris Agreement limits, and gives two fingers to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, report and even to the International Energy Agency, which has stated that no new gas or oil infrastructure can be built if we are to have any hope of limiting the increase in temperatures? Will the Government recommit to the programme for Government and bring in legislation to ban the building of LNG terminals in this country?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The Government policy on LNG is as set out in the programme for Government. An energy security review is under way, with which the Deputy will be familiar. She will no doubt have heard the Taoiseach earlier today emphasising the importance of the transition to renewable energy sources and the importance of us doing that in an accelerated fashion. That is where this country and the Government are going in regard to energy policy because that is where the future is. We want to reduce our dependence of fossil fuel quickly, although certain fossil fuels will continue to be there as a transition fuel and a back-up fuel. The position on LNG is as set out in the programme for Government.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** So the future is dependency on fossil fuels.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Naughten, please.

**Deputy Denis Naughten:** Quite a number of colleagues have raised the issue of the acceleration of the transition to a green economy over the course of the Order of Business. Last December, Dáil Éireann overwhelmingly passed a motion that, among other things, called on the Government to design a strategy in conjunction with the European Commission to fund and construct an Atlantic electricity interconnector that would plug west-coast renewable electricity

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directly into the European grid. This would provide large quantities of clean and green electricity to the EU and create tens of thousands of jobs along the western seaboard. This measure would also significantly reduce the cost of electricity for Irish homes, providing us with the cheapest electricity in Europe. To do this, we need to establish an offshore renewable development authority to drive the type of change and strategic thinking that is needed in this country to make this opportunity a reality. When will the Government implement the content of that motion?

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** The Deputy is right to identify the area of offshore renewable as one of great potential. That is why the Government passed legislation in respect of, and is setting up, the new maritime area regulatory body, which will early next year assume the full suite of statutory functions, in essence to make sure we have a system that is fit for purpose in licensing and regulating this sector. I will ask the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to revert to the Deputy in detail in regard to the Atlantic electricity interconnector the Deputy suggested.

#### **Fourteenth Report of Committee of Selection: Motion**

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the Fourteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 26th May, 2022, and discharges a member and appoints a member to a Committee accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

#### **Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 95(3)) (Variation of Title: Chiropodist) Regulations 2022: Referral to Joint Committee**

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 95(3)) (Variation of title: Chiropodist) Regulations 2022,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 27th April, 2022, be referred to the Joint Committee on Health, in accordance with Standing Order 95(5), which, not later than 21st June, 2022, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 101, and Standing Order 100(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

#### **Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion**

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Social Protection, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Justice

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 30th July, 2020, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Health.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2020: Referral to Select Committee**

**Deputy Ged Nash:** I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

### **Electoral Reform Bill 2022: Instruction to Committee**

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 187, it be an instruction to the Dáil in Committee on the Electoral Reform Bill 2022, that it has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill, in relation to amendments to:

(a) sections 2, 3, 22, 23A, 25, 43, 46, 48A, 61, 83, 84, 85, 86 and 88 of the Electoral Act 1997 and the insertion of new sections 4B, 24B, 91 and 92 into the Electoral Act 1997 for the purposes of providing powers of investigation to the Standards in Public Office Commission, enhancing transparency in relation to certain donations to political parties and to provide, *inter alia*, for the preparation by political parties of consolidated annual statements of accounts; and

(b) sections 85, 86, 96, 108 and 114 of the Electoral Act 1992; sections 3, 7 and 42 of the Presidential Elections Act 1993; sections 2, 13 and 30 of the Referendum Act 1994; articles 49, 50 and 76 of the Local Elections Regulations 1995; sections 26 of the Local Government Act 2001; sections 10, and rules 48, 49 and 75 of the Second Schedule of the European Parliament Elections Act 1997 for the purposes of providing for same day voting on islands at elections and referendums.

I am sharing time with Deputy McAuliffe. The purpose of this motion is to instruct the Dáil in committee, pursuant to Standing Order 187, that it has power to make amendments to

the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill. In this regard, I propose to introduce amendments to the Bill on Committee Stage, to be held in Dáil Éireann later this afternoon. The Committee Stage amendments to the Bill in the motion are twofold and comprise amendments to the Electoral Act 1997, and amendments to the provision for island voting in the Electoral Act 1992, the Presidential Elections Act 1993, the Referendum Act 1994, the Local Elections Regulations 1995, the Local Government Act 2001 and the European Parliament Elections Act 1997.

I will now set out the amendments to the scope of the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 relating to the Electoral Act 1997, or Part 6 of the amended Bill. As the House will be aware, Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits the Government to reviewing “our current electoral laws and the conduct of politics in Ireland, to ensure that donations and resources from non-citizens outside the State are not being utilised to influence our elections and political process.” It goes on to state we will legislate to prevent this if necessary. In late January 2021, the Minister, Deputy O’Brien, and I wrote to all 25 political parties on the register of political parties seeking their views on the regulation of electoral funding from outside the jurisdiction of the State and on other related matters in the context of the Government commitment.

The amendments I intend to move on Committee Stage of the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 arise as a result of that consultation process and were informed by further engagement between my Department and Government parties. In summary, the proposed amendments will: strengthen the definition of “subsidiary organisation” to clarify that it includes a body or association which maintains an office outside the State; amend the definition of “donation” to confirm that it includes any donation from a subsidiary organisation located outside the State; update the definition of “institution” in the light of changes in the financial services sector and to include credit unions within its meaning, which will allow political donations accounts to be opened within credit union institutions for the first time; prohibit the acceptance of donations of any value in the form of a cryptocurrency; impose a new obligation on the leaders of political parties to provide a written statement and an accompanying statutory declaration in respect of each year to the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, stating that all donations from outside of the State, whether in cash or in kind, have been declared and that no other donations, either in cash or in kind, took place; insert new requirements into the Act to confirm that the preparation of the annual statements of accounts must be in accordance with guidelines published by SIPO and with the relevant requirements of the FRS 102 financial reporting standard and the inclusion of all property in the ownership or control of the political party and its subsidiary organisations when the annual statements of accounts are being prepared; and provide a wide range of investigatory powers to SIPO, as the body currently responsible for regulatory oversight under the Act.

These provisions are modelled on similar powers in the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015. The proposed amendments are designed to strengthen and enhance the transparency measures already in place around the funding of our political system and will further protect our democracy against malign foreign influence at a time of unprecedented global threats.

The second set of amendments to the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 included in this motion will amend the Electoral Act 1992, the Presidential Elections Act 1993, the Referendum Act 1994, the Local Elections Regulations 1995, the Local Government Act 2001 and the European Parliament Elections Act 1997 to provide for same-day island voting at all elections and referendums in Ireland. These amendments will ensure polling at elections and referendums on the islands will take place on the same day as the rest of the country. The amendments would

be inserted into the Bill by way of a new Part 7 and an amendment to section 3 of the Bill, and will amend the Electoral Acts mentioned as follows. The amendments will remove the existing provisions in the Electoral Acts that currently allow returning officers to take the poll on islands at elections and referendums up to five days before the appointed polling day where, in the opinion of the returning officer, it would be impracticable due to stress of weather or transport difficulties to either take the poll on the appointed polling day or to deliver the ballot boxes to the count centre by 9 a.m. the following day, if the poll were to go ahead on polling day.

The amendments to the Bill will also insert new provisions into all electoral codes to allow the Minister the power to make an order to shorten polling hours on an island at an election or referendum where it would be unnecessary or impracticable to have full polling hours due to local circumstances and taking account of the advice of the returning officer. Such an order must be made no later than seven days before polling day and the amended polling period must not be less than four hours. The returning officer would be required to give public notice in the polling district of the times and date of the poll. The local circumstances to be considered include the size of the electorate on the island, distance between a polling station on an island and the count centre, advance weather forecasts or foreseen transport difficulties. Accordingly, the amendments to the Bill will amend the existing provisions in the Electoral Acts, which currently allow for polling hours on islands to be reduced on polling day itself where weather or transport difficulties affect the commencement of the poll or the timely delivery of ballot boxes to the count centre, in order to clarify that these are emergency provisions to be used only in the event of unforeseen weather or transport difficulties on polling day itself. The amendments to the Bill will amend the preliminary procedures for the counting of votes in the Electoral Acts to allow returning officers, in the event of weather or transport difficulties at an election or referendum that would give rise to the late arrival of ballot boxes from a polling station on an island, to proceed with the opening of ballot boxes and the verification of ballot paper accounts for each box that have been received. These tasks typically take a number of hours to complete and the proposed amendments would allow these tasks to be commenced pending the late arrival of ballot boxes from a polling station on an island.

I look forward to the debate on the motion.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I thank the Minister of State for allocating to me the remaining part of his time. It is unfortunate that in a debate that will last an hour, there are 50 minutes for opposition statements and seven and a half minutes for the 82 Members on the Government side. If we are talking about electoral reform, perhaps the Business Committee might start with those disproportionate arrangements.

Both the Chairman of the relevant committee and I are anxious to put on record the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny process that took place last year. I think there were seven specific meetings with some held during the depths of Covid and the restrictions. I thank all the members for contributing to that. This week we will hold 12 hours of committee hearings and every Member of the House is welcome to come. There will be many amendments. It is important we debate this because it affects every Member in this House and everyone who will be a Member of the Houses.

There is one area of concern that has not been addressed. I welcome in particular the same-day island voting. Deputy Ó Cuív has worked hard on that and I welcome that progress.

There is the issue of transparency in regard to donations which we will address later. The

issue of online political advertising remains regulated, but I regard it as facilitated. I refer to the ban on broadcast media - radio and television. Why are we allowing authoritative news sources to be deprived of revenue activity while permitting online political advertisers to benefit from it? They do not regard themselves as publishers but they will benefit from that advertising. We should ban online political advertising until we have properly regulated this space and until we treat all media outlets equally.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I thank the Minister of State for his explanation. On the Bill itself, this legislation is of enormous importance. Repeatedly during our discussions both as part of pre-legislative scrutiny and on Second Stage, it was described as a once-in-a-generation Bill. I echo Deputy McAuliffe's description of the pre-legislative scrutiny. It was probably the most detailed done in this Oireachtas and a very significant amount of time was taken by members and witnesses. It was also one of the most collegiate and cross-party pre-legislative scrutiny processes we have had. There was broad agreement among members, irrespective of party, on the need for the most modern, well-resourced and independent electoral commission, electoral register and subsequent processes to ensure our electoral processes into the future are free, fair, democratic and of the highest possible integrity.

In fairness to the Minister, he indicated early on there was an intention to bring a range of non-consequential amendments and he wrote to members of the committee outlining the general areas in which he intended to do that. I thank the Department and its officials for organising a detailed briefing yesterday that a number of us attended. It was helpful because, even with the best will in the world, some of these amendments are very technical and it is much better to have had that briefing before we go to Committee Stage.

Sinn Féin warmly welcomes both sets of non-consequential amendments. During the last Dáil, Deputy Ó Cuív had a Private Members' motion on modernising the voting arrangements on the islands passed and we supported that. My colleagues, in particular Deputies Doherty and Mac Lochlainn, were very vocal on it in the last Oireachtas and previously and we are very happy to support those amendments.

With respect to the amendments dealing with the Electoral Act 1997, anything that increases the transparency, accountability and visibility is warmly welcomed. We have no difficulty with the amendments whatsoever and will be supporting them later on.

It is important to echo what Deputy McAuliffe said. The Chair of the committee and the committee itself have made it clear there is no guillotine and we will take as much time as we need to go through these amendments. Members may have technical questions on the consequential or, indeed, the non-consequential amendments. There will be plenty of time for debate around that. We will return here for Report and Final Stages before the Bill goes to the Seanad.

I have a final point, and again it is in the spirit of collegiality we had during the pre-legislative scrutiny. Deputy McAuliffe made a fair point on the speaking time. If he had spoken to me beforehand, I would have happily given him a few minutes of my time if he needed it. We need to return to the issue of the regulation of online social media platforms and advertising on those platforms and our electoral processes. There was a very strong sense from all members of the committee - opposition and government members - that while the provisions in the Bill are welcome, they are weak. It is incumbent on us, once this Bill is passed, to return and have a wider conversation about that. I believe there is an appetite in the committee to ensure that the same principles and values that underpin the strong restrictions on buying advertising in mainstream

media should apply to social media as well. We are very fortunate that we do not have the type of malign influence that certain forms of financial investment have in other liberal democracies around the world, and we should ensure those same principles apply to media. I assure Deputy McAuliffe he has friends on this side of the House if he wants to pursue that.

However, we must get this Bill through and get the electoral commission established. It has to be an electoral commission of strength and substance, with adequate resourcing and with the power to conduct the crucial pieces of research that the Government was not willing to include in this Bill, so it can recommend further reform into the future. I look forward to the committee's debate today, tomorrow and Friday and, indeed, next week, if that is deemed necessary by the members.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** I agree with what Deputies Ó Broin and McAuliffe said. The pace of change in the evolution of online platforms is such that we will not be in a position to wait two, three, five or ten years for a reappraisal of the utility and effectiveness of this legislation. It is an important start, but we have to remain ahead of the game and keep a watching brief on how the evolution of those platforms impacts on the way we do politics in this country, the way we campaign and the activities of citizens and others, especially those from outside the State, in that regard.

I welcome this debate, but I do not think it is a debate that we should have had to force, in essence. It became abundantly clear that the amendments tabled by the Minister of State for the select committee strayed well beyond the original intentions of the legislation as initiated and as debated on Second Stage a few weeks ago. For a long time my party, a party that is largely responsible for much of the ethical framework that now governs Irish politics and for the change introduced some years ago relating to corporate donations and so forth, has been campaigning and committed to updating and modernising the framework in respect of how we fairly finance politics in this country.

The rules we introduced about a decade ago succeeded in flushing big money corporate donations out of Irish politics to a real extent, but the bequest of cash and assets worth more than £2 million from the late William Hampton to the Sinn Féin Party and that party's acceptance of it exposed some of the frailties of our system and some of the anomalies that exist between both jurisdictions on this island. It appears that the Standards in Public Office Commission, SIPO, agrees. That was clearly outlined in correspondence it issued to the Labour Party in response to concerns we raised with it. It seems that a party that is registered and active in both jurisdictions can accept limitless amounts of cash in the North regardless of the restrictions here. I am not saying that as a criticism necessarily; I am saying it is a fact of life. That is the reality and it is incumbent on us as legislators and on anybody who wishes to see a more transparent system of politics and the financing of politics on this island to call that out and to propose solutions to what is a real problem. Frankly, I would not look to what I describe as the corrupt and amoral UK system of political financing to set a benchmark for the framework of ethics in politics in this jurisdiction.

The amendments from the Minister of State reflect some of the reforms that I proposed in my Second Stage contribution on this Bill. Little did I think that such extensive reforms would be proposed to be inserted into the legislation at this point, welcome as the amendments are in principle. The way in which the Bill has been wholesale amended with the intention of shunting it very hastily into the select committee, as we will do from this afternoon, is no way to do business. I hope the House will accept that. As I said on the Order of Business last week, these

reforms are critical to the proper functioning of politics and of our democracy. The Dáil should have been given ample time to interrogate the proposals from the Minister of State properly. I accept we will do that on Committee Stage in the select committee and on Report Stage and that the process will be mirrored in the Seanad, but we should have been afforded the opportunity to have sight of the Minister of State's proposals on Second Stage.

We also did not have ample opportunity to propose amendments to the Minister of State's amendments. Two amendments have been circulated this afternoon. One of them is from me and one is from the Minister of State. That is an imperfect way of doing business late in the day. Quite frankly, it is unsatisfactory and it can lead to the making of bad law and to unintended consequences. Officials in the Department said at the very welcome briefing yesterday, which we all welcomed and found very useful, that many of the ideas reflected in the amendments came from the consultation that was undertaken with the political parties in 2021. That was an important consultation. However, if we are to accept that, surely we should accept that those changes should have been reflected in the initial Bill and not brought forward in such a hasty fashion.

In the short time I have left I will speak to some of the amendments. Bringing so-called subsidiary organisations into the ambit of the financing and donations sphere is very important, as is the requirement to declare all properties owned by political parties and subsidiary organisations and put them into the ambit of the system. We know that most wealth in this country is held not in cash but in assets, such as land and property. Where there are assets such as wealth in property there is wealth and that has to be recorded. We must be very clear about who owns those properties and assets. That is in the public interest. It is important, too, that annual statutory declarations will have to be made by party leaders and that these will include all donations from subsidiary organisations from outside the State. It is interesting that the Department confirmed in the briefing yesterday what I had suspected from my first reading of the relevant amendment, which is that this will not be governed by donation thresholds currently in place but instead it will apply to all donations in cash or coin from outside the State. That is an interesting proposal and I expect we will have some detailed debate about it. My understanding is that donations can still be made by citizens residing outside of the State in the normal way, once they are within the SIPO personal and corporate donations thresholds.

It is also very welcome that official accounting standards in terms of the recording and presentation of accounts will be required if the Minister of State's amendments are accepted, and I expect many of them will be. Again, this is very important for transparency and consistency. It will mean that every party will know what its obligations are, what the reporting and accounting standards are and, significantly and critically, the general public will be able to compare and contrast the financial position of each registered party. Nobody involved in politics in this country and nobody who is committed to democracy should fear transparency. I look forward to the debate on Committee Stage later today and throughout the week.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** First, I welcome this Bill. It is important legislation. Establishing an electoral commission is long overdue. It is an important measure, and the main thrust of the Bill is one I welcome. As I outlined on Second Stage, I have a slightly different take on this from that of other parties. While I welcome the legislation as very good, it is weak in some places and must be strengthened, especially in areas around voter education. I have tabled amendments on that which we will discuss shortly on Committee Stage. I hope the Government is able to accept some of those amendments.

I agree with the other Deputies about the importance of ensuring there is strong regulation of what happens online on social media during elections. It is an area that is not sufficiently regulated, and the Bill does not do it sufficiently. There has to be very strong transparency regulation and restrictions in that area. It is certainly something on which I am happy to work with other Deputies and other parties.

Regarding the process in respect of the later amendments that have been introduced by the Government, I have no issue with being flexible and efficient in the legislative process but we must have a certain amount of time built in to allow for sufficient scrutiny. To explain, we were given the briefing note from the Department on these new amendments when it was emailed to us at 12.05 p.m. today, approximately three and a half hours before this debate. We have other things to do so it is not as if we can simply drop everything else and go straight to the briefing note and analyse it. A group of these amendments are about more transparency in the electoral process, but we need more transparency in the legislative process, which means that if a briefing note is circulated about new amendments, and it is a good idea to have a briefing note circulated, and it is received three and a half hours in advance, after only receiving the briefing yesterday, there is insufficient time to engage and to scrutinise properly. I raise those points not to be awkward but to be helpful. We want to be able to scrutinise the legislation and the amendments as much as possible and we need an adequate amount of time to do so. I hope that can be taken on board.

I very much welcome the amendments on same-day island voting and I recognise the work done by Deputy Ó Cuív on that. These are welcome measures. They are long overdue and very important. People on the islands have made the case strongly that they should not be treated any differently from anyone else, that there are not the same barriers to transport of ballot boxes as there might have been in the past and that, especially in the modern era, there can be very consequential developments in elections right up towards the end in respect of the national debate. They feel they should not be put at any disadvantage when they cast their votes. It is very important that the Government has taken that on board.

As for the restrictions in not allowing donations through cryptocurrencies, given that that is not properly regulated and there is a lack of traceability, I support those measures. It may be that at some point in the future, matters may be different and this may need to be changed but that makes sense at the moment.

I very much welcome another long-overdue measure, that political donations accounts can be opened up in credit unions. It is a small thing but it has been a source of a lot of frustration to people that they cannot go to credit unions to open such accounts. This measure is important symbolically in recognising the very important role of credit unions, and there is no good reason it should not have been facilitated in the first place.

I also welcome the amendments on transparency regarding properties and ownership in respect of political parties. I note the Government is not supporting my Bill on a land price register, which would give greater transparency on ownership of land, including development land, but at least we will have that transparency in respect of political parties, if no one else, in terms of land interests. If the Government votes down my land price register Bill, I will be back as quick as I possibly can with a revised Bill on that issue.

Finally, people can look at this Bill and wonder whether these issues matter and whether they are technical. They absolutely matter to the heart of our democracy. Money can have an

absolutely corrosive effect on democracy. We have seen that, very sadly, with the recent events in Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, Texas, where children and their teachers were murdered in a society where there is an absolute lack of effective gun control as a direct result of the corrosive effect that money has in the US political system and that the US gun lobby has in lobbying the US political system. That is at its most extreme the highly corrosive effect money can have on the political system. We have seen the corrosive effect of money on politics in Ireland, especially its effect on our planning system, and we have in turn seen some detrimental effects of that. We see in our planning system to this day developments happening without sufficient infrastructure, proper childcare places or schools going in as a direct result of changes made in our planning system due to lobbying and due to a lack of transparency in respect of the influence of lobbyists on our planning system. These things have an effect on people's lives. It is important to do as much as we can to make our system as transparent as possible. That is why our measures have to go beyond the measures in this Bill in respect of the electoral system, welcome though they are. They are one part of the equation and, on their own, not sufficient.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Mattie McGrath, I believe you are sharing with your colleagues.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am sharing with Deputy Michael Collins and possibly an Teachta Danny Healy-Rae if he arrives.

I too welcome this long-overdue electoral reform. In many areas the measures could be wider than what is proposed, but I understand that small steps are important. I pay tribute to the many people I have worked with over the years in the county councils, South Tipperary County Council and then North Tipperary County Council, who helped out, did a lot of work and updated the register. They were really in a void and a vacuum. They did not have the proper information a lot of the time but they did their best with the limited resources they had. The electoral register was, come election day, often in a bit of a mess. Whole streets were knocked off it and there was anguish and so on. I hope we can avoid that.

I see there is to be a rolling aspect to when 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds can get involved and get on the register, if they are interested in doing so. That is very important. We hear debates and clamours for people to get the vote at 16, but we should at least get them involved. I spoke to cara liom in the canteen just a few minutes ago. I had her daughter visit here previously. I worked with his parents some years ago. The daughter has just turned 18. I asked if she was registered. It should not be beyond possible nowadays and in this modern era - although when we see what happened in Dublin Airport at the weekend, one would have to be left bewildered - that people when they get their PPS numbers are automatically put on a register when they are ocht mbliana déag d'aois. They should be. Why do we have to be so archaic and so slow? I welcome the effective engagement with the 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds, but that should happen automatically.

Then there are the death certificates. It is awfully offensive to people to get post and to see many different issues with the electoral register when there is a death in the family. There should be some link-ins with the death certificates. This is 2022. I do not know why this is so far back and so outdated. As I said, however, we are making some progress, I hope.

Then there is electoral reform around donations and so on. Certainly, we had the wild west for decades, and we now have SIPO, which does a very good job. The vast majority of people are engaged with it and comply 99.9%, and rightly so. When they misbehave and do not do

proper returns, they are dealt with severely.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Obviously, electoral reform is a huge issue. Many young people want the right to vote. Maybe we have to look at implementing rules and regulations regarding people who do not vote but who have the right to vote. Many people in this country, including my namesake, gave their life for that. It is sad to think that many people could not care to take the journey down the road to vote on voting day. I think a regulation in that regard has to be introduced.

Also, I am very worried, when it comes to electoral reform, about how the political system could be interfering, especially in boundaries and the reissuing of boundaries. A number of years ago, in my constituency we lost part of Dunmanway and lost Enniskean, Castletown Kinneigh and Newcestown. I will not go any further. I could probably name many of the west Cork townlands but you might get annoyed with me, a Cheann Comhairle. The people in those areas keep telling me they have no connection with the constituency they were put into. These are west Cork towns, villages and areas, and these people cannot understand for the life of them why they were taken out and put into the north Cork, Macroom and Ballincollig area. They keep coming to me. I have no issue with that or with trying to help them, but it does not make any sense that they have no relation to their constituency. Take the people of Enniskean. Ballineen is almost the same town and it is split down the middle, so one area is in one constituency and Ballineen is in the Cork South-West constituency. My worry is that this is to be looked at through new boundaries, electoral reform and all these commissions that are out there, but it is very strongly politically linked. It looks to me sometimes that some of these are nice little movements. The last seat might be picked up by a party that has seen its stance weakened in political society. We need to find out who in the name of God is on these committees and why the work is not being carried out by an independent commission.

As for the electoral register, I myself was a registrar years ago, and God knows they used to do a good job when there were the people on the ground carrying it out. Unfortunately, they are not there any longer.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this matter because it is surely very important that the political process or the electoral process is seen to act fairly and properly. We should all aspire to get young people to vote. We hear of many youngsters who when they turn 18 years of age do not turn up on the register for whatever reason.

*4 o'clock*

Something needs to be done. A bit of common sense must be applied here. I know that in schools they have the dates of birth of students, and they know their ages. At this stage, young people should be automatically put on the register when they reach 18 years of age. Instead, we find that so many of them are not on it when we go around one or two weeks before an election. It is absolutely ridiculous. Given all the information the authorities have, including PPS numbers and the whereabouts of people, as well as the census, in the era in which we live there should be some way for automatic registration. When people move, they are taken off the register in the area where they lived - whoever is good enough to do that - but they have no vote in the new area. Although they are taken off automatically, they are not put on automatically. We find ourselves with an awful lot of work to do. It is my belief that nobody should be taken off the register unless they are put on it somewhere else. I know the political parties have done this in the past. They take people off, but they do not look to put them on where they go. This

is something on which we should all work together to ensure that every youngster and person who is in an area has an entitlement to vote, whoever they vote for. I hope they vote for me when my name is on the ballot paper, but they should surely vote for someone. We should all ensure that they have a vote.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** They will have to vote in time too.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I support the Government's intention to provide for same-day voting on islands in elections and referendums. This would affect many island voters in my constituency of Donegal who have been advocating for same-day voting for a long time. There is no reason why island voters should be forced to vote in advance. It is important that every voter is allowed access to all information on upcoming elections and referendums. This includes making sure that everyone has the ability to watch late debates and follow changing stories before casting their votes. Island voters should not be treated any differently to the rest of the country and I am pleased to see that the intention is that they will not be any longer. We must ensure that happens. Same-day voting is more than doable for all the islands at this stage with modern communication methods.

I also support the Government's intention to amend the Electoral Act 1997. This is long overdue. I am pleased that we are finally addressing areas in this Act that require amendment. I specifically support the amendment of section 22 of the Electoral Act. I hope the Government will take on board the amendments that have been put forward regarding the term "political purposes". The inclusion of this term has created very unfortunate unforeseen consequences. I was very disappointed to see that this was not addressed in the drafting of the Electoral Reform Bill 2022. I urge the Government to accept the proposed amendments to address the issue.

A very important aspect of modern, democratic societies is ensuring that civil society has a voice and plays an important role in policymaking. To take away this role would be incredibly undemocratic and would only serve to weaken legislation in this country. However, as the law currently defines it, "political purposes" actually encompasses human rights and social justice work. Shockingly, the inclusion of this definition in the Electoral Act 1997 has placed a ban on any group of citizens raising money to campaign for a particular policy or to criticise the activities of the Government. Groups now run the risk of facing serious financial penalties and possible imprisonment for speaking out on the very issues most of them have first-hand experience of dealing with.

Advocacy groups receiving donations and working on the ground should be able to speak out, advise and criticise Government policies. Furthermore, we should be actively seeking to include these voices. Most often, these are the groups that are seeing and experiencing the issues at first hand, and they have played an incredibly important role in influencing policy in this country. We should be capable of including a definition that differentiates between community and advocacy groups and groups with private sector influence. Obviously, the intent behind the legislation in the first place was to curb the corporate lobbyists. It should be possible to do that without curbing community groups as well. The Electoral Act seriously compromises Ireland's democratic values in disallowing advocacy groups from undertaking this role. Advocacy must be supported at all costs. We must do all we can to protect the rights of groups to continue their work. Accordingly, I sincerely hope that this particular amendment is accepted.

Overall, I support this motion. However, I hope that the committee's input and the many

Opposition amendments put forward are equally supported by the Government as this legislation passes through all Stages. It is important that while we facilitate things happening in this House, the Government should be capable of facilitating work in the committee and taking on board amendments that have value put forward by the Opposition as well.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle as an deis teacht ar ais. I wish to address a couple of issues I believe are important in this debate. We do have a wonderful electoral system in this State. The PR-STV system does provide for very clear representation within the political institutions, which is very important. When we have a system whereby various minority voices are excluded for whatever reason, that leads to real difficulties within the political system. First, those minority voices are very important, and it is important that they have an influence over the direction of the country. We can learn a lot from those minority voices. Also, if minority voices are continuously blocked and they feel they do not have a democratic opportunity to get their point across, that can lead to frustration within a democracy and to negative outcomes as well. It is important that we try to maintain, as much as possible, the best representation within the democracy that we have.

In other countries, such as the United States and Britain, we see that when the representation element is not built within the system it can lead to significant difficulties. In the United States, if a person is not voting for Trump or Biden, he or she literally does not have another option in the system there. That is part of the polarising element that can be found sometimes in the United States. It is the same in Britain. Voters do not have another option because the first-past-the-post system militates against a third or fourth option ever becoming available to people, so they are forced into those two poles, in terms of political choices. I ask the Minister of State to focus on this, if he can, to make sure that in this country we have the most representative political system.

I understand that six-seat constituencies are available to the Minister and the commission under the Constitution, yet we have not seen such constituencies used in this State for probably well over 50 years. When I spoke to a Minister of State recently, I suggested that the country is full of three-seat constituencies, which militate against proper representation, and that we should be moving to six-seat constituencies. The Minister of State said the big parties would not like that. Therein lies one of the difficulties that we have in this entire process. It should not be about what the big parties want in the design of our electoral system. It should be about ensuring that we have the clearest representation possible from the electorate into the number of men and women sitting in this Chamber. That is why I would advise the Minister of State to consider six-seat constituencies. When I look at County Meath, for example, it has six Deputies, but it delivers them through two three-seat constituencies. That could result in a major difficulty because it ensures that sections of the political views of the people of the county are simply never going to be represented in here.

The other element I would like the Minister of State to focus on is the slivers of counties that find themselves in constituencies outside of those counties. Again, in County Meath, we have a sliver of Westmeath, around the Castlepollard to Delvin area, which is part of Meath West and a sliver of the eastern part of the county in the Louth constituency. What happens often times with these types of slivers is that they fall between two stools. They do not have an electorate large enough to elect a Deputy and, therefore, Deputies in general start to focus their attention on where the electorate population is. For many years, that part of Westmeath did not have a Deputy's constituency office. It now has two, thankfully, as Aontú and Sinn Féin both have offices in that constituency. It is important we try our damndest to make sure those slivers do

not happen because on a county council basis, a political basis and even in the mindset of the people who live in the area, people are aligned to counties. When 6,000 or 7,000 people are appended to another constituency, they often do not get the representation they are entitled to and that is a mistake.

I am reminded of a scene in “Killinaskully”, where a lady who looks about 90 years old tells a local politician he can be assured of her vote and adds that he can be assured of her mammy’s vote as well. The politician thanks her and inquires how long her mammy has been dead at this stage. A constituent in my county had voting cards sent to him from the age of two. I know numerous people to whom voting cards are sent in a half-dozen locations. It makes a mockery of the register and allows for electoral fraud. When we start to talk about the issue of voter turnout, we are actually talking about voter turnout in the context of a hocus-pocus register. We are not getting the actual turnout in respect of the number of citizens in a constituency who can vote.

The Minister has an opportunity to resolve some of these issues. I ask him to be bold and courageous, to step outside the actions taken over the past 20 to 40 years, to build in six-seater constituencies where they would fit within county lines and where they would give far more representation to citizens, and then make sure the integrity of counties is protected in future.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I thank all the Deputies for their contributions.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I was looking ahead at statements on transport where the Government is allowed to reply, but in this instance it is not. I made the mistake so the Minister of State can make a comment.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I again thank the Deputies. We are moving the Bill to Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Transport, Accelerating Sustainable Mobility: Statements**

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I appreciate the chance to give these statements on our national sustainable mobility policy and to listen to Deputies. I will not be here for the entire debate. There is a Cabinet meeting at the same time, which is unfortunate, but I look forward to reading the record and hearing what Members have to say on how we use this moment in time to deliver a seismic change in the nature, characteristics and environmental aspects of our transport system. The switch to this new sustainable mobility mode will be key to this. The national sustainable mobility policy, published last month, sets out the approach we need to take. I will give some examples of what is happening and talk about some of the structures we need to put in place.

I will start with the imperative for doing this. It is an imperative driven first and foremost by our climate targets. We have to halve our emissions in this decade and we expect transport to have to provide a reduction close to the average we want to see across the economy. That will not be easy. It will be incredibly challenging because many of the patterns that have been put in place are there because for five decades or more, we followed a transport policy that was

about promoting private car use, which saw ever-longer commuting distances and ever-longer amounts of time spent commuting. The last census showed approximately 200,000 of our citizens commute for more than an hour each way every day. Of those, approximately 80,000 have children under 15 and about 45,000 of them have children who are in their preschool years. This means there are millions of hours when people are not spending time with their families, and when there is major frustration with the traffic gridlock caused by this system that has been created, not to mention the emissions that come from it.

This system has also promoted an ever-lengthening sprawl, especially from our cities. If we look at the census populations for distance travelled for work, we see this doughnut pattern around each of our five cities, in particular, where people moved out and commuted ever-longer distances. As I said, it did not work in climate terms and it did not work in the time wasted by people they could have otherwise spent in a range of other much more preferable activities. It was also very expensive in resource terms and having to provide the infrastructure for it.

We now need to change and change everything. There are four legs to the stool on which we will build a new transport system. These relate to switching, including switching away from the use of fossil fuels, which we know we have to do, towards using electricity, biofuels, hydrogen and other transport fuels that will meet our needs. We need to make a modal shift away from overdependence on the private car. We need to start with our younger people, where there has been a remarkable change in the past 30 to 40 years. We have gone from a country where the vast majority of young children took the bus, walked or cycled to school, to the current environment where the vast majority are driven to school. Indeed, one of the statistics that jumps out, for example, is more secondary school girls drive themselves to school than cycle to school. How did we create such an environment? We need to change it. We need that modal shift back to active travel, walking, cycling and taking the bus and train.

We need to shorten the overall amount of travel. We need to implement the national planning framework, which references not just decarbonising but supporting more compact development and better balanced regional development so everything is not built on the east coast and there is not ever-increasing growth in the numbers travelling in Dublin. That is not just bad for the rest of the country. In the end, it is bad for Dublin because it will not be able to cope with the volume of traffic coming in and out of it.

The fourth S in this switch, shift and shorten approach to sustainable mobility has to be towards sharing. There is a significant opportunity for us to develop sharing transport modes, recognising that most cars spend almost 92% of the day parked and not being used. A sharing mode, in this time of a cost-of-living crisis, is an obvious way we can reduce the economic burden on our householders, while still providing the mobility they need without them necessarily being obliged to own every car, in addition to being flexible in how they share services to deliver that mobility.

I will give some examples of what is happening in government and what we are delivering on in four key aspects, in particular, active travel because promoting it is the most important strategic development we seek to achieve. I will outline what is happening in bus transport, how we do demand management to help us make this more sustainable shift, and some of the governance structures we are setting up in the Government to achieve this leap to halving our climate emissions, reducing the amount of travel we have to do and seeing a shift and a switch in the fuels we use.

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Recent developments in active travel are significant. A walking and cycling index was published two weeks ago, for which a very detailed survey was done of Irish householders, some 71% of whom, as citizens, said they wanted to see more investment in cycling and walking infrastructure, such as greenways, cycle tracks and better footpaths. That is one of the reasons the Government has committed to provide more than €360 million a year for them in its programme for Government, as well as in reality.

We followed the OECD recommendation of spending 20% of the transport capital budget on active travel, so we are following best international advice. We are starting to see it pay dividends. The Clontarf cycleway, which is being built at the moment, shows a new level of priority for cyclists and pedestrians as well as buses. This is what we need to do. MacCurtain Street in Cork is an example of how a busy city centre street can be changed. That will happen this year. We need to do the same for O'Connell Street in Limerick city. These are just examples of projects that are starting to be delivered. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle will know that the incredibly narrow Salmon Weir Bridge is a pinch point between the city, the university and the hospital. We are starting to provide new facilities there. This is only the start of what we need to do. Another example of what is happening on the ground is the extension of the greenway in Waterford from Bilberry into the city.

Projects are not just happening in our cities. Some 1,200 walking and cycling projects are being undertaken by local authorities across the country. One I am looking forward to is the new bridge across the Shannon in Athlone as part of the greenway from Dublin to Galway. The bridge will transform the stunning and beautiful urban space on the western side of the Shannon in Athlone town. It will open that area up, provide for significant rejuvenation and create a public place, while also providing active travel infrastructure. Other projects include the Hannover residential and cycling scheme in Carlow and the N63 cycling and pedestrian scheme in Longford. I could go on. People around the country know that we are only starting – we still have a great deal to learn – to roll out these projects, which will be critical in transforming how we view walking and cycling in our cities and will reverse the pattern that has developed over the past 40 years. When I went to school, the majority of people walked, cycled or took the bus. Today, the vast majority are driven there. We can turn that around. There are 170 schools involved in the first green school projects to improve facilities and infrastructure.

I will speak to governance later, but at this critical point, as we come out of Covid and when patterns are still flexible and changing, we need to go further and provide spaces across the country that make our villages, towns, countryside and cities safe, accessible and pleasant places to walk and cycle. The benefits of this lie not just in the climate, but in a much more efficient transport system and a healthier population. The health benefits of active travel are beyond compare.

This is also a social justice project. When I was a councillor in Dublin city, almost half of all households did not own a car - many of them could not afford one - but they suffered the worst noise and air pollution and congestion problems because of a traffic system that did not serve them. We were not providing for households that did not have a car. What were we doing? We are now providing for them. It is a more economical, healthier, cleaner, safer and much better system.

We need to do the same for bus infrastructure as we are for active travel projects. We are doing so. Last week, the third of the BusConnects routes in Dublin was launched. It is going before An Bord Pleanála. Routes are starting to be put in on the Howth, Lucan and other cor-

ridors. We are starting to reform the whole route network as well as street formation to give further priority to buses.

This is not just happening in Dublin. Last month, the sustainable transport corridors report on Cork was published by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Cork city and county councils. It will go back for public consultation in the coming months. I believe 12 corridors are being planned there. There will be a combination of cycling and walking in Cork, with 54 km more of walking and cycling routes as well as 75 km in new bus routes. The same is happening in Galway. It is critical that we develop high-quality bus corridors there, with the prospect of shaping the city around public transport rather than around roads, which I am sure the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will welcome. We could then examine the retrofitting of those bus corridors with light rail.

This is the step change that we can make, but it starts with giving priority to bus services in Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Cork and Dublin. It is happening, but it needs to be accelerated, which I will address in my closing comments regarding the governance system.

The BusConnects networks in our cities are important, but the most important bus project is probably Connecting Ireland, through which we are trying to establish new rural bus transport routes. If we deliver on this scheme, approximately 100 towns and villages will see frequent and proper public bus services for the first time. We started last year with some experimental schemes in Dingle and Leitrim. Now, we are starting to expand it. We will expand it first to the Ukrainian people who have come to our country in order to give them access to public transport services, for example, in north Clare. However, this is a five-year project. Each year, new and clever loop services will be rolled out that connect to train stations and other transport infrastructure, so that synergy is created and every part of the country can start to see public transport as part of its transport system.

This project will be key and we will have to deliver it in a time of change when the patterns that were in place before Covid are unlikely to return. This will require us to consider whether all of our buses are in the right locations, whether we need the level of commuting services that were provided previously, whether we need to match the new transport patterns that will develop with people working remotely and whether we need new town services, for example, those that we introduced recently in Kilkenny, Athlone and elsewhere. This is the type of review of our public transport system that needs to be done to help adjust to the changing patterns as we come out of Covid.

Something else that the Government has done as regards our bus system is provide a 20% reduction in all public transport fares to the end of the year as a way of encouraging people back onto public transport as we come out of Covid. For under-24s, we have provided a 50% reduction in fares to ensure that the pattern is set early in life. We will have to continue reviewing, monitoring and measuring how the public transport system is being used in this new post-Covid, heading-towards-decarbonised world to ensure that it fits patterns of transport that are changing radically from what they were previously.

Besides active travel and bus travel, a third aspect is demand management. Public transport fare changes will help us to switch away from private car ownership. It is not that private car owners are wrong or bad people. Rather, it does not work mathematically. It is expensive and creates congestion, which ends up costing everyone and creating high emissions.

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As well as lower fares, we are examining the five cities demand management study, which was published this year and will play a critical part in the changes we need to make. We need to reallocate space to support more sustainable transport solutions. We need to examine our car parking patterns to see whether they are promoting sustainable urban and rural design systems or whether we need to regulate some car parking systems so that the space can be used to create better local environments and streetscapes and support retailers without having everyone drive to every shopfront before driving off and leaving our streets less attractive, less safe, less efficient and less effective as an urban public realm.

Turning to governance, we have the right plans in place to deliver this switch. We have the national development plan, which commits €35 billion to transport over the next eight years. We have the climate action plan, which is strong and legally effective in steering in the direction of a more sustainable low-carbon system. We have the national planning framework and the national sustainable mobility policy. In its remaining two and three quarter years in office, this Government is committed to focusing on delivery and making sure we bring real, efficient, effective and quick change about because we have to be fast before transport patterns are set again as we come out of the Covid period.

It is also critical that in the next three years we meet our carbon budget for 2025, which will probably be one of the most difficult things to do in transport. We have established a leadership group within the Government and a delivery team beneath it that involves various Departments and Government agencies like the NTA and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, bringing in outside expertise and new thinking and sharing it through our national climate dialogue so that stakeholders across the country can recommend ideas, see what is happening and understand what is in the programme. Those leadership groups also include the regional authorities and the County and City Managers Association. Critically, we will go to each local authority and ask it to put forward some pathfinder projects, as we are calling them, that can be delivered in the next three years and that might be done super-fast. I will use the example of Robert Burns in Dún Laoghaire and some of the coastal cycle routes that were developed using low-cost solutions and by working with communities to get agreement on what is difficult. As we all know, space reallocation to support cycling, walking or bus transport is not easy but that is what we have to do. We must use this opportunity with the space that was previously used for mass commuting, which will not return. If we do not do so, we will fail both to meet our climate targets for the next three years and to move the entire country in a more sustainable direction.

I hope that in each city and county, local authority managers will join in this process, which has to be from the bottom up. It cannot be directed from the top down because it has to be wanted. The type of project we might look at in, for example, Limerick would involve the three universities joining together in the context of the development of a bus, cycle and walking network that would transform the city centre, bring life back into it and connect those universities. This could be done at a relatively low cost. We could also reopen the Foynes train line. One of the Deputies suggested to the Tánaiste last week that the latter could be done quickly as a way to encourage people to move away from driving to industrial estates and getting stuck. We could go from a system that is not working to fast-tracking the rail solution there to serve our industrial sites better and to provide access to Adare in time for the Ryder Cup. We want to deliver those sort of accelerated projects.

I mention Galway city and what we should do there to turn matters around. I hate to say this, and I have discussed it with the Leas-Cheann Comhairle before, but Galway probably has the least effective transport system of our five major cities. What could we do in three years or

what targets could we set ourselves? I visited Galway the week before last and asked the local authority and the local chamber of commerce to come back with proposals for BusConnects, cycling and greenway projects that we could deliver in the next three years.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will be accused of not being fair if I let the Minister go on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I will finish on the following point: we want the councils of the country to come to this leadership group with proposals for these pathfinder projects that we could deliver quickly and at low cost as part of this sustainable mobility revolution.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** These statements have been flagged since last week after the meeting of the Business Committee and the working title was "Statements on Transport" up until 6.30 p.m. yesterday. It was only at 12.20 p.m. today that the title was changed to "Statements on Transport, Accelerating Sustainable Mobility". I do not have a lot to say on accelerating sustainable mobility, but I have a lot to say on the topic in general. I find it incredible that the Minister would spend 20 minutes contributing to a debate on transport and not mention what happened at Dublin Airport.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** This debate is on sustainable mobility.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Regardless of that, the Minister has responsibility for transport and he is accused of being missing in action, of not supporting the aviation industry-----

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Not true.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** -----and of being out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Not true.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** If anybody looked at a recording of the past 20 minutes of the debate, they would point to that.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I was asked to discuss and debate sustainable mobility and how we accelerate it. It would not have been right for me to ignore that. The issue the Deputy raises is important and also needs to be debated.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** This is the Minister's first time in the Dáil Chamber since the incidents of the weekend. He is the Minister for Transport. The people of Ireland are looking to the Minister and his Department for leadership on this matter. The Minister can take it or leave it, but my opinion is that to neglect that, not reference it and not provide confidence and comfort to people who either went through the experience of Dublin Airport at the weekend or who will be travelling next weekend or further into the future, is incredible.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter of transport. While there are many areas I could focus on, the events of the weekend put one matter ahead of all others. As an island nation, air connectivity is vital for family, social, tourism and business purposes. The aviation sector has endured two difficult years during the pandemic with many workers losing their jobs and thousands of others suffering severe pay cuts. A rapid return to normality was hoped for and thankfully that is now materialising. Unfortunately, our main State airport failed to read the signs of recovery over the past year and was completely ill-prepared for the long-awaited rebound.

During the pandemic, the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, slashed employee numbers. It cut 1,000 staff. That was completely excessive, short-sighted and highlighted a total disregard for workers. It was also incredibly ill-judged for an authority with responsibility in the aviation sector. The DAA is now scrambling to refill these jobs, which should not have been abolished in the first place. In short, abolishing them was a penny-wise-and-pound-foolish approach. If the DAA had talked to a sinner soul on this island during the pandemic, it would have known that people were chomping at the bit to get back to travel. In addition, Ireland is home to Ryanair, one of the most successful and aggressive airlines on the planet. As a result, the airport should have been better prepared for a more rapid aviation recovery compared with other airports. If aviation was going to recover anywhere, it was going to recover in Ireland. Instead, the DAA was caught on the hop and passengers have paid the price.

Dublin Airport management is simply not performing, and that is not just when it comes to unacceptable security wait times. Complaints have been made about the uncleanliness of the airport, long queues for food and beverage outlets in the terminals, more delays for baggage pick-up and the struggle to get taxis. We even saw an ugly brawl in the terminal recently. The Garda response to the incident was slow, despite the opening of a brand-new Garda station in the airport this month. It all adds up to an unpleasant experience for passengers, with many dreading the thought of using the airport to go to and from Ireland.

It is having an incredibly negative impact on our international reputation. We spend millions each year marketing Ireland as a great tourist destination but coverage of this travel chaos on the BBC, in *The New York Times* and on Australian news has the potential to put tourists off. Cost-cutting by management and neglect by Government Ministers has resulted in a significant drop in the quality of the service being offered at Dublin Airport, and that is not good enough. Is the Minister for Transport happy to stand idly by and allow these problems to continue or has he any intention of acting? Throughout the pandemic I raised the need for support for the aviation sector so that it could be ready for this rebound. Airports and airlines used the pandemic as an opportunity to cut staff numbers beyond what was justified. They targeted the longest-serving, most experienced and best-paid staff.

I raised the issue of security delays with the Minister at the start of April when the problem arose ahead of the Easter break. I asked him what action he was taking to address this problem. The Minister said he was monitoring the situation and was arranging meetings with the management of the airport. The same response came yesterday when yet another meeting took place with management. The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, have stated that they will now hold daily meetings with management about this problem. Meetings are all we have had. That is it. What have these meetings achieved to date and what is discussed at them? By the look of things, it is not solutions.

The Government has a really important role to play in this matter. We are talking about the busiest State airport in the country, with 85% of all air traffic going through it. There are solutions the Government can push to help to fix this issue. First, excellent pay and working conditions are central to resolving it. There have been reports about low pay, long shifts and issues with workers getting paid their overtime. Good pay and conditions will help to attract and retain security staff in our airports. In the short term, extra personnel clearly need to be drafted into Dublin Airport, whether from other airports or, for example, by utilising Army personnel. Everything needs to be on the table. We also need to see a fast-tracking of recruitment and training for new staff.

In the medium term, as well as investment in workers, we need to see investment in new security screening equipment. Last year, Shannon Airport invested in upgrading its security machines, which removes the need to take liquids and laptops out of bags. This has the potential to speed things up significantly. In the longer term, we need a plan to rebalance some of the Dublin Airport traffic to other airports, including Cork, Shannon and Ireland West Airport Knock. As I said, 85% of traffic currently goes through Dublin.

The Minister for Transport cannot wash his hands of this problem. All Ministers needs to step up and take responsibility. They cannot just turn up at the airport when a ribbon needs cutting. When the pressure is on, they need to stand up and be counted.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Over the weekend, we witnessed shocking sights at Dublin Airport arising from issues with capacity. There was chaos, with more than 1,000 people missing flights, many of them unable to depart for holidays they had waited three years to go on and others delayed in visiting family or leaving for work opportunities. Some of those people will not get the time off work at a later date to take another holiday. For many of them, this was their one opportunity.

Despite the Government support it received during the Covid crisis, through the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, the DAA laid off 1,000 staff in order to reduce any losses during the pandemic. The company saw an opportunity to get rid of workers who had the best terms and conditions and who were the longest working there. This was about profit and greed. That is why we ended up where we did at the weekend. The DAA tried to maximise its profits on the backs of its workers, and the people of Ireland paid for that this weekend. We made a show of ourselves. In fact, the DAA made a show of the country. Nowhere else would such a company's management be allowed to behave as the DAA's did. In so doing, it made a joke of us as a nation. For the Minister to come in here to today and indicate the company will be let away with it, instead of standing up and giving a stinging criticism of it, is unbelievable.

There is another perspective to consider, which relates to my constituency of Cork North-Central. If I walk into Dublin Airport today, I will see there are 178 flights to 88 separate destinations. If I go into Cork Airport, however, there are only 26 flights to 11 destinations. The Government has talked about balanced regional development and putting Cork forward as an alternative to Dublin for proper regional development. The Minister and other Ministers have said they care about regional airports. However, the facts are the facts. They have not delivered and they do not care about regional airports. The DAA and the Government care about only one thing, which is jamming every passenger into Dublin Airport. We need to think outside the box now. We have regional airports that are crying out of support. Will the Minister finally deliver that support, work towards balanced development and ensure what we saw at the weekend will never happen again?

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** I raise a long-running issue in my constituency of Louth, which includes parts of east Meath. I refer to the need to extend the short hop zone to Laytown and Drogheda. I have raised this issue on many occasions with the NTA at meetings I requested, at committee meetings and in representations to the authority. To be honest, I have been met with a brick wall. This is a pity because the extension really is a no-brainer.

A monthly rail ticket to Dublin from Laytown costs €237. A monthly ticket from Balbriggan to Dublin costs €154. Laytown is the next stop after Balbriggan and the rail distance between the two stations is a mere 9 km. The villages of east Meath, including Laytown, Bettystown

and Donacarney, as well as Drogheda, have experienced a major expansion in their populations over the past decade or so. A huge percentage of those people commute to Dublin every day. There is a major burden on them, which they have been talking about for years. Clearly, the NTA is not listening, which is why I am raising the issue with the Minister today.

There is a total inequity in price fare structures, which penalises people using Drogheda and Laytown stations. Commuters are resorting to driving their cars to Balbriggan to avail of the short hop zone fares. From an environmental point of view, this is absolutely bonkers, as I am sure the Minister will agree. He is leader of the Green Party and Minister for Transport. He is aware of this issue. His policies are encouraging people to drive part of the way to work because they cannot afford public transport. These are the policies he is putting forward and that people must live with, day in and day out. These are the policies coming from a Green Party Minister for Transport.

Witnesses from the NTA made it clear to the transport committee several weeks ago that they are not even looking at fare reductions. We have seen of late that the Minister can reduce fares with the stroke of a pen. People in Laytown and the whole east Meath area, along with Drogheda, have been asking for more than a decade for an extension of the short hop zone to include them. As a basic principle, public transport should be affordable and accessible. Given the NTA's reluctance to ensure this is the case, it is clear the Government is the only entity that is able to do it. There is an environmental and economic case to reduce the fares. It is up to the Minister now to act. He gave a fine opening statement in which he talked about super-fast and sustainable travel and encouraging people to use public transport. As I was listening, I was waiting for him to acknowledge the situation I am raising and to tell me he is going to address it straight away, because it is bonkers. The policies that are in place under his watch are giving people no option other than to drive part of their journey to work in order to avail of the short hop zone fare up the road.

Will the Minister continue talking the talk or is he going to walk the walk? Will he give a commitment to take action, particularly in view of all the reasons I have outlined and given that it is a no-brainer from an economic and environmental point of view? Will he listen and will he act? He talked about speedy action. Is he going to address this issue or will he, like the NTA, turn a blind eye to it? Will he extend the short hop zone? People want to travel by train. The Minister is talking about encouraging the use of public transport seven days a week. Will he make it more affordable and accessible for the people I am talking about to do precisely that by extending the short hop zone, or is he just going to ignore the issue? Which will it be?

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The Government has pulled an absolute stroke with these statements. It is deeply unfair that the information only went out to the parliamentary inbox at 12.20 p.m. that the discussion would focus on sustainable mobility. The Minister said he was asked to speak on that particular issue. Who asked him to do so? I am on the Business Committee and I know nobody on the Opposition side asked for statements on sustainable transport. Did the Taoiseach or the Chief Whip ask the Minister to focus on that aspect? It is incredible, after the weekend just gone, that he did not demand that these statements be used to discuss what happened at Dublin Airport.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Had that been suggested, I would have been quite happy to agree to it. I came into the Chamber on the understanding-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Who asked?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I was given a paper. I actually gave my own speech along the lines that we were here to discuss accelerating sustainable mobility. That is what I did. I heard no one say the debate should be on the airport. Had it been, I would have been happy to accede to that. However, to criticise me after the fact for following the Dáil instructions is not fair.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Who gave that instruction?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I did not give the instruction.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** You are the Minister. The Business Committee did not ask for this. You are the line Minister and you had a meeting with the DAA today.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I presume it is the Government. The Government made the decision that we would have statements on sustainable mobility as I understand it a week ago.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy's point is made and there should be no more interaction.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The Minister interacted.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is running.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** As a small party, we need to prepare. In my hand is a list of the issues I was going to raise about the airport and this is the extra stuff I wanted to bring up. I spoke to my PA yesterday to discuss what we were going to speak about today. Everyone needs time to plan what they are going to say. It is understandable that we would have thought that the one thing we would have discussed with the Minister for Transport today was the airport. It is okay. I will move on.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** Had someone raised that, I would have happily accommodated it. No one asked for that in advance.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It is incredible.

I will speak a bit about Dublin Airport and it is fair that I do I, but I will try to mix it in with the title that has been dropped on us at late notice. We are talking about sustainable transport. We are talking about the airport. This crisis has been multifactorial and has been years in the making. It will require a turning point as to where the airport is going and this should be it. It needs to become a good employer again. It needs to become an employer that will hire staff on good wages and good terms and conditions. Staff should again be proud to work there.

The airport is now asking the Commission for Aviation Regulation, CAR, for an increase in airport charges to fund its development plans which have sustainable transport elements to them. It wants to build solar farms to help out with the airport. It wants to move to become properly carbon neutral. It wants the metro to be linked up, as we all do. It wants to reduce the number of cars using the airport. It wants more public transport using the airport. It wants to make all these changes. How can it with any credibility come to the Minister, any future Minister or the CAR and say, "We need more money. Give us your money. It will be in safe hands with us. We know what to do with it."? Its credibility has been absolutely shot.

It is a massive problem because we need an airport that functions. Air travel will be here to stay. We are an island nation; we need air travel. Air travel and aviation need to play their role

on the climate agenda. This has always been a charge against the Minister. He is a Green Party member. His credentials on climate issues are unquestionable. However, there is a sense that he does not want to get involved in the airport because it conflicts with that. That is the sense that is out there. He needs to lead on this. Privately he needs to drive what needs to be done in aviation.

The lever of the pandemic was pulled very quickly cutting many staff from good secure employment, to be replaced, as the Minister is being replaced now, with other staff who are not on the same pay or terms and conditions which is outrageous. Trade unions and those of us on the left warned about this for years and it has happened.

I will raise some other issues while I have the floor. Nationwide transport fare reduction has generally been a good thing, but it has been unequally applied. I raise an issue highlighted to us by activists in Labour Youth and other activists in Wexford and the south-east region. Young people travelling to college or work from Wexford, Wicklow and Kildare have been excluded from the fare reduction. The reduction has not applied to Expressway or Wexford Bus and unfortunately many students and low-paid workers use these services to get to college or their workplace, be it in the capital or their surrounds. They feel disenfranchised and excluded from this. The Government has trumpeted this as a massively good thing. It is good for those to whom it applies, but it does not apply equally and those outside Dublin and in rural areas are suffering.

The 90-minute journey Leap card fare is also a good thing but some wrinkles need to be ironed out on a regional basis. In north County Dublin, rail services to and from Balbriggan and Skerries are excluded even though Rush and Lusk and Donabate, which are not on the DART line but on the commuter line, are included. As they are within the 90 minutes, it seems a line has been drawn in an arbitrary fashion. This could be easily resolved. Common sense demands that it would be resolved. Those in the outer Dublin area, in Fingal, South County Dublin or the west should be included in the 90-minute fare because they can take 90-minute journeys.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** When we have debates, they need to deal with the issues of the day. The burning issue for the public at the moment is that of the delays at Dublin Airport. For future reference, it is critical that any Minister coming in would address many other issues but would also address the issues of the day. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has had to leave the Chamber, but I have no doubt the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, will convey this back to him.

Aviation needs to be front and centre. The Minister is meeting representatives of the DAA and they will also appear before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications at 1.30 p.m. tomorrow. We need to see a plan from the DAA as to how it will ensure that passengers can get through Dublin Airport on time before the upcoming bank holiday weekend when the numbers will double from 50,000 to 100,000 passengers per day into the summer period.

We need to understand how this situation arose last weekend. Was it simply rostering? I accept there is a mismatch with the staff levels being at 70% of what they were in 2019 and traffic volumes at 90% or 95%. Ultimately what happened over the weekend is down to management. The security check workers are under extreme pressure. I regret if passengers took their frustration out on the staff who are checking bags. That should not happen and I regret if it did happen because there are reports that it did.

The public are entitled to a service from the DAA. We look forward to hearing from its representatives at the committee tomorrow. We need to know when its plan which is due to go to Government tomorrow will be published so that we can discuss it in depth.

The burning issue is obviously Dublin Airport. I am a Deputy from the mid-west and Limerick. The national aviation policy was published in 2015. The Joint Committee on Transport and Communications published a report in December 2020 calling for that to be reviewed. We now need to look at our overall policy for the distribution of airline traffic outside Dublin. Dublin Airport is creaking at the seams. Shannon Airport has a capacity to handle 4.5 million passengers per year. It peaked at about 1.7 million. It could take an extra 2 million passengers.

No doubt the same is true for Cork, Knock and other airports. That review needs to be commenced immediately. We need to look at the redistribution of air traffic to places like Shannon and Cork. Passengers can pass through Shannon in 20 minutes. It now has state-of-the-art scanning equipment. Passengers travelling to the US need only have their baggage scanned once whereas through Dublin it can be twice. Passengers can also avail of pre-clearance there. Cork is also a great airport. We are a small island nation and need to think outside the box. The Netherlands has a policy in place to redistribute traffic to other airports in the country to take pressure off Schiphol Airport.

*5 o'clock*

We need to do likewise.

I will move on to deal with other issues. The Limerick Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy, LSMATS, is currently out to public consultation. There are many good things in it, including the intention to link Shannon Airport to Limerick city by rail. There is a short-term proposal for a bus service from Shannon Airport to link in with the existing rail line at Cratloe and Sixmilebridge. That plan uses the existing rail network. That is something I pushed at a public consultation meeting to consider the first draft of LSMATS. We need to see targets for the roll-out of bicycle lanes and so forth. The Minister intervened to issue a directive to the National Transport Authority, NTA, which is the professional body charged with considering this particular transport strategy for Limerick, and told it not to proceed with stage 2. That was an inappropriate intervention on the part of the Minister. I ask him to reconsider. We are looking for sustainable travel. Limerick has serious traffic problems. The northern distributor road was there for that purpose. The first phase, which was from Coonagh to Knockalisheen, has a bus lane and cycle lanes. We need phase 2 to Castletroy. There are also serious traffic problems in Corbally.

I also ask that the 20% reduction in public transport fares be extended beyond 2022. I would like to see it extended into 2023. It is a proactive measure and I would welcome its extension. We need public transport, road, rail, cycle lanes and buses working in harmony to ensure we have a better sustainable transport system.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** Unlike others who have spoken before me, I will speak to the topic, which is the sustainable mobility policy. At the outset, I welcome the proposal from the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to establish and accelerate pathfinder projects.

I will speak with respect to my own city and constituency of Limerick and the mid-west region. Before and since entering government, the Minister, I and the Green Party have persuaded many stakeholders of the vision for Limerick and the mid-west of a growing, thriving,

sustainable, European region that will not only provide employment opportunities for those who come from the region but which will also provide opportunities for employment, a high-quality life and quality jobs to people from across Europe and the world. We want them to come to Limerick and the mid-west to live an enjoyable, healthy and rewarding life.

This vision we sold to the people of the mid-west is underpinned by the national development plan. To achieve it, we must get planning and development right. We cannot cherry-pick from this plan. We must aggressively pursue it. Limerick will grow and the question is how that will happen, how much will it grow and how quickly. The path to fastest and best growth is to plan future development around the four rail lines that intersect at Limerick city.

We talk about transit-oriented development, which is the idea that large medium- to high-density residential, commercial and employment projects should be built on a small footprint on or near a transport node such as a train station. It is imperative that we not only provide high density but we also provide high-quality developments where people want to live. The Limerick plan is to develop a network of new stations at Ballysimon, Parkway shopping centre, Moyross, Lisnagry, Patrickswell, Adare and so on. Raheen industrial estate, for example, has 6,000 workers. I have spoken with the leaders of various industries who are very keen for a train station at Raheen industrial estate. It is critical that the LSMATS is aligned with this vision and that we look at the national planning framework to see if it is also aligned with the vision. It is also critical that the city and county development plans of both Limerick and Clare are aligned with that vision and that we get the zoning around these transport zones correct and appropriate.

It would be remiss of me not to mention, during statements on transport, the remarkable Ms Dervla Murphy, from Lismore in the Acting Chairman's county of Waterford, who passed away recently. She was a fearless, intrepid explorer who was fiercely dedicated to her mode of transport of choice, that is, the bicycle. She inspired generations to travel and to enjoy getting off the beaten track. She understood the value of spending time with local people, getting a true sense of place and she conveyed that experience to many of us through her honest and frank writing. She took the road less travelled and that made all the difference.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Unfortunately, this debate is far too short and I only have two minutes to contribute. I will try to be brief. I have been a strong advocate of public transport. I must say that the inaction over years by the Department of Transport and the NTA on simple issues that could be done immediately has been absolutely staggering. There was a consultation on Connecting Ireland but we do not have any buses. I have been asking Ministers, including the present Minister, and the NTA if they have done any scientific analysis or research on the relationship between the frequency of service, increases in that frequency and the number of passengers. The answer is a deafening silence. It is a fundamental question.

What we know, of course, is that when the frequency of rail services from Cork to Cobh and from Athenry to Galway, and bus services from Galway to Carraroe, were increased, there was a dramatic increase in the number of passengers. We need to get the academic, scientific evidence because it will stand up the proposition that if there is an infrequent service, people cannot be expected to take it.

We campaigned for three buses to leave Galway for an Cheathrú Rua and to come back along the most populated route out of Galway. It was amazing that it took a year and a half for the NTA to make a decision that should have been made in 24 hours. We hear about active travel but there is a lack of action. They want great and fantastic things but never seem to do

the simple things that would change people's lives dramatically.

The point made about non-urban fares is valid. The 20% reduction in fares did not apply to the only non-subsidised company in the country, Expressway, and the private companies that provide services. It is amazing. They are all in rural Ireland, which is also amazing.

The Minister mentioned the Salmon Weir Bridge in Galway. I have for years wanted to see that bridge designated for public transport and active travel only. However, there is one snag. If we do that and do not build an extra bridge, that is, the bypass, two bridges are left across the River Corrib and one of them is very narrow. It is not adequate to allow the 80,000 people to the west and the 3 million people to the east to get across.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** It is a timely opportunity to discuss transport, particularly given the biblical scenes we had in Dublin Airport over the weekend. I note the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is not here and I hope he is reading the inside of his passport where it states:

The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ireland requests all whom it may concern to allow the bearer, a citizen of Ireland, to pass freely and without hindrance and to afford the bearer all necessary assistance and protection.

I hope when the Minister has read that, he hands it over to the head of the DAA because the delays that Irish citizens experienced last weekend, before they even got out of the State, were a disgrace. I believe the scenes are indicative of what goes on and how we work in this State. There are many queues. When one peels back the expensive veneer, there is dirty chipboard underneath. There are queues at the airport and in soup kitchens. There are invisible queues for healthcare services and for children seeking places to cater for their special educational needs.

Transport organisations and the Government must realise that after major events, such as pandemics and wars, the relationship between employees and employers needs restructuring. The terms of conditions of workers in the DAA must be considered.

Around sustainability and transport, closer to home in north Kildare, the DART service goes as far as Maynooth. There is a proposal for a station a mile from Kilcock but the line will not go as far as Kilcock. We have written several times to the Minister on this issue and I have spoken to him about it. The station is already there. The commuters are there. Kilcock is a thriving village. We need to bring it as far as Kilcock or at least have a park-and-ride facility there to accommodate all of the people who live in north Kildare.

This weekend we will be hearing about the Kildare bus routes, Nos. 120 and 115 and the absolutely chaotic service for the thriving towns of Straffan, Prosperous, Clane and Kilcock, where the buses either arrive full or do not arrive at all and passengers are none the wiser as they wait. If a Green Party Minister cannot see the emergency in public transport in our rural towns and villages, what hope do we have? Public transport in rural areas is essential. A few cycling lanes in Dublin is just not going to cut it. Climate change is upon us and we cannot act as if it is in the future anymore. We need to pull out all the stops and deliver on public transport all across the State.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I listened to the Minister's opening statement which was absolutely tone deaf. He did not mention Dublin Airport in his opening statement and I had to ask myself if he is actually for real. It is absolutely incredible. His Cabinet colleagues must be cringing. The issues affecting Dublin Airport over the last number of weeks have been well

documented. On Sunday 1,000 people missed their flights due to delays at the airport. I worked in the travel industry for 19 years and I find that absolutely unbelievable. It is unimaginable that 1,000 people went to the national airport but could not get through and missed their flights. The Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, had the audacity on Sunday to tweet advice to passengers to contact their airline. Who can get through to an airline on a Sunday? I do not know what the authority expected people to do.

This was predicted, however, and all of this has its roots in the laying off of 1,000 workers by the DAA during the pandemic and the subsequent lack of workforce planning as international travel reopened. At the time of these lay offs, Mr. Jerry Brennan of SIPTU told the DAA that it would need to rehire people because the queues would be extending through the car parks and unfortunately, never have truer words been spoken. This is incredibly frustrating and disappointing for those people who missed their flights but it has also become an embarrassment for the State. People have had to queue outside the terminal for over three hours and we have had little response from the Minister in charge. It is absolutely unbelievable that he did not mention Dublin Airport in his opening statement today. I cannot believe it. I thought I would come down and read the statement in case I missed it. There is no actual statement available which suggests the Minister was ad-libbing. If he was ad-libbing he could have at least mentioned Dublin Airport.

Adjacent to my own constituency is Shannon Airport. The types of issues affecting Dublin Airport have not been repeated in airports such as Shannon and Cork. Obviously, there is a lot less traffic at these airports. Shannon Airport is at the heart of the economy of the mid-west but for a long time it has been under-resourced and under-appreciated. The Shannon Group was over 12 months without a chairperson under the Minister's watch, at the height of the pandemic. Government supports for the workers at the airport were delivered at a snail's pace, ultimately leading to job losses. Surely following the calamity at Dublin Airport, the Minister will recognise the importance of increasing traffic through the regional airports. Prior to the pandemic almost 90% of flights departed from Dublin Airport. In debates on aviation during the pandemic there was much talk of planning for the future of aviation but the issues at Dublin Airport indicate that these plans were not developed. Shannon Airport accounts for 15,000 direct and 45,000 indirect jobs in the mid-west region. There is potential to grow and develop the airport but this must begin with an increase in flight options from the region. I would like to hear some details from the Minister on how he intends to alleviate pressure on Dublin by supporting Shannon Airport further.

Finally and briefly I want to mention a road in my constituency, the Coonagh to Knockalisheen road. The Green Party opposed it and forced it back down. The road is 35% completed but the company doing the work collapsed and went into receivership. We are now left with one third of the road built and we need to get it finished. Will the Minister intervene and make sure the contract is completed as fast as possible and that the people who build critical infrastructure are back doing just that?

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** The fiasco at Dublin Airport has dominated this debate today, but not by the Minister. There is no doubt that there is a significant problem with mismanagement at the airport. I wish we had more time to deal with that issue in its own right. We will need to come back to it at some point but I hope the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications will have an opportunity to go through the issues in considerable detail tomorrow.

I want to focus on the issue of bus transport. I have been an advocate and an active campaigner for better public transport for decades. I am not against changes to the bus network or to how buses are run and organised and it is important to say that at the outset. BusConnects has nine spines, two of which have been rolled out. The Howth one seemed to work very well. There were changes in the numbers but the overall service did not change an awful lot. There have been substantial changes in the sea spine and there are significant problems with it. It is working well in some respects but not in others. Myself, my colleague, Councillor Nuala Killeen, and some other party members conducted a survey in which more than 1,200 people took part, either online or in face-to-face settings. In the face-to-face settings a very large number of people said they would not take part because the bus service no longer met their needs.

If one listens to the traffic reports on the radio, every day north Kildare is featured. We must have a bus and train service that works but there are significant problems. The NTA is very slow to make changes. I will give a quick run down of some of the issues people mentioned in the survey. Common issues were morning buses not turning up and less frequent services than previously. The No. 52 bus is scheduled to run once an hour but frequently does not turn up, both ways. People reported a high rate of empty buses. Some buses run every half an hour and on one particular route, a taxi would be an over-supply. A double decker bus is running from 4.30 a.m. to 11.30 p.m. and is practically empty when there are other routes where demand is not being met. This is a diversion from a direct service. The NTA is not managing the feedback. In fact, my office has become the complaints department. People do not feel safe at bus stops. Very often they are alighting from feeder buses in unlit areas and can be waiting for up to half an hour for the bus to arrive. There is a mismatch between the times the buses arrive. Very often the buses arrive full and an awful lot do not show up at all. I have never come across such a number of no-shows and it is not exclusively on Bus Connects. As we roll out those spines, we really have to get to grips with the problems in each before rolling out the next one. Otherwise, the same pattern will emerge.

We were told by people who want to use the bus every day and who would be very happy to do so that they cannot because of the amount of no-shows. They cannot be sure if they go that they can get back. This is a problem on the services that were privatised and awarded to Go Ahead as well as on Dublin Bus services. Frequently the No. 126 to Naas is cancelled after 7 p.m. The No. 120 bus has become a joke, particularly in the mornings. People told us that they had to take a day's leave because the bus simply did not turn up. These are buses that would ordinarily be full. These are not buses that just a small number of people are using. People are being left behind frequently. The NTA has told us that it is aware of this and is monitoring it. Either it can provide a service or it cannot.

If one makes a criticism, one has the public transport lobby on top of one saying that one should not be criticising changes but the reality is that some of those changes were not good. It was well flagged in advance that some of the changes would be problematic and would not meet the needs of the public. One thing that we did not anticipate, even when there was a service advertised, is the number of no-shows. They have become a real problem on both Dublin Bus and Go Ahead services. It is all very well to have reduced fares - that was a good initiative - but they are no good if people end up having to use taxis. I am coming across that frequently and then it becomes uneconomic to use public transport. There are very significant problems and I do not feel we are being heard. Kildare County Council is having a special meeting with the NTA to discuss the no-shows on the No. 126 and No. 120 service. This is the kind of public pressure that is coming on in relation to delivering a public transport service. It has to be reli-

able. If it is not reliable, people will use it once and then give up if they have an alternative.

I cannot impress enough on the Minister of State that unless the various spines are rolled out in a way that works for people, and unless he gets that right and gets feedback from people, this will not work. The same problems are emerging for people in Lucan as are emerging in north Kildare. I ask the Minister of State to take particular note of this and to get on to the National Transport Authority to make the service work for people. These people are being told they are to be provided with a service. We will not have a sustainable transport solution if people feel that the service is unreliable.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I greatly appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this timely and important debate. I will not dwell too long on the absolutely farcical scenes going on in Dublin Airport at the moment, but I will reiterate every comment made by my colleague, Deputy O'Donnell, earlier in this debate and throughout the week in his role as chairperson of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. I am happy to leave it there. We all know that what is happening is completely unsustainable. There needs to be a swift and sustainable resolution. The powers that be at Dublin Airport who have allowed this to occur must be answerable to the Government and to the Oireachtas.

There are three areas I would like to focus on, which are relatively positive areas on which we should be able to find some agreement. I really welcome that we have had the first decrease in public transport fares in 75 years. This is extremely welcome. I absolutely welcome that this is scheduled to go through 2022. We need real indicators to show the success of this measure in the context of uptake in the use of public transport. If possible, perhaps this is something that should go right into 2023 also.

There are two other areas I wish to raise specifically, which will not be unfamiliar to the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, given that we represent neighbouring constituencies. The first is in relation to Luas capacity. Many of the problems faced by the Luas, and especially the green line, have been masked by the pandemic and by the welcome shift towards working remotely and will be masked by the fact that secondary schools are currently breaking up, and third level institutions have already broken up, for the summer. It cannot be avoided, however, that come September we once again will see the Luas at absolute peak capacity throughout the green line. Across my constituency, at the stops at Glencairn, Leopardstown Valley, or Ballyogan, people are prepared to take the Luas coming out of town towards Brides Glen and Cherrywood, to try to get a Luas back into town, such is the issue around timetabling, capacity and congestion. The Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, knows as well as I do that there are upwards of 5,000 new homes about to come on stream along that line on Ballyogan Road, in Cherrywood, in Glenamuck Road and in Enniskerry Road, and across Stepside and Carrickmines. The need to genuinely look at increasing the capacity on the Luas is vitally important.

The last area of transportation and mobility I will speak on is the old reliable, which is Dublin Bus. The whole point of encouraging people to get onto Dublin Bus and use it more often is not just about frequency and fares: it is also about ensuring timetables that work around the needs of the vast majority of people who take those buses. I will give the Minister of State two examples of the No. 47 and the No. 44 buses that start out in Stepside or Enniskerry. These routes serve many schools and businesses, along with St. Vincent's hospitals and the city centre. Those timetables are simply not working for the vast majority of people, and particularly those secondary school children in that area of Stepside, Sandyford or Leopardstown. They simply do not have a bus available for them to get into school in adequate time. I ask the Minister of

State to speak with Dublin Bus to raise this issue.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** Given the disruption to transport we have all seen in the last days, it is really timely that we are having this debate now. It seems very clear that what is happening at Dublin Airport is due to staff shortages after Covid. If pay and conditions need to be reassessed to attract and retain talent, then I really hope they are reassessed. If we have Dublin Airport branded as a more attractive place for people to work, it would ensure that we could stop these absolutely embarrassing scenes we are seeing. It is embarrassing because the DAA knows exactly how many flights are coming in and going out. The DAA knows exactly how many passengers to expect but it is simply not catering to them.

I also wish to highlight some local transport issues. I have raised the matter of Kishoge rail station again and again on the floor of the Dáil. It is 12 years since the station was built and trains still whizz past it without stopping. We need that station opened. We need it opened as a matter of urgency.

On the C spine, which is one of the two BusConnects spines in operation at the moment, we need the full service and not buses that drop off the app instead of arriving. We also need to deliver a public service to the people who were previously served by the Dublin Bus routes, including those people in Hillcrest, Dodsborough, Lucan village and Laraghcon.

The planned W6 orbital route is a new route that will go from Maynooth to Tallaght. It will connect with places such as Hazelhatch, Celbridge, Newcastle, Rathcoole and Saggart. It is a really important orbital strand but we are hearing now that it is going to be delayed again. With so many students going either to Maynooth University or to the Technological University Dublin in Tallaght, we need to make sure that we are providing those transportation links, especially for those commuters going to Greenogue.

With regard to commuters, while we all absolutely welcome the implementation of the progressive and positive measure of the reduction in fares in public transport, which is currently a 20% reduction across the board and a 50% reduction for young people, I am very concerned that commuters who use public transport every day are not feeling any benefit from this new measure. A TaxSaver commuter ticket is about 20% more expensive than using a Transport for Ireland, TFI, Leap card to go in and out of work five days per week. That does not make sense. This was supposed to be a measure brought in to benefit people who plan ahead and get an annual ticket. I would love for us to take a look at this.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I will start on a positive note. For the first time, I will be able to walk my three and a half-year-old son to preschool this September because we are availing of a €12 billion investment from central government into connecting Glanmire to the city and Glanmire to east Cork. We are seeing the benefits of active travel and the extension of greenways and cycleways in my area, which is very welcome.

I echo concerns that were mentioned by Deputy Ó Cuív earlier about the frequency of services. As I said, I am lucky to live on the Cork to Cobh railway line. I regularly use the train heading up from Little Island or Glounthaune into the city. Given the Government investment of €185 million to that line to make it fully electrified and fully accessible, in a couple of years' time we will have a train every five minutes. This will be massive for the area. Unfortunately, there are many rural areas in my constituency such as Grenagh, Carrignavar, Whitechurch and Upper Glanmire where the bus service is so infrequent it is like apples and oranges when com-

pared with the offering of public transport on both sides. I am aware that we cannot have trains on everybody's doorstep but, at the same time, in those rural areas in particular we need to have a greater emphasis on public transport in the context of our bus provision.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the debacle that is Dublin Airport. I believe it is over-simplistic for people to suggest diverting flights to Cork or Shannon but the Government and the DAA should be doing their best to subsidise additional flights out of those regional airports. Perhaps in the medium term it is one way that we could actually alleviate some of the pressure off Dublin. In the shorter term, something has to be looked at in the area of security and how quickly people can get through those channels in Dublin Airport.

The reduction in fares that was handed out some weeks ago is to be broadly welcomed. It is great to see people using that train line, which has been there most of my lifetime. I see people using it for the first time now, and using the buses that are going in and out of the city quite frequently. It is now cheaper and more competitively priced for people to leave the car at home, not have to pay the parking charges in the city, or wherever it is they are off to, and to get the public transport option. This needs to be further built on going into future budgets. It is one part of our policy where we need to sweat the assets as best we can. If these buses are running on these different lines, we need to make sure that they are full and operating at capacity to get the true benefit from them.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I am very concerned about rural train stations, and especially in my area of Carlow-Kilkenny. It is unacceptable that Irish Rail is actually downgrading these stations such as Bagenalstown and Thomastown. These stations are being left unmanned. When people go there, there are no toilet facilities. It is very hard for tourists who want information because there is no one there to help them and guide them on where they are going. This is unacceptable. While the funding that is there is welcome, rural Ireland is never as big a part of things as it should be in reality. We should not be downgrading our train stations because they play a huge part in rural Ireland. I met representatives of Irish Rail and told them my concerns and those of the people who had contacted me about the service. I ask that this issue be addressed.

Carlow town was meant to get a town bus service, with work being done by Carlow County Council and the Minister. My understanding is that it was to be ready and up and running in the summer. Tomorrow is 1 June and I have some concerns about this. What is the timescale? I ask the Minister of State to come back to me on this matter. I know the funding is there. I have been told that by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I welcome that funding but it is important that we deliver on this project. Carlow is now a university town, as the south east has its own university. It is great to have the university but we need proper transport. We need to make sure the town bus service that was committed to is delivered on as soon as possible.

What happened at Dublin Airport was unacceptable. We cannot allow that to happen again. The coming weekend is the long weekend and we have to make sure nobody is in a position where they cannot catch their flight or miss their flight because of this situation. I ask the Minister of State to make sure of that and to keep everybody updated. I got a lot of phone calls today from people in my area asking about what will happen over the weekend, how many hours beforehand they have to be there and what the situation is. Communication from Dublin Airport and from the Government will be critical to keep people informed about what is happening in the next few days. We cannot allow that situation to happen again.

**Deputy Chris Andrews:** Unsurprisingly, I agree with my colleague Deputy O'Rourke, who said the Minister for Transport should have come in here today and briefed us on the shambles that is Dublin Airport and the queues there. It is horrific for people planning to go away. There is no clarity. It is an absolute shambles. The Minister of State himself would know that. It must be embarrassing to be working in the Department of Transport and to have to try to justify what is happening, because there is no justification.

I welcome this opportunity to speak on the issue of transport in Dublin Bay South. The communities in Ringsend, Irishtown and Sandymount are facing a nightmare due to the lack of public transport. There will be 3,500 new homes built on the Irish Glass Bottle site and there is no prospect of a Luas, which was part of the planning application and the strategic development zone, SDZ. Residents in the new houses are being held hostage. We have a cycle lane but I think I am the only one who uses it. Some 3,500 new homes are being built on this site and the Luas has been kicked down the road for another ten or 15 years. Seán Moore Road is already a car park. Residents cannot move in or out during peak hours. The Government has now decided not to put a Luas there even though that was an important part of granting planning permission for the glass bottle site. Residents feel let down by the Government. They feel it is a game of smoke and mirrors. They were told they would get a Luas, new bridges, public transport and infrastructure. The preparatory work is taking place for the homes on the glass bottle site and yet none of that infrastructure is being planned. Residents in Ringsend, Irishtown and Sandymount are being let down by this Government.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** This is some farce. We are here to make statements on transport and the Minister for Transport is not even here. He has left. The Minister of State who is here is not even assigned to the Department of Transport. When the Minister did speak, he spoke for 20 minutes without reference to the one aspect of transport policy that the whole country is talking about, that is, the debacle at Dublin Airport. Even if we were to take into account the new language the Department has insisted we use, around accelerating sustainability and mobility, the Minister's remarks simply tell me there are two realities in this country - the reality that goes on in Eamon Ryan's head and the reality facing the real people of Ireland, constituents such as mine.

I come from a county and a region that has no rail network and this Government has zero plans to change that. Anybody relying on public transport relies on the bus services, which are minimal at best. That is being generous. Unless you are going to Dublin city centre, there is virtually nowhere you can get a public bus to from my constituency. If people do decide to get the bus, the bus station is in an embarrassing state. Again, the Minister will not intervene in that regard. The people who travel by bus by and large have to travel by private operators. They get no benefit whatsoever from the so-called discounts for public transport. When the Government introduced a 50% reduction for young people last October, I challenged the Minister on the fact that that discount would not be available to many of my constituents. Nothing has been done since. When the 20% reduction across the board was introduced as a temporary so-called cost-of-living measure, it was again not applicable to many of the people I represent. The truth is that many of them rely on their cars. While the cost of travelling to work or dropping children to school has been increasing, the Government has sat on its hands and introduced very few measures to target those costs. In fact, I would argue there are some people in government who are actually quite smug about the fact that fuel prices have increased.

Our road network is in a deplorable state. Local roads across County Monaghan and similar counties are in a desperate state while the Government takes money from the road network to

put into pet projects. There is no better example than the N2, which would be a major artery to the north west. This year, the Government removed money from the section of that road going from Clontibret to the Border and put it into the Minister for Transport's pet project. When pressure was exerted by Government Members from different parts of the country, unfortunately the Government representatives from Cavan-Monaghan must have stayed silent because the project has now been shelved, according to this Minister. The Minister is quite clearly out of his depth. I hope he will prove me wrong by starting to fund projects that will actually ensure people can drive to work after paying their road tax.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** I ask the Minister of State to get back to me on the issue of the CIÉ regular wages scheme statutory instrument. Five weeks ago, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, told me it would be signed within two weeks. Thousands of workers are waiting for this statutory instrument to be signed and it has already taken two years for the State to respond. This is not a great way to treat transport workers and it is certainly not a great sign of the respect and priority we give public transport. I ask the Minister of State to get back to me on that as soon as possible.

The key issue for People Before Profit is that of free and frequent public transport. We have always had a problem in Ireland when it comes to investing in public transport. At the highest level, there has been an attitude of begrudgery around State subsidies and supports for public transport. Transport emissions account for 40% of Ireland's total carbon emissions. In 2020, road transport alone accounted for 94% of transport emissions in Ireland, with private cars accounting for 74% of all journeys nationally, compared to just 7% by bus and rail. If we are to reach our climate targets, we need a massive shift away from private forms of transport, including private electric vehicles. Public transport has a vital function and role in helping society shift away from private vehicles to mass transit. There is a problem here, partly because of the legacy of begrudgery I spoke about but also due to a dearth of imagination on behalf of the Government, or a dearth of understanding as to how important public transport is and will be in dealing with the climate crisis.

Over 100 cities and regions globally have initiated free public transport, for a variety of reasons but increasingly as a climate measure. It is not an overnight solution and we know its impact will be limited unless we also significantly increase the frequency and accessibility of public transport, not just in our towns and cities but also in our rural communities. Fare-free public transport is the future and that idea will grow. I welcome the recent fare reductions, the first in the State since 1947. Since the fare reductions in Bus Éireann and Local Link last month, passenger numbers have increased by 10%. Free public transport was provided to the over-66s and we all know the considerable benefit that continues to give.

The benefits of frequent free public transport include greater connectivity, social inclusion for the vulnerable and marginalised groups and the revitalisation of urban and rural areas. Such a shift is essential if we are to achieve our reductions in global gas emissions. People Before Profit will continue to campaign for this as an issue not just on climate but also to reduce the cost of living for all.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The chaos that was seen at Dublin Airport is the consequence of DAA management choosing to slash staff numbers, wages and conditions, taking advantage of the pandemic to drive through a shock doctrine. We have been warning the Government about this for the past two years but the Minister for Transport was asleep at the wheel. Two years ago, when the DAA announced plans to sack hundreds of workers, I spoke out multiple times

in the Dáil, warning this would be disastrous. The CEO of the DAA, Mr. Dalton Philips, appeared before an Oireachtas committee in July 2020 and, again, we challenged the authority about its short-sighted, profit-driven agenda. The Government has no excuse. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, knew that the DAA was using the pandemic as an excuse to cut workers and is now trying to replace them with workers on low wages and poor contracts, and he let it get away with it. The result is serious staff shortages, massive queues and thousands of people missing their flights.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** A debate is under way in Cork city on the issue of the proposals for BusConnects Cork and the shape the final plan might take. I will use this opportunity to state my views on the matter. The BusConnects proposals have many positive elements I fully support, including more bus lanes and cycle lanes and a significant cut to bus travel times. I have some concerns about the prospect of plans being railroaded through and I insist on democratic consultation with communities on issues such as making compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, in respect of gardens, changes to parking spaces and so on, should the plan go ahead.

However, the fact Bus Éireann will be forced to compete with private operators for the tenders to run the 12 Cork city BusConnects routes is a deal-breaker for me. The only way Bus Éireann can compete with these private operators for the tenders is by driving down wage costs. In fact, the company has already made a move on this by threatening a pay freeze for not one but two years. Bus services should be run for public need, not private greed, and the privatisation of Cork city bus routes would be bad news for commuters and workers alike, as already has been proven to be the case by the experience in Dublin.

While the BusConnects Cork proposals contain many ideas and initiatives I would like to support, as an advocate for workers' rights I cannot support any plan that has a privatisation agenda baked into it from the get-go.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I am sharing time with three colleagues.

The scenes we witnessed at Dublin Airport at the weekend are a damning indictment of the national aviation policy, whereby we jam 87% of passenger traffic into one airport and allow the remaining four airports to fight over the remaining 13%. I very much look forward to representatives of the DAA appearing before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications tomorrow and answering questions. The public are entitled to a service and that service is simply not up to scratch. I look forward to the representatives explaining how the DAA will get passengers through the airport in a timely fashion, which I expect them to outline tomorrow.

The underlying problem relates to the national aviation policy. We in the transport committee have received a commitment from the Minister for Transport that that policy will be reviewed. This is important not just for Dublin Airport but for the entire country. One airport is overly dominant. Other countries have examined this question, such as the Dutch Government in regard to Schiphol Airport. It has enacted policy decisions to spread out the traffic more evenly to airports in other regions of the Netherlands. A similar policy is being pursued in Finland and Austria and we need to do the same here. The national aviation policy has not been reviewed since 2015 and the mask has begun to slip, as can be seen in the chaotic scenes at Dublin Airport. We need to look at the role Shannon Airport, as well as other airports such as those in Cork or Knock outside of the greater Dublin area, can play.

I reiterate the points made by the new chairperson of Shannon Group, Mr. Conal Henry,

when he appeared before the transport committee last week. He stated that the national aviation policy is a critical issue, and we need to move on that. Doing so would be good not just for the regions but for Ireland. Dublin Airport is creaking at the seams. We have spare capacity at Shannon Airport, where only one third of the capacity is used, and it would be excellent for balanced regional development. It would mean much more than a catchphrase and would bring it in line with strong Government policies such as Project Ireland 2040 and our regional economic and business plans. We need to bring the aviation policy into line with those policies and look on our airport as a regional driver of economic activity for the mid-west and the western seaboard.

In his concluding remarks, the Minister of State might confirm whether the national aviation policy will be reviewed and outline a timeframe for that.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** Given the extraordinary scenes that took place in our airports over the weekend, it would have been important to have the Minister for Transport or the Minister of State at the Department present for this debate but, unfortunately, that is not the case. I wanted to put that on record, as my party's spokesperson on transport.

It is looking quite certain that next year, we will experience very turbulent economic times. The Government has put in place extraordinary plans to upgrade transport infrastructure throughout the country, which is important economically but even more so environmentally, particularly with regard to the investment in public transport. What is fundamentally important - it is a mistake that this was not done between 2011 and 2016 - is that funding be ring-fenced for public transport projects despite economic conditions. That is important work that needs to be done, not only nationally here but also in conjunction with the European Commission, to ensure we will give funding towards sustainable projects, such as those we are discussing during this debate, in order that projects relating to rail, BusConnects and other public transport will be protected no matter what the economic circumstances are, within the bounds of reason. That is fundamentally important to the future development of public transport infrastructure in this State.

In my constituency and in Cork North-Central, under the Cork metropolitan area transport CMAT, strategy, more than €1.4 billion is planned to be spent on our rail infrastructure. It is critical that that be carried out to get more cars off the road. Furthermore, from a sustainability point of view, the N7 is one of the busiest roads in the country and filters traffic coming in from Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Tipperary and Kilkenny all the way into Dublin. There is no concrete plan yet in place to deal with a new park-and-ride infrastructure facility such as those that are planned on other arterial routes with access to and from Dublin, and that is a disgrace. The NTA needs to grab the bull by the horns in that case and come up with some plan to keep traffic out of Dublin city. That has to be done and the fact no concrete plan is in place is very concerning.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** Given the extraordinary scenes that took place at Dublin Airport over the weekend, it would have been important to have the Minister for Transport or Minister of State from the Department

I have another point to make while we are discussing the airports. Along with many other Deputies, including Deputy Carey, I have worked diligently with airport management. However, when it came to getting operating expenditure funding, to help them with their operational supports, not enough funding was provided and they had to work extraordinarily hard to get

access to Government and the Department on that matter. No doubt we will hear more on the public record on that tomorrow and I look forward to participating in that debate but that is a point that must be made. We must also look at the fact Dublin Airport is at capacity so now is the time for Government to put proper, concrete supports in place for flights to be diverted to Cork Airport and, in particular, Shannon Airport, which are two airports that are underserved by Government subsidies. They need to be looked at.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** As yet, there is no published plan for how Dublin Airport's chief executive and board of management are going to handle the issues next weekend. I am very concerned at the way people have been treated. Families are disgusted and absolutely appalled at what happened. Approximately 1,000 people missed their flights. The stress and tension caused to families with young children, older people and people with disabilities is unforgivable. I tell the Minister and the board and chief executive of the airport that they should beware 24 June. That is an important date because it is when all our primary schools close and tens of thousands of families will be going to our airports to go on their long-awaited and well-deserved holidays. I am concerned that there will again be absolute chaos. I make the point, clearly and fairly, that the CEO is not badly paid. His wages are €366,370 per year according to the 2020 annual report. There are 12 members of the board, four of whom are members of trade unions. I do not know what happened that 800 people were allowed to leave on voluntary redundancy. The DAA has never explained the who, what, where and why of that. It must do so. The people of the country are suffering and they are demanding, and are entitled to, fair and equal transport on the day they choose to avail of it. They need an explanation.

There is congestion every day on the M1 between Drogheda and Dublin, especially between Julianstown and Balbriggan. Accidents happen frequently. Every day the area is mentioned on the news. There is a serious problem here. The argument for the bypass at Julianstown has been well made. The origin and destination survey of the people who use the Julianstown bypass has not yet commenced, yet €2.6 million in funding has been identified with Meath County Council as being needed to deal with the huge traffic issues that arise in the village of Julianstown. We need that money and we need it now under the national development plan, NDP.

Then there is the issue of the cost of rail travel between Drogheda, Laytown, Gormanston and Dublin. It is unacceptable. A return day fare from Balbriggan is €8.95 but from Gormanston, which is a short distance away, it is almost double that at €15. From Laytown it is €16.90 and from Drogheda it is €19.20 for a day-return fare. It is unacceptable. I raised it with the chief executive of the NTA and made my submission to the authority. I hope it will deal with these inequalities in my constituency.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I wish to talk about trains and public transport, and the electrification of rail services in particular. There have been huge advancements with battery-electric units that have a really good range. In most cases, we will not need to build that extensive overhead network in order to provide a good, urban, electrified rail system.

Electric trains have the advantage of being much quicker to accelerate and brake, so you can have a good urban service without the slowdown in service diesels or other heavy rail vehicles necessarily involve. I urge Deputies from all parties to support further capital investment in procuring carriages and especially battery-electric carriages. Irish Rail has an extensive order in at the moment, and delivery of the first of those battery-electric units is expected. What this means is that where we do an overhead extension in an area of high urban density, we can go another 80 km on a battery-electric train. If, therefore, we electrified the overhead as far

as Drogheda or out to Maynooth, we could go another 80 km. Those trains can charge at that point and then come back in those 80 km. That gives real flexibility to that rail service and it is what we need to do to decarbonise so we have trains running on electricity we generate from offshore renewable energy.

The rail line between Greystones and Wicklow is suitable for that type of expansion. Wicklow is a key growth town. Its population is going to grow and it has a very poor public transport service. It is one of the reasons the N11 is so congested. That rail line is very suitable for the first of those battery-electric trains when they arrive and also to serve areas like Newcastle, Kilcoole and south Greystones at Charlesland. These would be extra stops that add no extra journey time.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Before I start, I also want to express my disgust that the Minister for Transport came in here for 20 minutes and then scooted off again, leaving the Minister of State to take the flack. The buck stops with the Minister for the shambles that went on at Dublin Airport.

I welcome the opportunity to address the issue of transport and air my views on some of the recent developments. I start by expressing my concerns at a report in the press yesterday that seemed to throw cold water on the prospect of the Limerick-Waterford railway being used to take traffic off our roads. The report implied a senior engineering figure in the N24 project said that even if the Waterford-Limerick train service speed was increased by enough to half the journey time, use of the line would only increase by 0.3%. It would be proper for the Minister to expand on the detail of this report and outline exactly what the terms of reference relating to it were. If key factors such as timetabling were excluded, then the study does not properly assess the viability of improving the line because it does not paint a true picture. I have spoken to the Minister time and time again. The timetable as it currently stands does not suit people getting to work and does not suit students either. You could build a rail line that is the most expensive in the world but without a timetable that suits people's needs and demands, it is not going to be used to its full potential. That is why, when it comes to studies of the viability of, for example, the Limerick to Rosslare or Limerick Junction to Waterford lines, you cannot be selective about what is taken into account. I urge all involved to publish that report immediately so we can see what was taken into account and what factors this 0.3% was drawn from.

In the context of the Limerick to Ballybrophy line, millions of euro have been spent on upgrading the track to continuous welded rail. However, the current service level is again inadequate to meet the public transport needs of the communities along the line. A third middle-of-the-day service must be introduced as well as a later evening commuter service from Limerick to Nenagh. These changes are possible if the will was there to provide adequate PSO funding in the NTA's 2023 budget for additional rail services. This is where the Minister comes into it. He must make the call here. He must take the lead and deliver for the communities across the country who are sick and tired of being lectured to about alternative methods of transport, yet are being denied this luxury at every turn. Adequate PSO funding is needed and the Minister's response can make a real difference here. I call on him to take action.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** The mind boggles. We are talking about transport and the Minister is not present. That is incredible.

The issues of delays with passport applications and the long delays at airports are a disgrace and need to be sorted out. My party colleagues have set out these issues in great detail. As I

only have a short time, I will not dwell on them, except to say we have a great reputation as a tourist destination and this is being damaged because of incompetence and greed. This greed saw a short-term view being taken when the DAA made a third of its workforce redundant. The authority is reaping what it has sown and must engage with SIPTU to address workers' concerns if this issue is to be solved in the long term.

Rural areas of Kildare and Laois are poorly served by public transport. If the Minister is serious about climate action, this needs to be addressed. A few town links are not the answer. Kildare and Laois need a central bus hub in the likes of Newbridge and Portlaoise where town links converge and where it is possible to transfer to other services. We need to ensure that someone can go from Carbury to Naas General Hospital or from Monasterevin to Intel in Leixlip as easily as possible. We need a reliable and regular service if the Government is to entice people out of their cars. What is in place at the moment is not working.

It is great that electric cars are becoming more popular, but we are facing a ticking time bomb if the Government does not provide local authorities with funding to enable them to expand the car-charging network. What does the Minister think they are going to do and where does he think they are going to get chargers if he does not provide them with funds? Now is the time to invest in order that we are not left stranded in eight years' time.

*6 o'clock*

**Deputy Michael Lowry:** Dublin Airport has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. The debacle on Saturday and Sunday was covered by *The New York Times* and many other worldwide publications, with images of passengers at their wits' end and mind-boggling queues of hundreds of people trying to get into the airport building, even before they began the process of checking in bags and clearing security. The images beamed out on Sunday from Dublin Airport by the media reflect badly on the DAA and are very damaging. Several overseas visitors have already publicly vowed never to return here following their experience at the airport. Irish people hoping to start their first holiday in two years were left grounded and in limbo, many of them in tears as their flights left without them. Our land of a thousand welcomes became a place of no escape for 1,000 passengers whose feet were firmly left on the ground last Sunday. This is not the impression of Ireland we want to send across the world. Repeat performances cannot be tolerated.

Ironically, while hundreds of passengers cannot get into the airport, dozens more cannot leave it when they arrive in Dublin, especially if they arrive after midnight. This is due to a serious shortage of taxis at arrivals. It is not because there are not enough taxis available to serve the needs of incoming passengers. In fact, the opposite is the case. It is happening because regulations introduced by the DAA in 2016 changed the criteria for obtaining airport taxi permits. Now all taxis picking up passengers must be wheelchair accessible. The result is that the use of saloon style cars is no longer permitted. Due to their design, saloon cars are not capable of accommodating the standard size wheelchair. While saloon-style taxis can continue to drop passengers at the airport departures, they do not have a permit to pick up passengers at arrivals. Taxi operators must leave the airport without any passengers while lengthy passenger queues wait for a taxi outside arrivals in both winter and summer.

This is not cost effective for taxi owners, who lose half their potential earnings as they drive out of the airport empty. The important point is that it is also both perplexing and annoying for passengers, particularly those arriving in Ireland from abroad who have travelled during night

hours and who have travelled on long-haul flights. Nobody wants to queue for a taxi in the middle of the night. The provision of user-friendly transport options for disabled people is of major importance to everybody. The DAA is to be commended on taking action in this regard, but surely with a little initiative it is possible to meet the needs of everyone.

I will highlight another anomaly that is both extraordinary and ridiculous. It is happening in Tipperary and elsewhere across the country. At present, drivers must stop driving school transport when they reach their 70th birthday. This is causing a major problem for school transport companies. The age profile of drivers is climbing as it is not viable for younger people to attain a D licence due to the cost of qualifying as a professional driver. The bus and coach industry is suffering. It cannot get young drivers. The majority of drivers on school runs are retired people who choose to work part-time and those who had the correct licence category from the old licensing system. Ironically, drivers over 70 years of age can continue to work in private hire once certified medically fit. They can also take a full-size coach to the UK or any part of Europe, but they cannot do a local school run. It defies belief. People over 70 years of age can also work for other State bodies, such as TFI, so why does the age rule apply to school transport? This rule should and must be changed to safeguard the future of school transport. Age is not a number, and a person's worth is not determined by his or her birth certificate.

**Deputy Matt Shanahan:** I was hoping the Minister would be present because, on 28 April, I highlighted to him during Leaders' Questions the dysfunction that exists in DAA management, which was clearly seen at the weekend. It is also a reflection of the Government's ability to spend eye-watering sums on Dublin Airport without any regard to the efficiencies or capacities it delivers. I suggest that the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, look at the exclusions that were offered to workers who were made redundant and see if they can be brought back on short-time working. Perhaps the Army could be brought in as well to try to get over this debacle.

I also wish to speak about Waterford Airport, the home of Rescue 117, and the capacity increases that were mooted for that airport in the 1990s. It was, in fact, the first regional airport used by a fledgling Ryanair. The runway extension to allow jet activity was in the previous programme for Government, but it was walked away from because of prevailing politics at the time. The airport's catchment mirrors that of University Hospital Waterford, with more than 530,000 people living in the area. There is a population of 1.5 million, which is growing, within 90 minutes' travel time of Waterford Airport. On 28 April, I also raised with the Minister the Department's stated funding of €160 million for the national aviation sector, while bypassing Waterford Airport completely. I expect the Minister of State will have heard in the news this morning that private equity of €8 million has now been secured for Waterford Airport to fund the expansion of the runway extension there. It will also require a combined investment of €2 million from the local authorities and €5 million from the Government. I thank Deputies Verona Murphy and Lowry, who are in the Regional Group, for visiting, and making representations for, the airport.

I will make a few points that the Minister of State might convey to the Minister. I expect that this funding will be delivered by way of grant aid and not be based on some public procurement capital plan. Currently, we are a year down the road in Waterford in trying to acquire lands for the South East Technological University. Grant money would be the most expeditious way to deliver funding to the airport. If the cost envelope for this new runway extends beyond what has been anticipated, the people of the south east and I would expect that the Government will fund any shortfalls. That is equitable treatment, and it is something the Government has

announced for shoring up cost overruns in other public sector procurement processes under way at present. I also ask that the Minister make a formal announcement as soon as possible welcoming the private sector announcement and honouring the deal that was made with Waterford and the south east regarding delivery of this vital infrastructure. It is long past time that it was delivered.

I refer to the recent public transport fares reduction, with the NTA launching a 20% reduction in public transport fares. Why was this not extended to the private sector, particularly to bus operators? Semi-State companies should not have a monopoly in this country, but that is exactly what the Government is now reinforcing with its policy. It is uncompetitive and discriminatory against private bus operators. It will mean that private routes will be lost in the future, thereby discommoding customers with less choice and more costs. I ask the Minister of State to speak to the NTA to find a way to try to support a ticketing solution to deliver discounts in these private fares as well.

With respect to heavy goods vehicle, HGV, and bus and lorry driving licences from Ukraine, and this has arisen previously, we have a number of people in this country who have both HGV and bus licences but who cannot have them accepted by the NTA. Car licences are immediately accepted in this country. Again, this is something that must be examined.

On cardiac care, I raised in the House in the last week the issue of 134 blue-light transfers out of Waterford, with the average travelling time to Cork taking three hours and 15 minutes. Perhaps the Minister might care to make a public comment on the Tánaiste's statement in the House during the debate on the national maternity hospital that it had to be in Dublin because a lady suffering a cardiac arrest could access ICU care in 20 minutes. What does that say for us in the south east? Is the Government aware that the international standard protocol for accessing cardiac catheterisation is 90 minutes from the onset of pain and first responder?

These are matters I hope the Minister of State will take up with the Minister. We need the N25 upgraded to give us a cardiac pathway for out-of-hours care. Far more importantly, we need the delivery of 24-7 cardiac care at University Hospital Waterford. I expect to see this delivered in the Government's programme.

**Deputy David Stanton:** On 30 July 2009, the former Minister, Mr. Noel Dempsey, travelled from Cork to Midleton to reopen the rail link to Midleton. There had been a big campaign for a number of years and it was a huge success. I recently met with an official of Íarnród Éireann and he told me it is planned to electrify the system from Mallow to Midleton to Cobh and it is planned eventually to have services every 15 minutes. That is very good. Part of the issue that happened there was that a lot of land had to be zoned in the area to provide a population base to make it sustainable. That has been done.

The N25, which is very close to this, is not fit for purpose and recently the Minister pulled a project to upgrade it. That puts 2,500 houses at risk, does not help to make what is a very dangerous road safer and further locks in a 64 ha Industrial Development Agency, IDA, site because the road is not upgraded. Perhaps the Minister of State could give us some clarity on that at some stage. It is hugely important.

In my area there is the N25 Castlemartyr bypass. My colleague, Deputy Shanahan, has just mentioned the N25 as well. There are massive tailbacks on that road at this time of the year, every day and every evening, leading to Castlemartyr. Anyone who listens to the radio reports

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will hear about that. That needs to be progressed. I know there are now plans to upgrade the road from Midleton all the way to Youghal, but we have tailbacks of cars sitting there spouting diesel and petrol fumes for hours on end, causing frustration and delays and costing money. That needs to change.

Has anyone ever considered a school town bus service? Every morning I notice massive congestion around schools where people drop their children to the door of the school if they can or as close as possible. There are one or two children in each car. That causes congestion, with people rushing and under stress. A local school bus service, in the larger towns in particular, could alleviate a lot of that problem.

They are just some of the issues I wanted to raise.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I welcome today's debate on transport. It is a hugely important topic. The recent capacity issues at Dublin Airport demonstrate yet again the need for a national aviation policy. What happened to people left stranded was outrageous. We need an all-Ireland approach to aviation as distinct from a Dublin Airport-centric policy. The sooner we have that debate the better.

I come from a rural constituency, Mayo. A majority of people living there are reliant on private cars. We do not have the frequency of public transport to accommodate people's need to travel to local towns and villages. Even though Mayo Local Link is making huge strides, it will be some time before we have the frequency of public transport necessary for a reliable rural service. The Government should introduce an enhanced grant scheme for electric vehicles for those living in rural Ireland. Providing people in rural Ireland with better incentives to switch to EVs makes sense not just for individual purchasers but also for the State as we strive to reduce transport emissions by 51% by 2030. If the Government is serious about getting as many petrol and diesel cars off the road as quickly as possible, it must introduce an enhanced grant scheme in tandem with increased investment in public transport connectivity and EV charging points in rural communities throughout the country.

While Government policy is to encourage people to take public transport, many small towns and rural parts of Ireland have not yet seen the signs of a bus stop, never mind a bus shelter. That needs to be addressed as a matter of priority. The roll-out of bus shelters needs to be addressed. It is to be hoped a plan will come soon.

As for rail, overcrowding on the Iarnród Éireann Westport route is causing huge concern during peak time on trains out of Heuston Station. It is certainly a deterrent to commuters, students and professionals. Additional investment is urgently needed to provide additional carriages in order to address the issue.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Whatever about the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, not being present, the fact that no officials from the Department are physically present in the Chamber to observe the debate speaks more volumes. The Minister is busy, I understand, and the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, will probably tell me that the officials are watching the debate from home or online, but that speaks to a bigger problem which manifested itself on Sunday in Dublin Airport, that is, that nobody seems to take responsibility. Nobody in the DAA will pay for what happened. The taxpayer will pay by refunding passengers. Nobody in the Department of Transport will take responsibility for what happened to the thousands of people and the stress that manifested itself. That has to be dealt with, not just in the Department of Transport but

across so many other Departments involved in the front line.

When it comes to sustainable transport, I really welcome the announcements made yesterday by Irish Rail about expanding services across County Mayo, in particular the introduction of a morning link service from Ballina into the Dublin-Westport route and the ongoing expansion of services to the Ballina freight depot. We have, however, a golden rail project that is sustainable, namely the western rail corridor and its expansion up into Claremorris and on to Sligo. That has been parked in an all-island rail review, while it seems other services around the country are being allowed to proceed. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is either serious or not about sustainable transport. There is no sense in us sitting here like dogs barking without teeth. This project absolutely stands up when it comes to building sustainable transport, equipping the economic side of the west of the country and building up the Atlantic economic corridor, yet there is no commitment within the Department or among officials. There is a consistent blocking policy. That is why it is parked in an all-island rail review. That is not good enough anymore. The project adds up. It is sustainable. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, keeps telling us we need sustainability. We keep being told that rural Ireland has to become more sustainable. A project was put in front of the Minister. He needs to move it on and not park it. That is what sustainable transport is.

Similarly, when it comes to transport projects in rural areas, it is a matter of building up the sustainability of the economy of rural areas to act as a bulwark against the very strong economy of Dublin. Building proper and accessible roads, such as the N26 from Ballina into Swinford and the R312 from Castlebar to Belmullet, develops strong communities and allows people to stay within their communities rather than commuting and travelling big distances. That argument, however, does not seem to be understood. These are not roads for the sake of roads. They are all building up and supporting communities and keeping people in rural areas and stopping them from having to come to the cities.

Sustainability and transport are absolutely dependent issues, but there needs to be a far more ambitious understanding of what sustainability is within the Department of Transport and on the part of the Minister himself. Rather than talking about it, we need to see action for once and for all.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I welcome this debate, although the change to the title has caused some problems, which were entirely foreseeable. Therefore, I am quite surprised that the issue of the day was not front and centre in the Minister's contribution, but I will come back to that.

I lend my support to the students of Ireland on the fare reduction scheme currently in place. I would like very much for that scheme to be continued to incentivise further the students to use public transport to get more people out of their cars. Most Members of the House to whom I have spoken so far over the past day agree with that, so I ask the Minister of State to convey that to the Minister.

I call on the NTA to ensure that Dubliners are not deliberately excluded from the 90-minute fare zone. As the Minister of State will have heard, Skerries and Balbriggan are not included but clearly should be. An exception should be made and we should get that done. Deputy O'Dowd mentioned the massive fare variations after Balbriggan or the station after that. We need to move away from that. It should be a fare based on getting on and getting off, not the distance travelled. If we want to encourage people to use sustainable transport and battery electric trains, we should charge them a modest amount and the State will pick up the tab for

the transport company because it is about the environment as well.

The only thing we should be discussing, however, is the predictable and unforgivable scenes at Dublin Airport at the weekend. Ministers have met with the DAA, yet we are no clearer if the scenes of last weekend will be repeated this coming bank holiday weekend. I have very little faith that they will be avoided. How many need to be in the queue before somebody asks if heads should roll? If airport operations cannot be managed, I cannot be alone in suggesting there needs to be a change. I am not referring to the chief executive, who has already announced his intention to move on. We have known for almost three months that passenger numbers were rising. It is unacceptable to hear that the DAA does not know how many passengers it is to expect on any given day. It sells the slots, it knows the aircraft types and it can extrapolate the data, yet it does not appear to be capable of doing so. That is frankly bizarre. The whole situation stinks.

It would be remiss of me in the last few seconds I have left not to mention sustainable transport and Dublin Airport in the same breath without mentioning MetroLink. We are almost at the end of quarter 2 and the railway order was due by the end of quarter 2. I would like to know where that railway order is and to hear back from TII as to whether any aspect of the delivery of MetroLink can be accelerated. Having spoken with industry experts in other jurisdictions in recent months, I find it hard to believe that the people of Dublin cannot expect a metro until 2034, and rising. We need to get real. We need to have a critical analysis of the skill set within the planning sections in Departments and their ability to deliver on these critical pieces of social transport infrastructure.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am appalled that the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is not here. I am also very disappointed that no officials are here. It is a case of do what you want and to hell with what we feel in here.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** The Minister is at a Cabinet meeting.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I do not know what the Minister of State said. Anyway, it is sad. I remember that officials could be here all night.

There is ageism and discrimination against men and women who, when they reach 70, cannot drive a bus that does school runs, although they can bring people to matches and everything else. They are willing to get a doctor's certificate and to have a medical twice a year if necessary. The system should be changed as it is discrimination.

I must also mention the Waterford to Limerick rail line. It is disgraceful the way it is trundling along and has been abandoned. When people arrive in Clonmel station by bus or train, it is locked up and there are no toilet facilities or anything else. It is disgraceful for public transport to treat people like that.

I also wish to speak about the discrimination against rural transport users following the recent reduction in the cost of public transport. It is not all about Dublin, but as Dublin has been mentioned, I will refer to a previous Minister, Mr. Ross, who is guilty of appointing the CEO and other members of the board of the DAA in the past. He wrote a lovely book one time about the snouts in the trough. I wonder whose snouts he put in the trough - his own friends and those who campaigned for him. They are obviously unable to do the job. I am aghast at their singular ineptitude and failure. It will probably happen again next weekend because we do not have people with understanding and the wherewithal and everything else. It is a shocking indictment

of different Ministers. The cronyism, nepotism and whatever you want to call it is disgraceful.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We are debating transport issues without the Minister with responsibility for it being here. Perhaps he is at the bog or doing something productive.

**Deputy Ossian Smyth:** He is at a Cabinet meeting.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** In a trough.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** That is highly unlikely, but as Deputy McGrath said, he is not in the bog, but he is definitely in a fog, because any man that has responsibility for transport issues in this country who could not afford us the courtesy and the time to be here to properly participate and listen to the debate is totally outrageous.

This Government plans to invest €3.8 billion on public transport protection and renewal, including fleet renewal of rail and buses, and switching to electric vehicles across urban fleets. Buses and light rail in Dublin are earmarked to obtain the largest share of this funding. There is no surprise in that. I want to remind the Minister what I want from him. I am dealing with a Minister for Transport who does not like building roads. I want the bypass for Adare to be built. I want the bypass for the bypass in Killarney to be built, going from Lissyviggeen to Farranfore, and the preferred route to be announced very shortly. I want the link road from Lissyviggeen Cross to Muckcross Road to be built very shortly, but I am relying on the wrong man to do that.

The shambles that has taken place at Dublin Airport in recent days is a disgrace and, again, the Minister is doing nothing about it.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Like my colleagues, I am very disappointed that the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is not here today. Regardless of anything else, he knew his time slot the same as everybody else, and he could have been here. Perhaps transport is not something he is interested in. He is not connecting Ireland, as he promised. He is disconnecting Ireland. That is what he has done. So many speakers have been talking about train services and even electric trains. We do not even know what that means in west Cork. We cannot get a bus service. The Government is two and a half years in office. It has failed the people for two and a half years. For two and a half years, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party have failed to provide a proper bus service for the people of Dunmanway to Clonakilty or from Clonakilty to Dunmanway through Ballynacarriga. The Government has failed to provide a bus service to Goleen and back. West Cork Connect put forward a plan to the National Transport Authority recently to do it free of charge and it refused it. The Government continues to disconnect rural Ireland and it does not care. It does not understand, or it does not give a damn. How are the people of Eyeries, Allihies, Ardgroom and Castletownbere going to survive? They deserve a service the same as the people of Dublin, as do the people of Goleen, Dunmanway and Clonakilty, but they are not getting the service because the Government is failing 100% to deliver for the people.

The 20% decrease in transport fares, with a 50% decrease for young people, is a great idea, but not for the people of rural Ireland. The private operator which carries the biggest percentage of people - I do not know how many million people it carries every year - cannot apply for the 20% or 50% decrease, so the young people who leave Skibbereen and Bantry every day to head to Cork or Dublin will not get a brown cent of that back into their pocket. This is a disgrace for the Government. It is a complete attack on the people of rural Ireland.

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There has been talk about the crisis in Dublin Airport. We have no crisis in Cork Airport. If the people are brought down to Cork, we will make sure they fly out on time. The great people of Cork Airport will sort it out, and the same is true for the people in Kerry and Mayo, but Dublin Airport has made an absolute shambles of it. Nobody is answering any questions about what is going wrong. We are only going around in circles in recent weeks. I could spend two hours talking about the issue this evening if I had time.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Social media is a great thing and if we look at it, we will see that more than 12 months ago I brought up that pre-Covid Dublin Airport had 31 million people going through it; Shannon had 1.8 million, with a capacity of 4.5 million; and Cork had 2.4 million, with a capacity of 5 million. I asked the Government at that time to disperse the traffic, which would have lowered emissions for people travelling to airports and would have made other airports sustainable. Did the Government listen? No.

The Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, came to Limerick on a train and sent down the State car with his bicycle in the boot. That is what he does while he is talking about carbon emissions. He sends down a State car. He cycled down the main street of Limerick thinking he was a great man. I invited him to spend a week in a town or village in Limerick so he would understand what it is like to have no transport. He did not even have the respect to come in here today.

I have a message for the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I believe Fossetts Circus is going around the country to reintroduce the circus in Ireland. I reckon that with his CV, he would not even qualify to be a clown in that circus because of his lack of understanding of Ireland and the people of Ireland whom he is supposed to be representing. He does not understand transport in Ireland. The Minister should take up my offer to come to Limerick for a week. I will educate him - bicycle and all - and I will educate him on what it is like to live in a town or a village in rural Ireland with no transport.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In the interests of fairness, and for the record, I am conscious of the fact that people get very emotive about some of these subjects, and I wish to make a couple of points.

First, although I was not here, the debate was opened by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who spoke for 20 minutes, so he was here and he did participate.

Second, there is a long-standing tradition in the House of Members understanding when a Cabinet Minister has to depart the House to take part in a Cabinet meeting.

Third, comments were made about somebody who is no longer in our midst - I am sure we all miss him very much - the former Minister, Mr. Ross. I am sure there was no intention to imply any mal-intent on his part when he appointed whoever he appointed to the Dublin Airport Authority.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** He had plenty of snouts in the trough. He wrote about them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay. I thank Members for listening.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** We note you took no exception to the clown reference, a Cheann Comhairle.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I guess he could.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I have just three and a half minutes so I will focus on a number of points if the Minister of State does not mind. The fact that the number of people on public transport has substantially and significantly increased because of the reduced fares proves exactly what some of us on this side of the House have been saying for a very long time. In fact, we have asked for free public transport. I repeat what colleagues have already said in that regard.

I would love to know what we are paying in fines if the Minister of State has the information to hand. What fines are we paying on a regular basis for breaching our obligations under European legislation? We clearly need to take radical action in order to meet our commitments for 2030 and 2050.

Before I refer to Galway city, I would like to sound a note of caution about electric cars and where we are sourcing the cobalt and lithium. This is something that has not been mentioned at all in the Dáil and I would like a response from the Government regarding the human rights abuses in Congo, the use of very young children and the very exploitative working conditions concerning the extraction of cobalt in particular. I would love to see an analysis done on that.

The Minister visited Galway two weeks ago and confirmed funding was available for a feasibility study on light rail. That has never been carried out. It is one of the most basic requirements in Galway city, which is destined to increase its population by 50%. More than four years ago, 24,000 people signed a petition calling on the Government to carry out a feasibility study. As usual, the people are way ahead of us. They will move to public transport. They do not need enticement. What they need are options, which we do not have. We have not done what the people of Galway asked us to do. We have not provided park and ride, which is a source of great upset to me because I was mayor at the time. We led on this, as did the councillors, and put an objective in the city development plan to roll out park and ride in 2005. Here we are in 2022, the National Transport Authority has taken over, and its latest response is it is looking at park and ride possibly being provided on the east side of the city but the west side is being ignored completely.

The Minister talked about school transport. There is major potential if we revisit school transport with buses that could be multifunctional but are not being used. There are some changes in the rail system from Athenry and Oranmore, which are very welcome, but they are very late and are *ad hoc*. There is no sense of urgency whatsoever in respect of climate change or the climate and biodiversity emergencies. We need transformational change. We do not need to talk about encouraging people. They are crying out to do it differently and we need to do it differently.

I once again appeal on the public record for the most basic thing: a feasibility study on light rail for Galway. It should consider school transport and park and ride, and ask why in God's name we are allowing the National Transport Authority to delay and delay with something as basic and fundamental as that.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I will outline my points in three areas. A free, widely available and decarbonised public transport system must be at the heart of a just transition and transformation. In Ireland, transport makes up the largest demand for energy. It is responsible for more than 40% of energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In 2021, private cars represented 42% of total transport energy demand. In the same year, bus or coach represented only 3% and rail was less than 1% of that demand. To remove the dependency on private cars, we need to transform our

public transport system. We need an intermodal system of buses, light rail, walking and cycling lanes. We need to connect rural areas to the main towns and cities and *vice versa*. Bus and rail need to be interconnected and adapted to local needs. All railway routes and stations that were taken out of service need to be brought back into service.

Public transport has to be seen as a public service. All public services must be accessible to everyone and free at the point of use. This is something the State has yet to achieve in any of our underfunded public services. Public transport needs to be widely available and free to encourage people to use it instead of private cars. The 20% reduction in fares introduced in April will help, to a degree, people struggling with high inflation and stagnant income, but it is not enough. The public transport subsidy for Dublin Bus compares very badly with other European cities at 29%, which is only half of the average across Europe. For example, Lyons in France has a 79% subsidy, Brussels has a 68% subsidy and most comparable European cities are above a 60% subsidy.

The other aspect of this issue is the removal of fossil fuels from the transport system, not only to avert a looming climate disaster but to eliminate the growing problem of air pollution. We know that densely populated areas with high traffic levels particularly affect children. Our public transport system needs to be upgraded using electricity and hydrogen fuels as an alternative to diesel. I take Deputy Connolly's point about lithium and cobalt. We must have an investigation into their use and human rights abuses in the Congo and so on.

For a high-quality, free public transport system to be viable we need a sustainable approach to urban mobility, transport and planning and development in rural areas. New housing must be concentrated in villages to allow for good transport links that will allow people to access jobs, schools, shops and other essential services. We will no doubt be told this will cost a lot and we cannot afford it. My answer to that is we cannot not afford it. Everything has to change. The global neoliberal economic model of capitalism is dependent on oil. Rich countries are dependent on it, while at the same time authoritarian regimes depend on selling it to rich countries. One way or the other, oil creates pollution, climate damage, social injustice and wars. The change has to come.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** I thank all Members for their contributions. It is clear we are all committed to improving and increasing sustainable mobility throughout the country.

Transport is central to Ireland's decarbonisation efforts. In 2020, road transport alone accounted for 94% of transport emissions. Road transport also contributes to increased levels of noise, collisions, congestion and pollutants that can have a negative impact on people's health and the environment. To garner permanent reductions in our emissions, we must make changes in our everyday life towards sustainable behaviours. The Government has committed to a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland to reduce our carbon emissions and to adapt to the impacts of climate change. As the Minister outlined, we are putting in place the infrastructure, services and structures to reduce car dependency and implement a major shift towards sustainable mobility. We are taking action now that will pay dividends in future years.

Our commitment is evident in the national planning framework, the climate action plan and the national sustainable mobility policy. It is also backed up by the funding allocated under the national development plan, NDP. The unprecedented funding for transport under the NDP will enable significant investment in walking, cycling, bus and rail infrastructure and will expand

sustainable mobility options in our cities, towns and villages. We are already seeing evidence of this investment throughout the country. NDP funding will support the commencement of major public transport projects of BusConnects in our five cities, and DART+ and MetroLink in Dublin, along with increased investment in the interurban and regional rail network. This will be complemented by an expansion of public transport services, including in rural and regional areas, under the Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan.

The Government is strongly committed to funding active travel infrastructure to provide more walking and cycling facilities to increase people's green travel options. According to the Central Statistics Office, almost 30% of trips are less than 2 km of which 57% are made by car. The significant investment in active travel infrastructure over the next three years will enable more of these, and some longer journeys, to be made by walking and cycling. Improving our walking, cycling and public transport options can also deliver social change. Everybody should be able to use active travel and public transport regardless of their ability or background. Sustainable transport modes are not only the most environmentally friendly options; they are also the most economically accessible and socially inclusive. They are a key part of a just transition towards meeting our climate goals and they will help us meet our targets in a fair manner.

The goal of the Minister for Transport is to increase the number of sustainable mobility options available to all our citizens. Where possible, he is incentivising public transport through investment in new services and infrastructure as well as by reducing the fare structures. In recognition that it is not always possible to provide public transport, especially in remote areas, there is also a complementary suite of incentives to electrify private transport, such as the electric vehicle purchase grant and the domestic charger grant scheme.

Alongside the climate action plan, the new sustainable mobility policy is central to ensuring we meet our ambitious climate targets. The actions under the new policy provide an opportunity to change our daily travel choices by making it easier and more attractive for people to make fewer private car journeys and to use walking, cycling and public transport, where possible. The Department of Transport listened closely to stakeholders in developing the policy and action plan to ensure we are focusing on the right measures.

We have the right plans and policies in place and our focus now is to accelerate delivery. Key to this delivery is the new leadership group led by the Department of Transport in collaboration with the NTA, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, local authorities and regional assemblies. This group will work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders to drive the implementation of programmes, such as BusConnects in the five cities, the connecting Ireland rural mobility plan and other key active travel and public transport projects.

As the Minister outlined, the first task of this group is to agree a mechanism to deliver a programme of pathfinder projects of scale at local level over the next three years. The group is already working to identify a programme of projects that will provide a template of people-focused development that can be replicated and scaled up. Drawing on the experiences of collaboration across the public service during the Covid-19 pandemic, experimental and innovative approaches are being encouraged where they can be delivered and at pace. These projects will demonstrate their capacity to achieve carbon abatement and other important co-benefits in line with the policy's goals.

The next iteration of the Climate Action Plan this year will be based on legally binding sectoral emission ceilings, including for transport. The first carbon budget to 2025 is likely to

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be particularly challenging for the transport sector, as embedded behavioural change elements are more difficult to achieve in the shorter time horizon. It will be important to demonstrate the types of project and initiative that can deliver a lower carbon future for transport. For this reason, the pathfinder programme is intended to offer a pathway and a vision of sustainable mobility in practice, which can act as a catalyst for the wider changes required across society and be replicated at national level.

Through continued collaboration with our stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, we can implement real change and make sustainable mobility the preferred option for as many people as possible. I thank the House for giving me the opportunity to speak on this issue.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State for that comprehensive response.

### **Food Price Rises: Motion [Private Members]**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Kerrane is sharing time with colleagues.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— food prices are continuing to rise, with groceries expected to cost €780 more over the next 12 months;

— new research has found that 62 per cent of people feel they will have to cut back on food spending over the coming year; and

— Sinn Féin have proposed a suite of solutions that would provide badly needed relief to households, to include:

— putting a month's rent back into renters' pockets;

— reducing childcare fees by two-thirds;

— increasing the minimum wage and social welfare rates;

— establishing a discretionary fund to assist households with utility debt;

— relaxing the rules around Exceptional Needs Payments; and

— re-introducing walk-in access to Community Welfare Officers;

notes, with increasing concern, that the rising price of food and groceries is forcing many families to go without and is evidenced by the steep increase in the number and range of families now seeking assistance from food banks;

acknowledges that:

— some of the drivers of rising prices are outside of this Government's control, but the actions necessary to protect people from its worst effects and to ensure the

outworkings of international factors are experienced fairly and without avoidable hardship are within this Government's gift; and

— the Government cannot protect everybody from every price increase, but they can and should do more; and

calls on the Government to introduce a cost of living cash payment of €200 for every adult with an income less than €30,000 and €100 for every adult with an income between €30,000 and €60,000.

“Almost two-thirds of people to cut back on food spending over the cost of living crisis”. “Working families skipping meals as demand increases at food banks”. “Food shopping drops as grocery inflation reaches nine-year peak”. “62% cutting food spending as prices rise”. “People putting rent ahead of grocery spend’ as 350,000 impacted by food poverty”. “Almost one in five people living in poverty amid cost of living crisis”. These are just some of the headlines that we have seen over just the past four days. This is Ireland of 2022. We are one of the richest countries on the planet, yet families, workers and others are cutting back on eating. We have to sit back for a second and think about the implications of that. Households, families and workers who are paying their taxes are getting up in the morning and choosing to go without. They have no choice but to cut down daily and weekly on eating. That we have reached such a point in this day and age is a great shame.

Research published today by Kantar shows that households are cutting back on the amount of food they are buying. Grocery inflation is at its highest level in almost nine years. Prices in supermarkets have risen by 5.5% in the past 12 months, the largest increase since August 2013. Coinciding with this is a fall in take-home grocery sales of 6.5% in the past 12 weeks. This shows that people are already cutting back, and the situation is due to get worse as inflation continues. These figures reflect data from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, which show that staples like milk, bread and cheese have increased in price in the past year.

An organiser of a food bank in Dublin today stated that the food bank was seeing record demand, having doubled in recent weeks alone, and that full-time workers were skipping meals and visiting food banks. Research from Permanent TSB shows that more than 60% of people feel that they will have to cut back spending on food in the coming year due to the cost of living crisis. CSO data show that groceries will cost an extra €708 over the next year. This is on top of increases in the cost of diesel, petrol, electricity, oil, gas, childcare and rent. The list goes on.

This State has a real poverty problem, and it is one that is growing. Recent survey on income and living conditions, SILC, data published by the CSO this month showed an increase across the board, with levels of consistent poverty, at risk of poverty and deprivation having increased for those aged over 65 years and for those with disabilities. These are alarming increases. Deprivation levels have increased to 44% among long-parent families, who already experience sustained consistent poverty rates. Yesterday, a report from Social Justice Ireland showed that almost 1 million people were living in poverty. It is incredible and shameful to think that we are in this situation.

The Minister of State will talk about the budget of eight months ago and so on, but no matter what the Government says, not enough has been done. Where we in Sinn Féin have been able to, we have welcomed what has been done so far, but this motion seeks a cost of living cash payment. We need to put money into people's pockets as quickly as possible. I hope that the

Government will be able to support the motion.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** We know that the cost of living is rising. We know the severe pressure that people are under to heat their homes as well as to put fuel in their cars in order to get to work and do the bare minimum that most people need to do. However, we are facing a new part of the cost of living crisis, that being, food poverty. People are finding it increasingly difficult to put food on the table. More than 60% of people say that they are now making choices in terms of food. This is a crisis point. No spin can be put on this. It is a crisis when people cannot pay for food to put on their tables or when they have to make a choice about whether they will put food on their tables, fill their cars, heat their homes or meet life's basic necessities.

One would imagine that the Government would say that it needed to take action quickly and that it would do everything it could to help the most vulnerable in society. Every Deputy has been approached by constituents who are suffering greatly because of the major increase in the cost of living. We in Sinn Féin ran a survey on the cost of living crisis. Of those who had come to us saying that they were struggling with food, one pensioner replied that it was not possible to live on what was left after paying the electricity bill by card at An Post. The pensioner could not afford groceries, was eating the bare minimum and said that life was very hard. This is the reality for people. A woman in her 40s said that there was a major difference – approximately €30 of an increase – in her weekly shopping compared with a year ago. People do not have €30 at their disposal. This is something that makes a difference in the kind of food, and how much of it, they can put on their tables.

In our motion, Sinn Féin is making constructive proposals to help people who are struggling and those who are the most vulnerable. We have consistently made constructive and credible proposals on how to tackle the cost of living crisis. We in this Chamber must be united on the crisis because that is what people need us to do. A cost of living cash payment of €200 for every adult with an income of less than €30,000 must be introduced, as must a payment of €100 for every adult with an income of between €30,000 and €60,000. We have also made a range of other proposals.

This issue cannot be allowed to fall on deaf ears anymore. Immediate action is necessary to tackle the cost of living crisis so that people can eat when they need to.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** While I was sitting down today writing this speech, I thought about the difficulties that many people were experiencing at the moment because of the cost of living crisis and about how they were suffering. They are finding it hard and life should not be hard. If you are going to work every day and doing everything right you should be able to put food on the table, heat your home and look after your family, especially your children. The other day I listened to the Tánaiste talking about full employment but where is the full story? What about all of those people who are working and who are in poverty? How can this Government accept that people are going to work every day and that they cannot pay their rent, put diesel in the car or pay their electricity bills? People are struggling but if you listen to the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach, they say how great things are. For a lot of people things are not great.

We are putting forward a constructive proposal. We understand that the Government cannot do everything; we know that but providing €200 for people today makes a difference. Providing €100 for people who are earning over €30,000 and under €60,000 makes a difference and pays a bill. The Minister of State talks about the €2 billion the Government provided but that was too little and was not targeted at the people who needed it. There are people struggling. I

was talking to people and they are angry. They are looking for leadership and for their Government to listen to them and to act. People are intelligent; they know the Government does not have a magic wand but they also know that the Government should be doing more and it is not doing so. In Sinn Féin we are saying that we are elected by the people and for the people and that we need to deliver for the people. We ask that the Government would finally recognise the solutions we are putting forward, including the ones Deputy Kerrane has spoken about today. We cannot sort out everything but we can make a difference if we choose to do so. I ask the Minister of State and the Government to listen to people because they need help and they are hurting and it should not be like that.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Sinn Féin is bringing forward this motion on the rising food prices as we recognise the plight every single worker and low-income family is going through at this moment in time. Food prices are continuing to rise, with groceries expected to cost almost €800 more over the next 12 months. New research has found that 62% of people feel they will have to cut back on food spending over the coming year, with increasing concern that the rising price of food and groceries is forcing many families to go without, as evidenced by the steep increase in the number and range of families now seeking assistance from charities or food banks. The cost of living has risen so much that people are choosing whether to skip a meal or two just so they can pay utility bills or the rent. Spiralling housing costs are pushing increasing numbers of people into poverty, with lone parents, people with disabilities and renters depending on housing supports the worst affected. Data published by the CSO this month state that the overall poverty rate in the State, when housing costs are included, is 19%. Some 952,185 people - almost 1 million - or one in five of the total population are in poverty.

I will look at my constituency of Meath West as a prime example of what is wrong. Last week an Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report showed that a lone parent with two children, earning €25,000 per year and living in County Meath will pay a €450 top-off on HAP to his or her landlord, compared with the same families living in neighbouring counties, which are paying €252, or in other cases, €226. That is an additional €2,500 per year for a lone parent with two kids in County Meath, or an additional 10% of his or her total income. Surely this is not right or fair? The HAP system is out of date and has not been updated since 2016. In Sinn Féin we want to help families that are stressed with bills. We would put a month's rent back into renters' pockets, reduce childcare fees by two thirds and increase the minimum wage and social welfare rates. We would establish a discretionary fund to help households with utility bills. I call on the Government to introduce these measures as a matter of urgency. This would not even go close to paying the bills people have but it would help ease some of the stress they are going through.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** The cost of living crisis is getting worse by the day. People are being financially crippled by the rising costs of groceries, petrol, childcare, rent and heating for their homes. Food prices have increased by nearly 4% in the first three months of this year. We understand that the crisis is global but we need to do what we can to help the people now. Food banks are seeing more and more people turning up and looking for help every week. New research by Permanent TSB found that 62% of people feel they have to cut back on food spending because of the rising costs. The Government claims that it feels the pain of the people but it is clearly out of touch and it is failing to grasp the real challenges that families are facing. People are struggling week to week and having to make decisions about whether to heat their homes or put food on their tables.

In Sinn Féin we have brought forward a package of measures which would help people who

are at their wit's end and the Government could act on these measures with the stroke of a pen. The Government could introduce a cost of living cash payment today, which would see those earning less than €30,000 receive €200, while those earning between €30,000 and €60,000 would get €100. This is all part of a package of proposals which would seek to tackle the cost of living. Proposals like putting a month's rent back in renters' pockets and relaxing the rules around exceptional needs payments, as well as reintroducing access to the community welfare officers, CWOs, could also be implemented. The Government needs to get a handle on this. Families are struggling and they cannot wait for the Government's budget in October. Help is needed in the here and now. Ministers must do all in their power to protect people from the sharp edge of these increases and to keep food on their tables.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. The cost of living crisis is causing serious financial hardship for ordinary families and workers. Some of this is beyond the control of the Government but some of it is not and this evening, Sinn Féin is proposing one solution that would provide some relief and a much-needed break. In response to the most recent surge in the costs in the food sector, we are proposing that those earning less than €30,000 would receive a once-off payment of €200, while those earning over €30,000 and under €60,000 would get €100. No one should face that choice between putting food on the table or paying essential bills. Our proposal is an attempt to ease the pressure on those who are most financially exposed. Sinn Féin is also calling for other cost-of-living solutions to be implemented. These include the introduction of a living wage, a rent freeze and a tax rebate of 8.5% for renters, equal to one month's rent. This Government has done nothing for renters, the most hard-pressed section of society. We want a discretionary fund to be established to help with utility bills and to provide a cut in childcare costs.

We also need to go further and to start addressing the causes of inflation and what can be done as a country to protect people from external supply chain issues. A lot of our food is imported and is transported long distances, which results in more energy being used and costs being increased. Supply issues and global conflicts are driving up prices. The uncertainty and breakdown in production and supply lines are making the supply of some products problematic. Part of the solution to inflation and supply issues is more localised production. We need, therefore, to see greater investment in and focus on organic farming, which only makes up a small percentage, 1.8%, of all agricultural production, despite the fact that we have a target of 7.5% for it. We also need to re-examine the production of sugar and flour in this country. Some 80% of our flour and 100% of our sugar are imported, despite the fact, as the Minister of State knows, that we had a State industry producing those products less than two decades ago. The Government needs to establish a working group to assess the viability of re-establishing those key industries and establishing jobs in them.

*7 o'clock*

That should be the long-term plan. The short-term plan must be to implement these Sinn Féin proposals.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** The cost of living is out of control and families are under real financial pressure as a result. Food costs are soaring while people's incomes stay the same. Every day, people who are struggling come into my constituency office on Neilstown Road. Their struggle is not just with the cost of living. People are contacting my office who are struggling because of the housing crisis, whether that be the lack of housing, sky-high rents or because they are among the thousands languishing on never-ending public housing lists. In addition,

10,000 people are now homeless, thousands of whom are children. We are back to 2019 levels of homelessness under this Government.

There are countless parents who are desperately trying to access care for their children, who have been left on waiting lists for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychology services. Representatives of the Quarryvale food bank, which is located in my area, told the children's committee earlier in the year that people are accessing that service because they have to pay privately for the care for their children that should be provided under the public health service. This is an absolute disgrace. Ordinary workers and families are exhausted even before they are hit by the cost-of-living crisis. No one should ever have to face the choice between putting food on the table or paying the rent. People are under real pressure. The Government must listen to ordinary workers and families and it must act to address the issues they face.

I commend my colleague, Deputy Kerrane, on bringing forward this motion. It is a simple one, which proposes to put money back in the pockets of the people who are most affected by the cost-of-living crisis. It would give workers and families a break and the ability to breathe, put food on the table and recharge their batteries for fighting all the other difficulties the Government has put on them. Sinn Féin is offering not one solution but a raft of solutions, including putting a month's rent back in people's pockets and cutting childcare costs by two thirds. These measures would make a real difference to people in the here and now. We need to listen to what ordinary workers and families are saying and we must put the measures in place to help them. It is up to the Government to act on this.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I thank the Deputies for putting forward this motion. I understand their motivation in doing so and welcome the opportunity for discussion on the issue of rising food prices. We are concerned with protecting our people from the severe financial and economic consequences of the recent worldwide spike in inflationary pressure. We are all aware that people are finding it harder to make ends meet. All of us in this House, regardless of party affiliation, want to respond as comprehensively as we can. The Government will not oppose the motion, but I wish to make a number of points on its content and on the Government's record in addressing the cost-of-living issues to date.

With the annual rate of increase in the consumer price index, CPI, standing at 8.2% in May, it is clear that the long period of stable prices has, at least temporarily, come to an end. This is an issue that is not limited to Ireland. Indeed, it is a trend that is being seen across most advanced economies in the euro area. Inflation has reached a record 8.1% in those economies and it is of a similar magnitude in the United States. The emergence of inflationary pressures over the course of the past year is largely explained by international factors outside the control of the Government and governments elsewhere. These factors include post-Covid supply chain bottlenecks, increased savings, which people wish to spend now that Covid restrictions are eased, and an increase in wholesale oil and gas prices because of the rapid rebound in global demand. The war in Ukraine has added to these pressures.

The Government did not wait for a further budget cycle to address these challenges. Instead, we acted early, earlier in fact than most other governments. We brought in measures worth €2.4 billion to help this year. We introduced a package of significant measures in February, costing more than €500 million, that were designed to ease the impact of rising costs on households, particularly those on fixed and low incomes. These measures included energy credits, excise and VAT reductions on fuel and energy, the extension of the low VAT rate for tourism and hos-

pitality services, a reduction in the caps on school transport fees for multiple children, maintaining the enhancement of the diesel rebate scheme and reducing public transport fees by 20%.

In addition, we took a number of measures targeted specifically at low-income households. Additional fuel allowance payments were provided in March and May to more than 370,000 households. The fuel allowance is not designed to pay 100% of a household's fuel costs but it is a substantial contribution from the Exchequer, through the carbon taxes we raise, to those 370,000 households, each of which receives more than €1,000 through the scheme. The approach of focusing on lower-income households is important as we know they have less capacity to absorb price increases. That is why we complemented general social welfare and taxation measures in recent budgets with measures specifically designed to help those at risk of poverty. The social welfare package in budget 2022 was the highest in 14 years, with 1.4 million people receiving a €5 increase in weekly payments, and more if they have dependants or are living alone. We also introduced a number of targeted measures designed to support those most vulnerable to poverty and the rising cost of living.

Budget measures combined with the February cost-of-living mitigation have significantly increased the incomes of all social welfare household types. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, and the Central Bank have indicated these measures have been of particular benefit to the lowest-income households. Fuel allowance recipients, for example, have seen their payment increase by more than 55%. I have already indicated the scale of that figure. The full impact of the measures taken to date has yet to feed through, but the Government will continue to monitor the situation in planning future actions and in preparing for the budget.

I turn now to the proposals in the motion from Sinn Féin. The proposal to establish a discretionary fund suggests we do not have one. In fact, we do. The community welfare service makes discretionary payments every day of the week to help people with additional costs they cannot reasonably be expected to meet. These include urgent need payments to people who would not normally qualify for supplementary welfare allowance, including those in full-time employment. The supplementary welfare allowance scheme is not budget-capped; it is demand-led. While I understand the intent of the proposal, there is no need to establish a separate fund. Instead, it is intended to increase awareness of the existing scheme through more intensive media communications over the coming weeks. I want to make the situation clear for people who might not understand the phrase "demand-led". If more people need the payment, that cost will be met by the Exchequer. There is no cap on the amount that can be paid out through the supplementary welfare allowance scheme. If more people need it or there is a need for higher payments, those payments will be made. There is no cap on the budget for that provision.

The motion asks that walk-in access to the community welfare service be reintroduced. This suggests there is currently no walk-in access. In fact, although telephone-based services were introduced as part of the Covid-19 response and are still in place, a community welfare officer is available in all main Intreo centres around the country, during business hours on each working day, for walk-in services. An officer is also available to attend smaller Intreo centres or branch offices or, indeed, at the person's home in emergency situations. The telephone contact service operates alongside the in-person service. This means citizens no longer have to meet in person with a community welfare officer to make a claim. Indeed, many claims can be taken and decided over the phone. In many of these situations, as Deputies know, the community welfare officer has knowledge of people, their background and situation, and is in a position to make a prompt decision. Even if there is no meeting in person, a decision can be made once the person is spoken to over the telephone.

The proposal to introduce a three-year refundable tax credit for all existing and new tenants, which it is claimed would put “a month’s rent back into renters’ pockets”, is an old idea and one that would have a significant cost to the Exchequer. The question we must ask is whether it would, in fact, put money in the right hands. A previous rental tax relief was abolished in budget 2011. The view of the independent Commission on Taxation and Welfare was that this relief would increase the cost of private rented accommodation. In effect, the Exchequer was increasing the income of landlords rather than reducing pressure on tenants. That is an essential point and I am surprised this proposal is included in the motion. If the Government introduced such a measure, we would be accused of assisting landlords and developers by providing more funds to that sector. As Deputies know, it would result in putting more income in the hands of landlords. It would actually result in putting more income in the hands of landlords. There is a real risk that pumping more money into the rental sector in this way will just inflate prices and will not help renters.

The Housing for All strategy sets out a target to deliver 33,000 new units per annum. The application of Exchequer resources to support housing, should, in the first instance, be used to fund this new housing. In the 12 months to the end of March, over 22,000 new homes were completed. This year, the Government’s target is 24,600 homes. We recognise that there are ongoing challenges to the delivery of housing but we are confident that this plan can deliver and we are completely focused on its implementation.

The Government acknowledges that fees for early learning and childcare can place a financial strain on families and has already set out a range of actions to address this issue. Significant progress has already been made. More than 100,000 children now avail of two years of pre-school education each year under the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme and the national childcare scheme provides subsidies to more than 80,000 children. Findings from a recent review reveal that people using the scheme have saved money - 38% have saved at least half of their childcare costs- are making greater use of early learning and childcare services, and are working more hours themselves. The Government is committed to continuing to invest in this scheme with spending to increase to at least €1 billion this year.

Ireland has one of the highest rates of minimum wage in the EU, which is good. In addition, the share of workers on or below the minimum wage as a percentage of the total workforce has reduced from over 9% to about 6% in quarter 4 of 2020. Since the establishment of the Low Pay Commission, the national minimum wage has increased by 21%. This compares with an increase in consumer prices of 7% in the six years to December 2021. We acknowledge that prices have increased substantially since then. The Government is supportive of the Low Pay Commission and believes that changes to the minimum rate should be informed by the work of this commission.

Future actions should complement these measures and build on the services already in place, rather than set up parallel or duplicate streams of work. That is not to say that we believe no further measures are necessary. The Government has not been found wanting and will continue to monitor the situation. We will take on board the advice of bodies such as the Low Pay Commission and the suggestions from this House to respond appropriately at the right time, as we have done to date.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I listened to the Minister of State’s speech. While the Government may claim it is doing everything it can to assist people, the reality is that assistance is not reaching many of them. That is the experience I come across every day of the week and I am sure

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the Minister of State and other Deputies come across the same experience.

Last week a lady called to my constituency office. I will call her Anne. She has two children and is renting. The landlord said he was selling the house and she needed to go elsewhere. She could either go to a place that would not take housing assistance payment, HAP, or get nowhere. Because she ended up with a landlord who would not take HAP, that resulted in a 35% increase in her rent. She works in a fast-food chain on minimum wage. She is trying to raise two children, one of whom is on the autism spectrum with all the additional costs that come with that. Her experience is the same as that of thousands of others who are in desperate situations. The cost-of-living crisis is grinding them into the ground. This woman told me that some days of the week they eat beans because there is nothing else. If she does not do that, she will not have enough to pay the rent.

We need to find means to address that type of situation, other than telling people to go to the community welfare officer. She has gone to the community welfare officer several times when there were other crises and she knows that she will be refused if she keeps going back there. The reality is that we cannot treat people in this manner. We need to recognise that poverty is real for these people. The only way we can deal with it is to ensure we have adequate support for them and move these people into better employment on proper wages. While the Government can talk about the minimum wage increasing, the reality is that the minimum wage is a trap in poverty for most of them.

The Minister of State spoke about the fuel allowance and other things. Most of those are for people who, unfortunately, are in receipt of social welfare and have no other option. Many of us meet other people who are not on social welfare and are in low-paid jobs. They are also in a trap, trying to raise a family, trying to pay mortgages or rent, and caught in a situation they simply cannot get out of. We need action from Government. We put forward firm proposals and the Government needs to embrace those proposals. The Government should support the Bill by implementing it.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I commend my colleague, an Teachta Kerrane, on all the work she has done to highlight the reality of people in such circumstances under this Government. The Minister of State cannot pretend that he does not know there is a problem. He has acknowledged that there is a problem. He is telling people something will be coming for them in October. People cannot wait until the budget. They need urgent action now. The Minister of State advised people to shop around. I think he has acknowledged how hurtful that comment was for people struggling to make ends meet. I want to quote the food writer Caitríona Redmond:

If you're on a tight budget you are already buying own brand products. In most cases you'd be hard pressed to find a branded item in your shopping basket ...

If you take home €500 per week but need a full tank of petrol to get to/from work which cost €65 a fill this time last year but costs €98 a week this year that's €33 less you have per week (€1,716/year), before you go shopping [even if you shop around].

Something has to give. It is not a question of the price difference between Brennan's bread and a value loaf. Families are going hungry today.

I listened to the Minister of State's speech. I especially liked the part where he said the Government has not been found wanting. I would love him to take that message to the people that I represent who are making the choice between heating their homes and having food on the

table or putting fuel in the car to get their kids to school versus being able to pay their utility bills. They know that the Government has been found wanting because they are living with the reality of what it has done and how much it has been found wanting. Instead of trying to explain to families that there is no problem or that somehow they are at fault, I urge the Minister of State to listen to the lived reality of people in his community and in mine. They are struggling now and cannot wait for the budget.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Workers and families across the State, including in my community in Cork city, cannot catch a break. They are forced to make incredibly difficult choices which no family should have to make between paying a bill and putting food on the table. That issue will rise further up the agenda as time goes on. They have to choose between turning on the heating or filling the car to go to school or work. For months we have been urging the Government to tackle the cost-of-living crisis. The cost-of-living crisis did not arise yesterday or the day before. We have been talking about it for months. It is not just about fuel. It is about childcare, rent and all the additional costs that families have to fork out for because we do not adequately fund our public services.

We have been urging the Government to act on this. Instead, we are faced with a Minister of State telling people to shop around and stop complaining. Shopping around is no answer when childcare costs are akin to a second mortgage. It is no answer when increasing food prices will affect every retail outlet and the same is true with energy prices. It will do nothing for runaway rents or for the back-to-school costs that families will experience this summer in the hundreds of euro and often over €1,000.

It speaks volumes that we have seen a Tory government in Britain moving to address the cost-of-living crisis to a greater effect than anything from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government needs to stop dragging its heels. We need to get cash into the pockets of workers and families who need it. Ministers have made much of the social welfare supports available. The current social welfare rates do not match rising energy and food prices. The majority of workers are not benefiting from some of the increases, such as the fuel allowance increase.

We need targeted measures for families and workers who need help. We need reductions in the cost of home heating oil. We need increased social welfare rates to match the rate of rising prices. We need a reduction in childcare costs which are crippling families and keeping people back from work. We need a ban on rent increases. Waiting for budget day will not cut it. The time to act was yesterday, and the next best time to act is today. I urge the Minister not only to pass this motion but to implement it.

**Deputy Kathleen Funchion:** I commend Deputy Kerrane. I will focus on child poverty. The impact of food poverty on children is a major concern. This is not a new phenomenon. It is something we have had for years in this country. Even before the most recent increases in the cost of living, the Joint Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth was examining child poverty. Guests presented to the committee on the increase in the use of food banks. There is an impact on children when they do not get access to the proper and basic three meals a day. It is a reality for many families and children.

Let us think about that for a second. How would any of us feel if our children or our family's children were going to school hungry or with no lunch? In some cases, parents may be making the decision not to send their child to school because they know they do not have the lunch to put in their bags and do not want them to be embarrassed. The costs of school trips

have increased. There is pressure on children to try to pretend that everything is okay in their world when they are struggling. There is an impact on children if they are not getting adequate food and nutrition. We all know that is not good for learning. It is not good if children are going into school cold or if they are trying to do their homework where there is not adequate heating. Perhaps they do not have access to all the things they need, including broadband and everything else. Many people take those things for granted.

We need to stop for a second and think about what we are talking about. We are talking about children here. We are talking about very young children who are seriously struggling. Parents are under serious pressure. They are heartbroken that they cannot provide food and facilities for their children. Perhaps they cannot provide the right books, uniforms, coats or shoes. That is as basic as the situation is getting in Ireland in 2022.

I will challenge the point that 38% of people have saved at least half of their childcare costs. I would love to know who they are and where that figure is coming from. I dispute that figure.

CWOs provide an excellent service. However, that service is not for everybody. People in any sort of employment, whether part time or for a few hours a week, will be told they do not qualify for a CWO payment. It is as simple as that. It is not right to say that people can go regularly to the CWO because that does not apply in the case of many people. We know that because people are coming to our constituency offices and asking us to contact the Society of St. Vincent de Paul on their behalf because they have already tried the CWO.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I welcome and support the motion. I will start by responding to the Minister's response to the point that is raised in the motion about the establishment of a discretionary fund. It is true to say that the community welfare service makes discretionary payments and nobody would argue against that. What worries me, however, is the fact that the number of people who are receiving payments is not very high, especially with regard to exceptional needs payments and urgent needs payments. In a response I received directly from the Minister, I was told that in 2021, more than 2,300 exceptional needs payments amounting to €750,000 were made to assist with household bills and heating costs. To the end of March of this year, some 780 exceptional needs payments amounting to €167,000 had been made across the entire State to assist with household bills and heating costs.

Most of us in this House have been around a long time. We all deal with CWOs and the Department of Social Protection but something is not computing in respect of the volume of figures I have shared. I have noticed a trend in the past five or six years, while also noting the excellent work that individual CWOs do for their clients, service users and people who come to them, in exercising their discretion. We do not have the exact evidence for my assertion yet but one hopes one's political gut hopefully serves one well. A centralising tendency is creeping into the Department of Social Protection, which is trying to reduce the number of payments that are going out under the supplementary welfare allowance or through exceptional needs payments and urgent need payments. People's access to those payments is being suppressed. That is not happening at CWO level, but when dealing with people who come to my office, I find I am more often ringing the 0818 number. There is increasingly a suppression of that human interaction between the person who is applying and the deciding officer. The point is that I believe strongly that the Department is by stealth trying to take the discretionary element out of those key payments. We agree they exist but we also agree, now we are all interacting with each other again, that we need to go back to a model whereby people can have a walk-in service. That is what we are talking about. We want the walk-in service to be resumed. We need the element of discre-

tion to be embedded into the structures again.

I do not understand why applications are more often going up the line to somebody who has no relationship whatsoever with the applicant or has not had a human interaction with the applicant. It runs contrary to the foundations of the supplementary welfare allowance scheme as it was established by former Deputy Frank Cluskey all those years ago. We need to go back to that. There is unmet demand out there. People find it difficult to engage directly and increasingly we, as Deputies, are interfacing to try to contextualise people's individual stories. We all know what the stories are. We know exactly where people are struggling. It is well evidenced at this stage and is plain for everybody to see.

It is not just people who depend on the Department of Social Protection for their income who are struggling. The working poor are also struggling. We need to find some mechanism, through schemes such as the supplementary welfare allowance, for example, to provide for a greater number of urgent needs payments. I am poring over numbers. In October 2021, 24 urgent needs payments were made, if the figures I received in response to a parliamentary question are to be believed and we take the figures provided by the Department absolutely at face value. In November, 36 such payments were made. In December, 38 were made. In January, 26 were made. In February, 25 were made. In March, there was an upward spike to 45. Those are the figures for urgent needs payments, which is a specific category. Those numbers worry me. I can conclude there is a deliberate suppression in the number of people who are applying and refused payments. We do not have those figures but they will come out in due course, I am sure, when the right questions are asked. The alternative conclusion is that the level of discretion has been taken away. Neither God nor man could convince me that in March only 45 people throughout the country applied specifically for urgent needs payments. That is based on a reply to a parliamentary question I received lately. If I am misquoting figures, somebody will correct me. I am happy to be corrected, but I have the information here in black and white.

We keep raising the issue of the fuel allowance and access to it. I know it is not the most important topic during these summer months. However, it will not be long until we are into the autumn and winter months again and the issue will be high on the political agenda. I have called previously in this House for some sort of scheme to be put in place for certain people. While it is acknowledged that there has been an increase in the fuel allowance for those in receipt of it, there is a whole category of people who have worked all their lives, put children through college and are living in C-, D- and E-rated houses. They do not have access to grants and do not have the means to upgrade their houses, but they could very well do with an additional supplementary payment for fuel. If the Government were to create a second category to encapsulate those people who have a modest occupational pension or a contributory pension and who do not meet the criteria for access to the fuel allowance, it would be a good day's work.

Very many of the people to whom I refer, because they are of a certain age, would have voted Fianna Fáil historically. It would be a fair assessment to extrapolate that they have probably turned away from Fianna Fáil but maybe Fianna Fáil could go back and look at that category of people, if at all possible. I urge the Green Party and Fine Gael to do the same because this is all coming into sharp relief at a time when there is a fuel crisis. That is a very obvious thing to say but if it is possible to create a second category for the fuel allowance that would encapsulate far more people, that would give them just a little bit of headroom and see them through the next winter. The same Minister of State was in the House the last time I raised this during the debate on a previous motion. I hope to address the line Minister with policy responsibility for this in due course as well. We have to look after those people. They made the biggest sacrifices in

this country in the 1970s and 1980s when they paid big money in taxation and still they were able to educate children and put them through college. I am probably a product of that system, dare I say it.

I support the motion. It is a worthwhile motion but we must look again at the role of the community welfare officer. We need to buttress that facility. The community welfare officers that I deal with know the people they are dealing with well. They know the personalities and they are embedded within their communities. The level of discretion they have is paramount and is key to protecting people and we need to go back to that, back to the well.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The rising cost of living, especially as it relates to the cost of food, is an incredibly serious issue affecting households across Ireland. I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for the opportunity to discuss this important matter and for the practical and considered solutions they are offering.

Rising energy costs, skyrocketing rents, childcare fees that are more expensive than mortgages and families forced to pay for expensive private healthcare because public services are practically non-existent are all contributing to the cost-of-living crisis. Recent research from Permanent TSB has found that over 60% of people feel they will have to cut back on food spending in the coming year due to the cost-of-living crisis. Social Justice Ireland has shown that when housing costs are counted, almost one in five people in Ireland is living in poverty. This is the perfect storm. Decades of underinvestment in State services by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, combined with the failure to tackle the housing crisis, have left households exposed. Now the energy crisis and looming food crisis have pushed very many people to breaking point.

It is important to acknowledge the steps taken by the Government. The reductions in excise duty supported by most of the Dáil, cuts to public transport fees and cuts and an improved drugs payment scheme are all welcome but in many cases these and other measures, such as social welfare increases, were long overdue anyway. The Social Democrats have repeatedly proposed measures such as a ban on rent increases, increases to the national minimum wage, a €300 refundable tax credit to those on incomes below €50,000 and a further increase in core social welfare rates. Families need temporary measures to address the current crisis but more substantially, they need a fundamental reform of our State services to address the real issues underlying the cost of living. We are in desperate need of a Government that will tackle housing, childcare and healthcare costs, including for those with disabilities and long-term illnesses. If we want to improve people's quality of life and put money back into their pockets, then there must be a comprehensive and strategic approach to addressing the chronic deficits that exist in our public services.

In our alternative budget we proposed the concept of universal basic services and the idea that everyone is entitled to a range of public services that are free at the point of use. In progressive societies there is a minimum standard of living below which nobody should fall. This is the social contract. In return for the rates of tax people pay, the very least they should expect is a decent level of public service. Sick and elderly people should be able to get a bed in a public hospital, children with disabilities should get the therapies they desperately need, families should have affordable childcare and all communities should have access to affordable and frequent public transport. These are basic standards. They are the least people should expect, but, due to continued underinvestment, understaffing and dependence on families or private means, our State services are so insufficient it makes life more expensive for ordinary people

every day. Rent, medical expenses, education costs, and childcare fees all underlie the current cost-of-living crisis. To ease the burden on households, there must be a new approach to public services.

The housing and rental crisis is getting worse, adding increasing financial and psychological burdens on already hard-pressed families. The number of people in emergency accommodation surpassed 10,000 in April, including almost 3,000 children but in reality we know the homeless figures are even higher. In the past eight years, house prices have doubled. They have increased by more than 12% in the past year alone. Rents have also doubled in a decade, while housing costs have skyrocketed. We are seeing a growing number of people stuck renting who would like to be able to afford to buy their own home. We are seeing house prices about to reach record levels, surpassing their Celtic tiger peak. Home ownership levels are in free fall under this Government and home ownership among adults of prime working age, between 25 and 54, has collapsed, according to the Parliamentary Budget Office. Young people and families are being priced out of the rental market and home ownership is a pipe dream for many. The Government's response has been wholly inadequate. Renters cannot continue to pay more and more. We have some of the highest rents in the European Union which are a major cost for individuals and families and are also a significant economic cost. We need a radical increase in the supply of cost-rental and affordable homes to meet the housing needs of people, as well as a ban on rent increases and improvements in security of tenure for renters.

Childcare costs range on average from €800 to €1,350 per month, per child. This often forces a parent - invariably the mother - to reduce her involvement in or leave employment. At the same time, childcare workers are very poorly paid and retention in the sector is extremely difficult. The problem stems from underinvestment in children by successive Governments for decades. Core funding for early learning and care and for school going children is so inadequate that families have to sacrifice just to get by. The State spends just 0.3% of GDP on early years, which is well below the European average of 0.8% and the UNICEF recommended benchmark of 1%. This underinvestment is felt most acutely by one-parent families and those in disadvantage. This underinvestment is not only a substantial component of the cost of living for young families, it also perpetuates inequality.

The cost of living is even higher for disabled people. The Cost of Disability in Ireland research report, which was commissioned by the Government, revealed that people with disabilities face extra costs of up to €12,300 annually for transport, fuel, equipment, aids, medical expenses and much more. As a result, Ireland has one of the highest rates of poverty and social exclusion for disabled people in the EU. The Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People programme is failing children and their families. Waiting lists for assessments and therapies mean that private services are the only hope of intervention for some families. This forces parents to make impossible financial choices and sacrifices, while for others it is simply not an option and they can only stand by as their child is denied vital therapies and supports. Those with the means to pay for private services do so and those who cannot afford it are just left on those never-ending waiting lists. The situation is no different for adults with disabilities. The Ombudsman's report criticising personal transport supports described the available scheme as "inadequate, unfair and inequitable". This failure increases social isolation and reduces employment opportunities. There is a need for targeted, social health interventions to enable people with disabilities to live independent lives.

This motion's focus on food is incredibly important. Too often it is forgotten that food is a matter of public policy, just like education, transport and housing. The availability, cost and

quality of food are all shaped by Government and EU policy. Food prices are rising. This hits all households. We are seeing more families having to turn to food banks. These fantastic organisations provide vital work but they are indicative of the poverty so many people face. Parents are forgoing meals in order to ensure that their children are fed. Families are cutting back on groceries to pay rent. This is deeply worrying. It is simply wrong and it is incredibly unhealthy. The least we should expect in a wealthy country is that all people should have access to sufficient healthy food.

Our current food system benefits larger processors and retail giants, not normal people and certainly not producers. While food prices are rising, producers are not making more. Small farmers, inshore fishers and small producers are barely getting by. The Government spends hundreds of millions of euro annually subsidising food production, but how much of that actually benefits farmers and consumers? We are all aware of cartel-like practices in some areas of the agricultural sector. Farmers are entirely dependent on processors and factories for prices, which often bear no relation to production costs.

A food system that respects farmers and fishers, and helps consumers to access healthy foods produced as locally as possible, benefits ordinary people at both ends of the process: farmers and consumers. For too long, large retailers and processors have controlled the sector by setting prices, changing contracts, and simply operating for their gain only. Food is fundamental. It is a basic need that shapes our health and well-being. We need much greater regulation of our food system. We need fair prices for food producers and affordability for families.

This motion for a proposed cost-of-living cash payment is a practical and much-needed intervention that would help to alleviate the burdens on families and ordinary people until we get a Government that is willing to systematically take on the vested interests and reform our State public services.

### **Message from the Standing Business Committee of Dáil Éireann**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Business Committee of Dáil Éireann has completed its consideration under Standing Order 30 of the request by Deputy Jennifer Whitmore to waive the requirement for scrutiny of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2021 by the relevant committee and has agreed thereto.

### **Rising Food Prices: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Clare Kerrane:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— food prices are continuing to rise, with groceries expected to cost €780 more over the next 12 months;

— new research has found that 62 per cent of people feel they will have to cut back on food spending over the coming year; and

— Sinn Féin have proposed a suite of solutions that would provide badly needed relief to households, to include:

- putting a month's rent back into renters' pockets;
- reducing childcare fees by two-thirds;
- increasing the minimum wage and social welfare rates;
- establishing a discretionary fund to assist households with utility debt;
- relaxing the rules around Exceptional Needs Payments; and
- re-introducing walk-in access to Community Welfare Officers;

notes, with increasing concern, that the rising price of food and groceries is forcing many families to go without and is evidenced by the steep increase in the number and range of families now seeking assistance from food banks;

acknowledges that:

— some of the drivers of rising prices are outside of this Government's control, but the actions necessary to protect people from its worst effects and to ensure the outworkings of international factors are experienced fairly and without avoidable hardship are within this Government's gift; and

— the Government cannot protect everybody from every price increase, but they can and should do more; and

calls on the Government to introduce a cost of living cash payment of €200 for every adult with an income less than €30,000 and €100 for every adult with an income between €30,000 and €60,000.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I thank Deputy Kerrane of Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, which we support. Any contribution to people who are being absolutely hammered with cost-of-living increases should be welcomed. We are happy to support the motion.

I want to set out what I believe needs to be a really comprehensive and radical package to deal with the inflation and cost-of-living crisis that people are enduring. There is a need for us to recognise that something is rotten in the way our economic system operates. If we do not get to the bottom of that, we are not going to either solve this problem or stop lurching from crisis to crisis, which is what we do. We do that because we allow the market to dictate what happens in our society, with commercial concerns coming before planning for the needs of society.

Consider the mess at Dublin Airport. That is a Covid-related supply chain bottleneck according to the Government. When it replies to our criticism, the Government says that it is not its fault and that it is a Covid-related supply chain bottleneck. This was what the Minister of State said. What does that actually mean? I believe it is just jargon and rubbish to try to cover up what is actually happening. I will outline what it actually means. The CEO of the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, was previously head of Brown Thomas. It baffles me what those two things have to do with each other. Somebody who used to run Brown Thomas is running the DAA. Another person who is running it is a former Goldman Sachs banker. They are running the DAA and during Covid they said they were going to get rid of 1,000 workers because not

as many people were travelling as used to be the case. They decided to take advantage of that opportunity to get rid of people. They knew they would have to rehire them. When they knew it was time to do so, they would have taken a decision to give them absolutely rubbish contracts in order that they can have a workforce that can be turned on and off like a tap. They would also have to decided to guarantee those people only 20 hours' work a week but with the proviso that they must be on call for 40. Furthermore, they would have decided to pay them €14 per hour. Is it any wonder that people are not exactly jumping over themselves for those jobs or that the DAA has a problem retaining people in them? The DAA wants to hire people but does not want to pay them properly. It wants a workforce it can turn on and turn off. That is what a supply chain bottleneck looks like. It is people running our most important piece of national transport infrastructure on a for-profit basis at the expense of the workers who are needed to make the place function. The workers are treated like dirt, which is phrased as being "flexible", but, of course, eventually workers just do not want to do that. The people at the top have awarded themselves packages of €366,000 in pay and pension entitlements. They have also decided to run two airports down in Saudi Arabia for one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world, and are setting up duty-free shops all over the world. This is because they are interested in money. They are not interested in making our infrastructure work; they are interested in money.

Does this sound familiar in the context of some of the other things affecting the cost of living, such as, for example, the cost of housing, accommodation and rent? The people running that sector are interested in making money out of it. If there is a shortage of housing, they actually make more money. In fact, they have absolutely no interest in creating a situation where there might be either a sufficient supply or an excess of housing. Why would they possibly do that when, if they did, they would not make as much money? That is how our housing sector works.

One can also go through the list of areas where it is about people making money rather than supplying food, as was just mentioned. Our entire system of agriculture has been set up to supply export markets, which is a global market-led approach, rather than meeting the need for food and a diversity of food supply, which would be necessary to deliver locally-produced food of all types to the people of this country on a sustainable and secure basis. No. We are geared up for the market and we are geared up for the beef barons and certain people who control the dairy sector to make money. It does not work for the producers and it does not work for the ordinary consumers, but by God does it work for the beef barons, for Tesco and for all of the rest of them. That is the elephant in the room. While ordinary people are hammered with the cost-of-living crisis, Tesco's profits, energy companies' profits, Shell's profits, BP's profits and corporate profits generally in Ireland are all through the roof. That is what is going on. Inflation is not some sort of interesting economic phenomenon. Inflation is about making money for the people who control the things that we need to make our society function.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** That is right.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is what it is about. One can look at any sector, but that is what we have to address. My God, even Boris Johnson has, under pressure, been forced to acknowledge this point at some level and introduce a windfall tax on the profits of energy companies that are making a fortune. In the past week, Oxfam produced a report showing that if we put a 1.5% tax on everyone in this country who has more than €4 million in wealth, we could raise €5 billion annually. My God, would that not do a lot to protect ordinary people from the rising cost of living to deliver affordable housing and so on? I think it would.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I will start with some questions. Will the cost-of-living crisis lead to an increase in the number of people who steal food from shops in order to eat or provide for their families? If so, how will the law react? Will people be prosecuted? In Britain, there is public debate around this question. Why is there no such debate here? Earlier this month, the new chief inspector of the constabulary in England and Wales, Andy Cooke, said the cost-of-living crisis will trigger an increase in crime and that officers should use their discretion in deciding whether to prosecute people who steal in order to eat. The following day, his views were challenged by Tory Minister Kit Malthouse, who said that crime causes poverty, not *vice versa*, and urged prosecutions.

I believe crimes are being committed in our supermarkets, by the billionaire owners of the major chains. I believe it is criminal for Tesco to make profits of €2.2 billion, pre-tax, in the UK and the Republic of Ireland in 2021, which is double the profits for 2020, at a time when some people are unable to feed their families or are forced to choose between heating and eating. It is not illegal for these chains to charge the prices they charge but it should be. The Government should make it so by using its powers under sections 61 and 62 of the Consumer Protection Act 2007 to control prices.

I also do not believe a parent who steals a packet of nappies for their child should be prosecuted. To be crystal clear, I am not advocating for shoplifting; I am opposing prosecution in cases such as those I have outlined. Having said that, if things keep going the way they are going, I wonder whether the “Can’t pay, won’t pay” movement from 1970s Italy, where people loaded their trolleys and walked out of supermarkets as an organised group without paying the price increases might not happen here in the future. In the meantime, I advocate for a different form of mass protest. I hope people take to the streets in large numbers to demand a €15 minimum wage, a freeze on food prices and legislation to cut rents. They will have opportunities in Dublin, Cork and around the country on 18 June. I hope workers put in claims for pay increases that match inflation and back that up with ballots for industrial action. Inflation is class warfare, with the rich robbing the poor. It is time for ordinary people to unite and act in defence of our own interests.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Today, families around the country are being hammered. Hundreds of thousands of families are living from overdraft to overdraft and many others are completely maxed out. Families are going without food and heat. Energy prices are sky-rocketing. It is incredible that people are spending time awake at night trying to work out what bill they can afford to pay and how they will make ends meet. Some of the advice we have gotten from the Government in response to this is incredible. Ministers have told us to drive slowly and shop around. Today, inflation hit 8.2% in this State. That is an incredible level. That money is coming out of the people’s pockets.

There are obviously a number of reasons for this, some of which are international and beyond the control of the Government, but many are local and in the control of the Government. It is interesting that the Government is now blaming Covid supply chains for some of the breakdowns leading to this inflation. This Government imposed the longest and most severe lockdowns on supply chains in all of Europe. The Government’s policies led directly, in many ways, to the crisis people are now experiencing in their pockets. The Government is in control of the fuel issue as well. Over 50% of the price of a litre of fuel is Government tax. The higher the price the fuel goes, the more the Government makes. Last year, the Government made €1.5 billion extra in VAT as a result of the increased cost of fuel. The Minister of State is refusing to look at VAT on fuel. He said the Government’s hands are tied by the EU on this but

the Government did not feel the same reticence in reducing VAT on hotels, for example. There was no problem with that. Some in that sector are now gouging tourists and locals alike with regard to prices. The profits and turnovers of many energy firms are rocketing. Some of these are local, including the ESB. The ESB made a profit of €679 million up to December 2021. It is a State-owned company and yet it is still increasing the price of electricity for consumers. The Government, as the majority shareholder of the ESB, could ask it to reduce the pressure on families but it will not.

Last week, Aontú raised the issue of the M50 tolls. If there was ever a monument to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael waste, it has to be the two toll bridges on the M50. They were built at a cost of €58 million in a public-private partnership signed off on by Pádraig Flynn, who, it later became known from a tribunal, received a donation from the successful company. That company charged tolls on those bridges for years. It recouped the cost of building those toll bridges in just one year. It then sold those bridges to the State for €600 million, after making a massive profits on it. Since 2009, the Government has recouped €1.3 billion on these tolls on the busiest road in the country. This Government is in charge of that. It could reduce the pressure on families by reducing or scrapping that toll but it will not.

Regarding food prices, today's farm inflation is tomorrow's consumer inflation. Last year, the price of fertiliser increased by 149%. Now 78% of farmers are going to reduce the amount of fertiliser they use. This is coupled with the fact that the price of cattle coming into farm has increased by 22% and feed prices are going up. Even before this inflation came into being, farmers were barely making a living in this country. Aontú has asked for the Government to subsidise fertiliser prices but it has refused to do so. As a result, after this harvest, the increased prices in the inputs of farming will mean increased prices on the shelves for consumers. In all these situations, the Government is refusing to act. Before this inflation crisis hit, this State was the sixth most expensive country in Europe, and Dublin the fourth most expensive city, because the Government will not reform the sectors that are maximising profits. Even when the Troika were here, they pointed the finger at closeted sectors the Government would not reform. There is a *laissez-faire* attitude from this Government when it comes to fixing the cost of living and that *laissez-faire* attitude is costing people dearly.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion, allowing us time to highlight the increasing price of food and how that problem has been made worse by Government actions. I again feel it is necessary to draw attention to the increase in carbon tax as one of the causes of price increases everywhere, including for food. To take it from its origin, the farmers who sow the crops have been hit with increased fuel costs via the carbon tax. Farmers are also faced with higher costs on the shelves because what they buy in the agricultural shop or hardware shop has increased in cost due to higher transport costs, caused in part by carbon taxes. Before ever sowing the crop, it is more expensive to plough, harrow and prepare for sowing. The carbon tax also makes it more expensive to sow, maintain and harvest everything. It is then more expensive for those transporting the produce to the factories and the mills. When the final products are produced, it is more expensive to transport them to wholesalers and retailers all over the country. All those extra costs are paid by the consumer when they take the finished item from the shelf and bring it to the cash register. Food costs are rising by 7.5% year on year. As I said before, it is the poorest people who are hit hardest by this. They are the ones who have to make tough choices but they are also the least likely to be able to afford the green alternatives. There are struggles in different sectors. The pigmeat sector has been particularly vocal in expressing its troubles, with pig feed costs almost doubling in the last two years.

8 o'clock

Scrapping carbon taxes would help significantly to reduce the costs, not only of fuel but of everything that has to be transported using that fuel, that is, not just the food on the table but the clothes on our backs and the shoes on our feet. It would also ease the cost burden faced by everyone who has to travel for work, such as rural Ireland dwellers, our home carers and tradespeople travelling hundred of miles to build the accommodation so badly needed in our cities. Social Justice Ireland has highlighted that the overall poverty rate has increased from 11.6% to 19% - not a statistic to be proud of.

There is a need to call out the Government's hypocrisy when it comes to its attitude to dealing with the cost of living crisis and blaming the EU rules. We have heard umpteen times the Government using EU rules as an excuse not to reduce VAT on fuel or heating oil, yet when it comes to the rights of people with disabilities, the Government continues to ignore the rules of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure compliance. It seems, therefore, that we can ignore our commitments when it suits the Government and apply rules that suit the Government to the detriment of our citizens.

Another issue caused by Government actions is the transient accommodation crisis. I received an email from a representative of the company Mastiff, based in Taghmon, County Wexford. It states:

Over the last few weeks we have faced a number of issues with meeting contracts due to the lack of accommodation and the cost of what is available. We cannot expect our workers to pay the best part of their daily wage on accommodation. We also cannot expect these men to travel 2-4 hours home at the end of the day and return for work in the morning with a 7-8am start, this would not be safe practice.

[...]

There are workers now refusing to go to work due to the cost and we are unable to increase the contribution, we must operate within revenue guidelines. This will have an impact on the market and we are seeing steady growth in our sector, this summer will be very busy and this is a concern now as there will be the added issue of tourism and students looking for housing throughout the season.

Mastiff is a wholly Wexford-owned and based company, employing 110 people, and its contribution is invaluable to the construction sector.

If the Government reduced its tax take on fuel to reflect the emergency situation by removing excise duties and other duties and applying VAT to the product only at the base rate in the short term, 1 l of petrol and diesel would cost €1.12 and €1.28, respectively, tomorrow morning. That would be radical, meaningful action to combat the soaring cost of living and to prevent people from not being able to afford to go to work or from having to decide between heating and eating. Does it have the *cajones* to do it?

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for organising this timely debate. The cost of fuel, especially diesel and petrol, is the main contributory reason for the increased cost of food. Lorry transport costs have increased significantly and farmers face increased costs to produce food. Whether they are dairy or beef farmers or tillage farmers, the savage extra cost of diesel alone and the considerable cost of fertiliser are driving production

costs through the roof.

The Government should and could take less tax from fuel. It has been raking it in since the base cost increased. Other countries are taking less tax. Why can the Government not do the same? It is not fair on people who have to pay to go on the road, that is, every man or woman with a wheel. They are paying savage costs and it will not be long until they are ground to a halt. The Government could take less tax and that would help. We have to start somewhere, and as the teacher said to me long ago when I was in school, when you are unravelling a stocking, you should begin at the toe. We have to begin where the trouble started and that is with the increased costs, which have to be reduced.

The cost of electricity is also driving everything mad and it has increased every day since the Government closed Bord na Móna. The Government stonewalled and said it would have to get permission from the EU to reduce VAT on fuel, but no permission was needed when VAT was being increased. I have never heard of the Government having to go to the EU for permission to increase VAT, yet it had to ask the EU, or so it claimed, to be allowed to bring it down.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I too thank Deputy Kerrane and Sinn Féin for bringing this very important motion before the House. The public are facing unprecedentedly hard times, with inflation at a record high at 8.2% in this month of May. We would have to go back to 1983 to find similar inflation figures here previously. If the Government were seriously to consider reducing the taxes that have been put on diesel and petrol, we could reduce the cost of fuel by 65%. Doing that is within the gift and the power of the Government and it would be meaningful and real and would have a major and immediate effect.

In the context of this debate on the price of food, I have been the owner of a small shop for many years and I know at first hand the effect the increases are having. We are living in a country where nothing can be distributed or taken around. Nothing falls out of the sky for us; it all has to go by road. Obviously, there has been a massive increase in the costs of transportation, whether that is the fuel itself or the running costs of lorries and vans. Even for people who deliver newspapers every day, there is a cost to keep tyres and a vehicle maintained and on the road. It is a never-ending cycle of increases and at the end of the day it is the consumer who pays for everything.

The Taoiseach admitted earlier that he was worried and concerned. If he is so bloody well concerned, why does he come into the House and put more taxes, in the guise of carbon taxes, onto the hard-pressed public? Now is not a time to be putting on carbon taxes and other additional taxes. It is a time to reduce, as a temporary measure, the taxes we have in place to ensure people will be able to afford to live, feed their families and keep bread on the table. We definitely have to do something, yet the Government seems to be hell-bent on nailing everybody to the cross. It has done nothing about the increase in energy costs. People's fuel bills have rocketed to unprecedented figures and there are also the issues faced by people running small businesses. I was contacted the other day by the owner of a chip shop whose monthly bill now stands at between €8,000 and €9,000, which is unsustainable.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The Minister of State was elected to represent the people. What is he going to say to the husbands, wives and children in this country when they cannot get adequate food to feed their family? Shop owners have told me their turnover has increased by 10% on last year. They tell me the margin on the products they buy into their shop are down by 5% but that their running costs mean they will now have slimmer profit margins than those

which they had last year, even though they are turning over more money. The Government has done nothing about this but increased taxes. That is where the price increases in all the shops stem from. The increase in transport costs has resulted in an increase in the cost of producing food, and the answer of the Government, which was elected to protect the people, is one of tax. Let us make the problem of inflation worse by taxing everyone in this country out of existence, but come September of this year, when people have to get their children back to school, they will look to the Government and what it has done to their families. When they look at their shopping bills and try to put clothes on their children and food in their lunch boxes to get them to school, they will remember the Government. The cheapest meat you can get at the moment is luncheon sausage. That has gone up 25% since last week. The packet of ham, which was always €4, is now €4.70. The pound of butter has gone up by 20%. That is all down to taxes because this country is completely reliant on fossil fuels as we have no alternatives and the answer of this Government is tax, tax, tax. We will take in more tax but give nothing back. The Government should reduce its take on fuel. It would help everything in this country to do with the production of food.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Anyone who steps inside a supermarket or a store these days knows full well food prices across a range of items are increasing all the time. Families are under huge pressure because they must struggle to pay these costs for basics but they are also struggling to pay electricity bills, fuel bills and so forth. I understand from reports on this issue that the cost of food across the EU has jumped by 7.1% in the past year. That is almost double the rate of inflation of 3.6% in the EU-27, according to the figures released on 2 June by EUROSTAT, which is the EU's statistics office.

We need concrete actions from the Minister of State. The Rural Independent Group called for a mini budget to try to alleviate some of the hardship for people and we again call on the Government to do just that because people cannot wait until the budget in October. We are also confronted by the fact that getting things right in this area is an extremely difficult balancing act because as many of us in the Rural Independent Group have been highlighting for some time, although the cost of food is rising, farmers and producers continue to see below-cost selling as standard practice. It is a vicious circle. The farmer and producer experience massive hikes in the form of input costs, fertiliser price increases, green diesel and other agri contractor-related expenses but when they go to sell their goods, they continue to receive below the cost in return. Last week I called for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to look at the carbon tax on agri-diesel. I support the call of the Association of Farm & Forestry Contractors in Ireland to exempt agri-diesel from carbon tax for five years in order to allow the sector to stabilise, because there are huge pressures there.

This motion calls on the Government to introduce a cost-of-living cash payment of €200 for every adult with an income of less than €30,000 and €100 for every adult with an income of between €30,000 and €60,000. I called for something similar many months ago when I suggested the Government revisit extending the children's allowance to all children over the age of 18 years who remain in full-time second level schooling. I call on the Government to do that urgently because it would be a huge help in alleviating some of the hardship.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** We move to Deputy Joan Collins. Does she know if her colleague Deputy Pringle will be here?

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I am not sure. I thought he would have been here. He is expected here.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** The Deputy is not sure. She has five minutes.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I thank the Acting Chairman. I have been at stalls in my constituency over the last couple of weeks to build for the demonstration on 18 June by the Cost of Living Coalition. There is much anger and frustration from workers and people on social welfare. I was talking to a young woman who has two children. She said she has been really impacted by the rise in the cost of her shop. She made the point that a pack of toilet roll that was €2.90 up to a couple of weeks ago has now gone up to €5.20. Another young woman and her husband work in the hospitality sector and are low-paid workers. They have four children and she said her weekly shop has gone up from between €100 and €110 up to around €150. That is about €45 per week extra, which is more than €2,000 per year on food alone. That is how the increased cost of living has impacted on them, without taking in energy and the other costs that have gone up.

Many people raised the issue of the €450 million given to developers to do the job they are supposed to do. People expect the Government to assist people in particular in lower-income households over the next period.

On the radio this morning there was a three-day piece on the cost of living in food shops and the impact on food. Kantar research stated that 62% of families are cutting back on food and this particular researcher had a receipt from a shop he did this time last year. He did the exact same shop for the exact same items this year and made the point the shop was up 20%. He said 454 g of butter, which is a pound of butter, has gone up from €2.19 to €2.99, which is a 36% increase. The price of 2 l of milk has gone from €1.49 to €1.89, which is a 26% increase. Chicken has gone up 29%. These are the real facts people are facing every day of the week while their incomes have not changed, and that is the issue.

While the Government said it is external factors, etc., that have impacted on inflation, it must do more to alleviate the crisis for families. Food retailers have announced their sales have decreased by 6% in the last 12 weeks. That means people are cutting back. Food inflation alone will have gone up at least 8% by the end of the year and possibly even more. Dr. Michael Drew from St. Vincent de Paul has written a book about the hidden deprivation of food. He said 350,000 people, which is 7% of the population, are impacted by food poverty. Social Justice Ireland was also on the radio yesterday. Its economic researcher, Colette Bennett, made the point the poverty rate is 11.6%, which is 580,000 people, but increases to 19% or 1 million people, when you factor in mortgages and rent payments. Overall, the poverty rate in owner-occupied homes is one in 12 and for renters it is one in five. For people with a disability she said the pre-housing poverty rate is 39.1%, which means two in five people with a disability living in poverty. That increases to more than one in two when you factor in the costs of housing. These are all realities people are living in at the moment.

Inflation went up by 7% in April and has gone up again this month. Rents went up by 12%. Almost 1 million people were forced below the poverty line in the past year when rents are taken into account and an extra 300,000 people found themselves in this position last year. Everything is going up, including rents, food and energy costs, but the only incomes doing so are those of the already well-paid. The Government has done very little to alleviate this crisis and working-class families and those on low incomes are being hit the hardest. The one-off payment for electricity bills was welcome but is not enough. The reduction in fares is welcome but we should have free public transport if the Government wants to take serious measures to tackle the climate crisis.

We cannot rely on the Minister of State's Government to take serious action. We need to organise for the minimum wage to be increased and move to a €15 per hour living wage. The €5 increase in welfare and State pensions in the last budget was an insult. We need a €10 increase at minimum. We need to freeze, then lower, rents and ban evictions. We need to scrap college fees and build public student accommodation. Importantly - and this is an issue I have raised on a number of occasions - we need a specific emergency hardship fund for those who are struggling with bills. The community welfare officers should be relocated back into the community for at least two to three days per week to make such payments more accessible. We need a windfall tax on the super profits of companies in the energy sector to help pay for these measures. I support the motion brought forward by Deputy Kerrane and appeal to people to come out on the streets on 18 June and put a shot across the bow of this Government to show people cannot tolerate this level of inflation, especially those at the poorest levels, on low incomes and on social welfare payments.

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I thank Deputies for an engaging discussion on the important issue of rising food prices. As was already outlined by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, I assure Deputies the fundamental objective of the Government's policy approach to this issue is to take action, monitor the impact of those actions, consult bodies such as the Low Pay Commission, take the suggestions of this House on board and then respond appropriately at the right time.

One of the facets of rising food prices, as part of a wider increase in inflation, is the increased risk of food poverty in our society. This is an area for which I have both a personal concern and a key responsibility. In fact, this morning I joined the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to speak at the launch of the book on food poverty that Deputy Joan Collins mentioned. In respect of rising food prices and food poverty, the roadmap for social inclusion, for which I have responsibility, is a whole-of-government strategy to reduce poverty and reduce social exclusion and marginalisation in Ireland. The roadmap includes a commitment to develop a comprehensive programme of work to explore further the drivers of food poverty and to identify mitigating actions. On foot of this, last year I established a working group on food poverty to deliver on this commitment. I chair the group and the membership comprises representatives from relevant Departments as well as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Crosscare and the Children's Rights Alliance.

The food poverty working group has focused on two pieces of work to date. The first is a high-level mapping exercise of programmes, services and supports already in existence across government that are tasked with addressing elements of food poverty and providing supports in this area, including everything from hot school meals to meals-on-wheels. A key issue for the future is ensuring that these supports are provided in a coherent manner and in locations where they are needed and availed of by people who need them, to ensure that the services operate as effectively and efficiently as possible in mitigating food poverty. The second piece of work is the development of a research proposal to identify the drivers of food poverty in two case study areas, one urban and one rural, and to examine the range of service providers and actors relating to food poverty in each area. It should also identify any gaps and overlaps in service provision. The findings from this research should further inform the delivery of this commitment as part of the roadmap for social inclusion.

In addition, the Department of Social Protection helps to address food poverty directly through the fund of European aid to the most deprived, FEAD, which supports EU member states' actions to provide food and material assistance to the most deprived. FEAD Ireland re-

ceived funding of €26 million for the period 2014 to 2020, with over 150 charities nationwide distributing food to their communities. The Department also delivers the school meals programme, which provides funding towards the provision of food services to some 1,500 schools and organisations, benefiting 230,000 children. A budget of over €68 million has been provided for the scheme in 2022.

I reiterate that the Government is keenly aware of the recent price increases and their impact on households and businesses in Ireland. For this reason the Government acted early in providing a response package. The February package was particularly targeted on the impact of rising costs on fixed-income and low-income households. To summarise, the Government's range of measures included energy credits, excise and VAT reductions on fuel and energy, the extension of the low VAT rate for tourism and hospitality, reducing the caps for multiple children on school transport fees, maintaining the enhancement to the diesel rebate scheme and reducing public transport fees by 20%. All these measures help all households but are of particular benefit to families on low incomes. We specifically targeted low-income households through additional fuel allowance payments which were provided in March and May, €125 and €100 lump sums, respectively, to over 370,000 qualifying low-income households. The overall fuel allowance increase for 2022 has been €355, bringing the total annual payment for fuel allowance to €1,139 per eligible household.

This approach of focusing measures so that they benefit lower-income households is important, as we know that these households have less capacity to absorb price increases. To the extent that prices of basic goods such as food are increasing, these households are more vulnerable to risk of poverty and deprivation than other households. These measures maintain the trend supported by Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, research of complementing general tax and social protection measures with specific measures designed to support those at higher risk of poverty. The full impact of the measures taken to date has yet to feed through, but the Government will continue to monitor the situation, both nationally and internationally, including price developments, in planning future actions and in preparing for the budget. We intend, as we have to date, to complement broader-based welfare and tax changes with targeted measures to support the most vulnerable households at highest risk of poverty.

To conclude, I thank the Members for their time and engagement this evening. It is important to ensure that these issues remain a focus of all Members of the House during a unique period of rising inflation both nationally and internationally. I assure Members that all suggestions and proposals will receive due consideration as the Government continues to respond to the unfolding situation.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I do not have to tell the Minister of State that the cost of living is affecting people from all walks of life. People are struggling with the rising cost of rent, the cost of trying to buy a house, the price of fuel and the rising cost of food. Social Justice Ireland has found that almost 1 million people are living in poverty in the State while the Central Statistics Office, CSO, predicts a dramatic rise in the amount of money people will have to spend on food over the next year. The CSO estimates an additional €780 will be spent on groceries next year by consumers due to the cost of living. This is a huge increase for those on lower incomes and those depending on State support payments such as the old age pension. When it is coupled with other excessive prices for electricity and gas it is an increase that cannot be managed.

People in my city often turn to Depaul Ireland, the Simon Community and the wonderful community centres we have across the city. For example, St. Munchin's Community Centre

on the north side of Limerick prepares and ensures that hundreds of meals are distributed in the city and across the region every day. While this was very evident during the pandemic, the work continues daily. People would be lost without these vital community services. They would literally be going hungry.

People are looking to the Government for solutions or support, but very little of either has been offered. The Government has often been far too slow to react. Rents have been allowed to spiral out of control, with a 14.1% increase experienced by renters in my city of Limerick, and childcare and energy costs are through the roof. The Government's response has been haphazard, untargeted and unambitious. Time and again we have called for the Government to introduce supports for households that are struggling with rising costs. We want those struggling to be aided by the State with a real intervention and we want to put workers and families first.

In the short time I have, I will refer to a comment that the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Fleming, made. I was not surprised to hear the Minister of State say it earlier because I often hear Ministers say that people can contact their local community welfare office. I can tell exactly what happens when that is said. First, the staff will be overwhelmed with the number of presentations they get. The staff tell me this happens every time a Minister spouts this in the Dáil or in the media. Second, little, if any, payment will be made to them. Can the Minister of State and his colleagues please do us all a favour and stop hiding behind the fig leaf of pretending that going to the community welfare office will be a solution? It is not. It often never works.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The truth is that food is just the latest necessity to see substantial price hikes. That is not an accident. Farm input costs have been increasing dramatically for several months, indeed, for the past year, and the Government has failed to act adequately. It was warned that this would happen if it did not act. Costs of fuel, one very important input, have been rising. There are international factors at play, but the Government actually forced higher prices. When it increased the carbon tax it increased the cost of producing food and the cost of transporting food. Hey presto, food prices have soared. Then we hear a Minister of State tell us tonight that the Government will not be found wanting. It has been found wanting on every single parameter when it comes to the cost-of-living crisis that so many workers and families are experiencing.

We have advocated for years that we must freeze rents and put a month's rent back into people's pockets. The Government has refused to act. On mortgages, we had the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, calling for the European Central Bank to intervene, essentially calling for an interest rate hike. No action has been taken on childcare costs, one of the major costs facing many families, to date. We have seen token measures on energy. There was a €200 rebate, which was wiped out before it was even implemented. On fuel, the Government gives with one hand in terms of minimal excise reductions but then it takes with the other through increases in the carbon tax. As regards heating costs, it has done nothing whatsoever in respect of home heating oil other than to force the price higher through carbon taxes. Then there are its hare-brained ideas to ban some sources of home heating fuel.

The huge costs people are now enduring for food are again partly the result of this Government's failure to act. What has been proposed so far to support families with rising food costs? Nothing yet, and listening to the remarks of the Ministers of State nobody can have confidence that this Government either understands the scale of the crisis people are facing or has any intention of acting appropriately. All this debate has reaffirmed to me and to anybody watching it

is that it is time for a change. It is time for the policies that Deputies Doherty, Kerrane and the Sinn Féin team have put forward. It is certainly time to get the Government out of office. It is time for Sinn Féin to provide the supports our families and workers so desperately need.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. In particular, I commend Deputy Kerrane on tabling the motion and on championing this issue on behalf of hundreds of thousands of workers and families who continue to struggle in the face of a cost-of-living crisis. They see it in the price of food, energy and other essentials, which continues to rise. They see their bank balances struggle to keep up with the weekly shop and the monthly bill. Some have been forced to make choices nobody should have to make, including whether to eat or whether to heat, cutting back on food shopping and trying to be sparing in the use of electricity in their homes because the money simply does not go far enough.

Some people benefit from inflation, but for the vast majority there is an income squeeze. In the Dáil last week, the Tánaiste contended that the entire world faces a cost-of-living crisis, but the reality is that not everyone does. Lower-income and middle-income families face a far higher bill for their living standards, and a higher fall in living standards, than the wealthiest in society. Cutting back on food, fuel and other essentials is a crisis; having to cut back on luxury items is not. The Government simply does not understand the financial strain ordinary workers and families are under right across this State. If the Government did - if it really got it - it would have responded properly and with greater urgency than it has done. It has not because it does not get it, and that is the simple fact. In the past year, inflation has reached more than 8%. For lower-income to middle-income households, it is some way above 8%. They now see food prices rise and essentials go up in the supermarkets, and they are feeling it right in the pocket. The prices of staples such as bread and meat have gone up by more than 5%, while the prices of pasta and milk have increased by 10%. Some claim that people are living beyond their means; in fact, too many do not have the means to live. That is the reality, and those people need help from a Government that is tone-deaf to these pleas.

To date, the Government's response has been totally inadequate. Despite high levels of inflation and inflation figures we have not seen in decades, it has refused to increase working social welfare rates. That is a disgrace. Members of the Green Party, which is in government and is allowing those people who depend on these fixed incomes to become poorer in light of inflation at in excess of 8%, should quit their jobs now because it is a disgrace that they have left people struggling in that way. It is a shocking dereliction of the Government's duty to protect the most vulnerable. The Government has said its measures are targeted. The Government should not take my word for this; it should take the word of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, for it. IFAC states that of €1 billion in measures since the start of this year, €893 million were untargeted. The Government left those most vulnerable in society without any support whatsoever.

When it comes to energy prices and home heating oil, the Government is making things worse. It is increasing the costs on families and, despite multiple calls and motions from us on this side of the House and amendments we have tabled, one after the other members of the Green Party, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael came in here to vote to increase the cost of living on people by pushing up carbon taxes and excise duties on those same families. The Taoiseach recently doubled down on the Government's refusal to introduce measures to support households until at least October. Even the Tories and even Boris Johnson understand that their government needed to act in a targeted fashion to protect the most vulnerable. The fact that Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Greens still do not get it and still are more out of touch than even Boris

Johnson and the Tories screams loudly.

It is not too late to act, however. That is why we tabled this motion. The Government said it will not oppose the motion. That is not what we want from the Government. We want it to act on the motion. The motion is very clear. It screams loudly to the concerns, plights and needs of hundreds of thousands of people across this State. It recognises that not everybody can be protected from every price increase but that the Government can and must do more. That is why we call on the Government to introduce cost-of-living cash payments to provide immediate financial support to those on lower and middle incomes. Sinn Féin proposes cash payments of €200 for every single adult on incomes less than €30,000 and cash payments of €100 for those on incomes between €30,000 and €60,000. This would come along with another suite of measures we have proposed such as freezing rents and putting a month's rent back into renters' pockets, increasing core social welfare rates to keep in line with inflation, cutting the cost of childcare and introducing a discretionary energy fund, which is needed. People should listen to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and not this balderdash from the Minister that such a fund exists when the dogs on the street know that is not what is needed. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is arguing for the proposal before us. Government Members should not only support it but also get off their backsides and implement it and get their heads out of the sand when it comes to the cost-of-living crisis faced by workers and families right across this State.

Question put and agreed to.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions**

### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

#### **Departmental Programmes**

1. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update on LEADER programme funding, considering the European Commission's recent statement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28016/22]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Will the Minister provide us with an update on the LEADER programme and the funding for it, particularly considering the statement made recently by the European Commission? It was an annexe to a response to our CAP proposals and it included information on LEADER.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue.

The LEADER programme is a key intervention of Our Rural Future, the Government's policy for rural development launched last year, which aims to deliver a range of actions to rural communities over the lifetime of the policy.

Some €250 million has been made available for LEADER for the period 2021 to 2027. This comprises €70 million for the transitional period 2021 to 2022 and an additional €180 million

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from 2023 to 2027. This level of funding is evidence of the Government's continued support for the LEADER programme.

My officials are engaging with colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the European Commission on the design of the next LEADER programme from 2023 and on the points raised by the European Commission in its observation letter on Ireland's CAP strategic plan.

Any discussion on rural development investment must also take account of the record levels of investment in recent years. A range of schemes, funded outside of the CAP, have been implemented in recent years, such as the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, the walks scheme and the outdoor recreation scheme, all of which contribute to enhancing our rural areas.

The national development plan, NDP, also outlines a clear commitment to a continuation of investment in rural Ireland, with capital funding allocations for my Department increasing from €88 million in 2018 to €205 million in 2025.

I am confident that this level of funding, through the range of schemes, including LEADER, will continue to support and to further develop our rural areas.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I understand that the CAP period of 2023 to 2027 is not fully determined yet and that work is under way on the design of LEADER for that period. Will the Minister indicate the timeline for the completion of the design and when LEADER will know exactly what is happening from 2023 onwards? The EU, through the European Commission's statement, said with regard to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, general objective of strengthening the socioeconomic fabric of rural areas, Ireland is invited to reflect on whether the budgetary resources and the instrument proposed are in line with the high number of needs identified. It also refers to different regions in Ireland. This brings us back to the north west and the west, which is the only region in the country that is no longer considered to be developed. It is a region in transition. It is regressing and it is in need of major investment to bring it back up to a developed region. That is urgent. When will the funding for the period from 2023 to 2027 be in place?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The indicative budget of €180 million has been announced for the LEADER programme for the period 2023 to 2027. When taken together with the €70 million for 2021 and 2022 under the transition LEADER programme, a total of €250 million will be made available for the 2021 to 2027 period, thus maintaining the level of funding provided in the period 2014 to 2020.

Approximately €139 million has been paid to beneficiaries in respect of completed works, with 3,250 projects receiving their final payment claim, representing 62% of all projects approved. Preparations for the design and delivery of the next LEADER programme from 2023 to 2027 are well under way. There is ongoing engagement between my officials, colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the EU Commission with a view to obtaining approval for the CAP strategic plan as a matter of priority. I cannot give the Deputy a specific date, but I can assure her a lot of work is going on to make sure the plan is approved as quickly as possible.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The Minister will also know the interim funding that is in place now was a matter of concern for the Irish Local Development Network, ILDN. A number of

LEADER projects throughout the State felt the funding was inadequate for the period. She will also know the ILDN is not satisfied with the €180 million for the four-year period. Issues have been raised in regard to that. Now that the European Commission is questioning the approach, given the high level of need identified, Ireland is being asked to reflect on whether the proposed budgetary resources are in line with the need. That is something that will have to be looked at and addressed, because if the ILDN is saying the funding is inadequate, then it must be examined. The interim funding for many LEADER projects has already been allocated and spent and there are still a number of months to go in 2022. They feel the funding should have been increased. The regions must be looked at as well in light of any funding that will come through Pillar 2.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The Commission is talking specifically about CAP. We have all the other schemes the Government is putting money into to support rural Ireland, which is what the Commission wants to see also. It wants to see the governments are putting investment in.

We have the rural regeneration and development fund, from which the sum of €347 million has been allocated to 164 projects since 2018. The town and village renewal scheme has been allocated €93 million since 2016. The outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme has been allocated €87 million since 2016, with more than 1,200 projects supported. Almost 1,800 projects have been supported by CLÁR with €45 million. More than 12,000 projects have been supported under the community enhancement programme since 2018.

Nobody has run out of money yet. I have seen this a few times in the past. People get very nervous when it comes to the end of a programme. I put transition funds in place this time in order that staff could be retained and projects could continue to be funded. Some LEADER companies are doing very well in terms of their spend and others are not doing as well. I have never been found wanting when it comes to funding for LEADER.

## **Broadband Infrastructure**

2. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the engagement she has had with the mobile phone and broadband task force in the past six months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27815/22]

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I want to get the perspective of the Minister on her latest interactions with the mobile phone and broadband task force.

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The mobile phone and broadband task force was re-established on 15 December 2021 with an inaugural meeting of State bodies co-chaired by the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth. This meeting included senior representatives of a number of Departments and State bodies. This first meeting allowed the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to set out their priorities for the coming period, which include improving mobile phone coverage in rural areas; examining issues around planning permissions and licensing for, and sharing of, telecoms infrastructure; the use of public assets for telecoms purposes; and improving the quality and availability of information for consumers of telecoms services and products.

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On 27 April 2022, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, co-chaired the second meeting of the reconvened task force. This meeting was attended by the full task force membership, including representatives of the telecommunications industry. This meeting allowed for discussion of the draft year one work programme and the terms of reference. The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, were both impressed with the level of commitment shown by members to the ambitions of the task force and the creative nature of the proposed solutions.

As the work programme moves towards implementation, officials from this Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications will continue to engage with each member of the task force bilaterally to ensure progress on the actions. It is anticipated the next meeting of the task force will take place in September 2022 with an annual stakeholder forum to take place in spring 2023.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** Did the Minister of State, Deputy O'Brien, attend the meeting as well?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** No, I did not.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is here and she attended the meeting, so I am not sure why she is not answering the question.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** We are sharing the load.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Yes, we are sharing.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I understand. The Ministers are sharing the load. I accept that. I apologise. Two key points arise from those deliberations. One is the point about improving outdoor mobile phone coverage. I acknowledge that a lot had been achieved in the key output of the previous task force of improving mobile phone coverage in rural areas and in urban blackspots. As more and more people are taking the modal shift in transport from private car travel into train and bus travel, we must ensure blackspots are addressed, in particular on the railway line, for instance, between Cork and Dublin, which is a service people use. Are such services being considered in terms of ensuring we have complete 100% coverage?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I can give the Deputy some information about what the task force is looking at. The issues it will look at this time are more complex, knotty and time consuming, and responsibility for such actions cannot always be assigned to a single body, as was the practice previously. We will make use of the well-established collaborative culture of the task force to take on the actions that require multiple stakeholders working together to deliver. That means fewer actions with longer delivery timelines but a much greater strategic impact. Specific actions have been discussed with members and there is a plan to publish the year one work programme in the coming weeks. The actions will fall under the three pillars of planning and licensing, improving information and access to assets and infrastructure, and improving customer information advice and experience.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** I think we all acknowledge the work. We also acknowledge that the coverage of mobile telephony could be improved. There are still some well-noted blackspots. We all know of them within our constituencies. If we could find some mechanism where we as public representatives could notify somebody who is involved in the task force of these specific blackspots, we would be serving our constituents well in that regard. I referred specifically to

the Cork to Dublin railway line, where there are significant blackspots, and I wonder if that could be addressed. If the Minister of State could take that message back, I would be most grateful.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** Certainly, we can feed that very practical point back into the task force. I will give the Deputy a flavour of some of the actions that are currently agreed. The Department of Rural and Community Development will continue to refine and enhance the broadband officer roles across local authorities in alignment with the implementation of the EU connectivity toolbox and the development of the EU smart community policy. In short, the Department will work with the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, to align the work of the broadband officers with European policy priorities as well as national priorities such as Our Rural Future, town centre first, making remote work and the national digital strategy. By aligning more with EU policy, we hope to leverage European funding and opportunities for collaboration and the exchange of ideas and expertise with colleagues across the Continent.

### **Departmental Meetings**

3. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the engagements she has had with community-based organisations in relation to tackling the cost of living and other major societal challenges; if she has met with an organisation (details supplied) on this matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27813/22]

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** This question relates to engagements with community-based organisations on tackling the cost of living and other major societal challenges. Has the Minister met with organisations, such as the alliance of 32 organisations, on this matter?

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** The programme for Government recognises the importance of regular and open engagement with all sectors of society. In this regard, I work with the community and voluntary sector through the cross-sectoral group, CSG, in implementing Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, the five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector. The community and voluntary pillar, of which Community Platform is a member, is represented on the CSG. The Department of Rural and Community Development has worked collaboratively with the sector through the CSG to create and agree a document setting out values and principles for collaboration and partnership working with the community and voluntary sector, which was approved by the Government recently.

Another key action in the strategy is the establishment of a civic forum for formal dialogue between the community and voluntary sector and local and central government. My Department is working on the design of this forum, which will take place later this year. The forum will be developed in collaboration with community and voluntary stakeholders and its work will be underpinned by the recently agreed values and principles.

In my capacity as Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection, I host an annual social inclusion forum, which provides people affected by poverty and social exclusion, as well as the community organisations representing them, with the opportunity to come together with officials from relevant Departments to discuss poverty and social inclusion policy. One of the workshops at this year's forum, to be held in June, will be on income adequacy and the cost of living.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** We all know there is a major difference between talking and having a real, genuine input into the challenges faced by all community organisations regarding the cost of living and other significant issues facing our society. The alliance has put out a call because there is a concern about the quality of that engagement and how genuine it will be in taking all the opinions on board. Ms Rachel Doyle, co-director of Community Work Ireland, a member of Community Platform, has said it is not credible for the Government to expect to find the best solutions to crucial social issues for all our society, such as childcare, housing and health, without the full and equal engagement of representatives of those who most depend on essential public services. She also stated she knows first-hand from Community Platform members the struggle which diverse groups in their communities have experienced and measures needed to address them. It is calling for that genuine engagement with the Government and to have its input taken on board and implemented.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I am dividing my reply into two halves as regards my role. As part of my role in the Department of Rural and Community Development, I spend much of my week engaging with the community and voluntary sector through different platforms and different formats. I am very familiar with members of Community Platform. I meet with many of them periodically regarding different issues. I have not had a formal meeting with Community Platform as a collective since last year. A number of Ministers and I met the Taoiseach. We had an initial discussion about social dialogue but formal meetings with Community Platform, particularly on the issues the Deputy outlined, are not what I do as part of my remit at the Department of Rural and Community Development. However, with my Department of Social Protection hat on, there are opportunities that I mentioned in my opening answer.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** This is critically important because of the scale of the rise in costs that society is facing at present. There is deep concern following the Taoiseach's statement today about the increasing cost of fuel because of the Ukrainian crisis, on foot of the deal done last night in the European Parliament. People are genuinely terrified about what will happen and how they will be able to live. The summer months will be a little easier because if it is a good summer, as we hope it will be, there will obviously be reduced costs for people, but they are terrified of what will happen as they come into the winter. Community organisations are in the same position. Members of those organisations are talking personally about their projects and how they will fund themselves, but they are also talking about the people they work with. That is what they care most about and those people are the ones they are most concerned about. It is about having that impact, and sitting at the table having a real and genuine engagement and partnership with the Government and Departments, to ensure the things they are talking about and that matter to them are implemented.

**Deputy Joe O'Brien:** I will not go through the various lists and forums through which I engage with the sector. As I said, I spend a lot of time doing it. On what the Deputy is talking about and the wider challenges society is facing, the civic forum we are planning for later this year is possibly the best outlet to tease out the major issues and to get a good representation of civil society around the table. That might then feed further into social dialogue, which is also something we want to progress. I take the Deputy's points. I have been contacted only today by Community Platform with a view to meeting and I will be glad to do so.

## **Departmental Schemes**

4. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will seek to increase significantly the local improvement scheme funding to ensure that a real impact can be made on the list of schemes to be carried out by each county council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28017/22]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** Question No. 4, in the name of Deputy Pringle, will be taken by Deputy Connolly.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** This question also applies to Galway so I am happy to take it on behalf of Deputy Pringle. It specifically relates to whether the Minister intends to increase local improvement scheme funding significantly to ensure it has a real impact. This goes back to a previous reply that indicated there were no reliable data relating to the actual demand and the number of roads. I ask the Minister to factor that into her answer, even though it is not specifically asked. The rationale behind that is that data are missing on how to assess whether the money the Department is giving is effective.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The local improvement scheme, LIS, supports the improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities. As part of Our Rural Future, the Government is committed to ensuring the scheme is funded into the future.

The LIS was reintroduced in 2017 following a number of years with no dedicated funding in place. The scheme is administered locally by the relevant local authority, which is responsible for prioritising and selecting eligible applications within broad parameters set by my Department. Following the launch of the LIS with the confirmation of county allocations, each local authority submits a priority list of roads, as well as a reserve list to my Department before works commence locally.

From 2017 to 2021, my Department allocated €80 million towards improvement works on more than 3,000 non-public roads and lanes benefiting over 13,000 landowners and residents in these rural areas. I was pleased, as part of budget 2022, to announce an increase in the base funding for the LIS from €10.5 million to €11 million this year. I announced details of the 2022 scheme in early April and approvals have now been issued for works to commence to all but one local authority. Last year, I was in a position to double the initial LIS allocation to €21 million following the identification of savings in other capital areas. This year, I am continuing to monitor expenditure patterns closely. Should savings emerge, I will certainly give consideration to allocating additional funding to the scheme again.

On the issue of funding, different local authorities have different criteria. Some are open to new applications in respect of the numbers on the list, while others are working their way through historical lists on a first come, first served basis. Some local authorities only include eligible applications in their returns to my Department and others appear to include all historical applications. It is hard to get exactly correct data but my officials are working on these issues.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Minister. I appreciate the fact the money has doubled. Arising from previously, the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, set out to look at whether there is value for money. Its focused assessment, which the Minister referred to in a previous reply, included as part of recommendation 4 that it was neces-

sary to carry out an estimate of “the scale of the relevant non-public road network” in Ireland. She said at that point that this recommendation was being considered along with others.

*9 o'clock*

That was 2020 and we are now in 2022. Deputy Pringle feels that his county is losing out in the allocation of funding because of the change to allocations based on geographical criteria. Saying exactly what the scale of the non-public roads is is complex, but where does the recommendation stand, given that the Minister stated it was under active consideration?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I made a large additional allocation last year, which was welcomed, and I am committed to supporting the LIS. Some local authorities did not spend all of their allocation last year. Donegal was one of those. Its spend was €35,000 short. We allowed it to carry that amount into this year, but its 2022 allocation has been reduced as a result of the shortfall in delivery.

The assessment is not uniform. As the Deputy knows, different local authority engineers in different municipal areas will deem some roads on the list eligible while others will not. Even within local authorities, there are differences in how the figures are compiled. My officials are exploring these issues and we are consulting the local authorities to try to ensure that a consistent data set is available.

Regarding the Deputy's county of Galway, the 2022 LIS allocation is €958,831. The total allocation for 2021 was €1.58 million.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am zoning in on this because the Minister's previous answers were given in the context of the absence of reliable data. While I appreciate that the figures seem large and they have increased, it is difficult to put them in context without adequate data. The IGEES produces these reports, which are very good and tell us whether there has been value for money. According to the IGEES, and the Minister repeated it, there are no reliable data on the matter.

Where does this specific consideration stand? Will we have a report on it and what is going to happen? The key element for Deputy Pringle in this is the allocating of funding based on geography as opposed to demand. My experience has been that demand on the ground is much greater than the allocation.

There are two issues, one of which is the absence of reliable data, as highlighted by the focused public policy assessment.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Funding is allocated each year based on the geographical area of each county, with a minimum and a maximum allocation applied, and the basis for allocating funds is reviewed each year. My Department has received indicative figures from the local authorities for the applications on hand. We need to be sure that the figures provided for each county are comparable.

The officials are examining these issues and consulting local authorities. It takes time, but the most important point to make is that we are making some inroads into the lists. My constituency counties are no different from any other, as both Cavan and Monaghan have long lists. However, we must remember that this fund was closed for a good number of years. In fairness to my predecessor, Deputy Ring, he was the man who reopened it. It has been running

ever since and a good deal of funding has been invested in it. I appreciate that there are lists, but the LIS was always funded by the Department of Transport. I have been in contact with the Minister to see what his Department can bring to the table in this regard.

### **Departmental Schemes**

**5. Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if more funding will be provided in 2022 in view of the many local improvement schemes in County Kerry, as there are over 660 applicants still on the current list and at the level of funding being allocated, it will take over 35 years to exhaust this list (details supplied). [28020/22]

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** My question is in the same vein. There are still 678 roads on our list. I believe that we have the longest list in the country, but we are only getting funding for 15 roads per year. I appreciate that we got extra funding last year, when we dealt with 19 roads, but a list of 678 roads would take 45 years to get through. I do not think that any of us who are in the Chamber tonight – except for maybe the Acting Chairman, Deputy Carey, who looks young enough, and Deputy Kerrane – will be here in 45 years' time. It would take ten Governments, assuming they lasted four and a half years, which they may not. We will have to get more funding. What is the Minister's view on this matter?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The focus of the LIS is to support the continued improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not normally maintained by local authorities but that represent vital infrastructure for rural residents. The scheme is also used to fund non-public roads leading to important community amenities such as graveyards, beaches, piers, mountain access points or other tourism and heritage sites.

My Department provides an allocation of funding each year to the local authorities for works on these roads. The selection of roads to be funded under the scheme is then a matter for each local authority based on the priority or condition of particular roads in its county. The local authority may rely on existing lists of eligible roads and-or advertise for new applicant roads. Demand for the scheme is strong and it is normally oversubscribed. It is acknowledged how important the scheme is for people in rural areas and for farm families in particular. There is no other source of funding for these roads, which provide vital access to agricultural lands and rural homes.

I was pleased, as part of budget 2022, to announce an increase in the base funding for the LIS from €10.5 million to €11 million this year. Last year, I was in a position to double the initial LIS allocation to €21 million following the identification of savings in other capital areas. Kerry received more than €1.1 million of this funding in 2021.

This year, I am continuing to monitor expenditure patterns closely. Should savings emerge, I will give consideration to allocating additional funding to the scheme again.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank the Minister for her reply, but I will pick her up on something she said. She stated that they were non-public roads, but they are public. It is just that they have not been taken in charge by a local authority. They have the same status as roads that were taken in charge by local authorities. Authorities stopped doing that in the early 1980s, but these roads were left behind. They are public roads, not private ones.

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To qualify, there must be at least two landholdings. The council would not dream of dealing with private roads where there was one or two houses and no landholdings. We are talking about public rights of way and public roads.

Our county's list was completed in 2018. Mixed into that were 90 applications made between 2007 and 2012. That was wrong. People on these roads pay every kind of tax – carbon tax, motor tax, income tax, property tax and the universal social charge. Indeed, people on these roads cost the State very little. Most have their own septic tanks and water and farmers on public water supplies pay savage water bills. They have built and maintained their own houses. These roads are also used by others providing services – milk lorries, feed lorries, tractors, ambulances, doctors, home helpers, postmen, public health nurses, vets, departmental inspectors, school buses and cars taking children to school.

These are public roads. The Department says that they are private roads, and this is where the Government has gone wrong, so I ask the Minister to challenge the Department. These are not private roads, but public ones.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I know exactly what the Deputy is talking about. When I was being reared on a farm, I lived on a lane that was a mile long. I know all about potholes on a lane. We had to swerve the bikes to get past them. I also know about septic tanks because I have a well and a septic tank.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad the Minister does.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The LIS was always funded by the Department of Transport. In fairness, my predecessor, Deputy Ring, brought the scheme back and I have continued it. We doubled the funding for LIS last year and increased the funding available in the budget for 2022. My county is the same as the Deputy's; it is rural and it has lots of roads but I have to cut my cloth to measure and divide up the pot we get. I have raised this matter with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who has responsibility for roads. In view of the fact that the LIS was always funded by the Department of Transport, I have asked that the Minister would consider matching the funding provided by my Department. That means more money and more roads. The Department of Transport has a much bigger capital budget than mine. I cannot do the loaves and fishes because I have a pot and a lot of other things have to get funding as well.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank the Minister for her reply and I recognise Deputy Ring's input because it was I who asked him to bring back the LIS at the Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs several times and I am glad he responded and did so. I do not mind whether the money comes from the Department of Transport or the Department of Rural and Community Development. I have a serious ask for the Minister. There are 678 roads and if we only do 19 or 20 a year, it will take us a long time, which is not fair on the people of Kerry. The people on these roads are every bit as entitled to a good road as the people in Dublin 4. We have to recognise the problem and deal with it, and that problem is funding. I appreciate that the Minister is doing her best and I agree with her that the Department of Transport should facilitate these people. The Minister talks about cycling on her road but you cannot cycle on any of these roads now because you are in and out of potholes and the traffic is massive. The people on these roads are entitled to better and I am asking the Minister, as a Minister from a rural county, to respond and do more for us. We are in a bad situation.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I know about the milk tanks coming in these roads and there were a few concerns that they would not come in any more because they were in such bad condition. Thankfully, I am aware of one case where the road was fixed and the milk tanker is going in to collect the milk. The Deputy will appreciate that and I mention the challenges that rural people face. The only thing I have to make to him is that I have to cut my cloth to measure. If I give more money to the LIS, where does he want me to take it out of? It will have to come from the rural regeneration and development fund, CLÁR, the town and village renewal scheme, the connected hubs fund, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme or the new community centres investment fund that I have just announced last week. It is a balancing act and the commitment I have given is that if savings emerge later in the year I will look at increasing the funding to the LIS. I would like to see some matched funding coming from the Department of Transport. There are the community incentive schemes as well and that fund is in the Department of Transport. Maybe that should be considered too.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** All I will say to the Minister is we are not recognising the amount of taxes that the people on these roads are paying. They are not getting value for their money.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** Question No. 6 is in the name of Deputy O'Connor but I do not see him here so we will move on to No. 7.

### **Harbours and Piers**

7. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 956 of 5 April 2022, the status of the development of Caladh Mór on Inis Meáin; the status of the bathymetric studies on the harbour; if they have been completed to date; the status of the development of the updated simulation by the National Maritime College of Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27786/22]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Táimid ar ais arís ar Inis Meáin agus an chéibh ansin, an Caladh Mór. Is í mo cheist arís agus i gcónaí ná cad é stádas na forbartha atá beartaithe? Tá a fhios agam go raibh an tAire ar an oileán ach cá bhfuilimid faoi láthair? What is the status of the promised development of an Caladh Mór? Where is that development in terms of the studies that were promised? I was looking forward to hearing that they are completed or to hearing a date for their completion.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I know this is something the Deputy has raised with me on a number of occasions. The development of the Caladh Mór pier on Inis Meáin is included in the NDP. As the Deputy will be aware, Galway County Council is responsible for the development of stage 3 of this project. As part of the preparatory works, the National Maritime College of Ireland was requested by Galway County Council to develop a model simulation for the harbour. The council has collated the technical specifications of the key vessels that use the harbour and this data will be fed into the simulation. It is hoped that the simulation will be completed and tested, with feedback given, by the end of August. To feed into this process, additional bathymetric studies are also to be carried out in the harbour to gather further data. This

will be a multi-beam mapping survey, which will be highly detailed, but which requires suitable conditions to be carried out. Galway County Council advised my Department at a meeting between officials last week that, due to unsettled weather and marine conditions, the bathymetric survey has not yet been completed. It is hoped that conditions will settle in the next week or so, allowing for completion of the survey. Once this work has been completed, Galway County Council will incorporate the findings into a draft business case. Following on from this, my Department will be in a position to evaluate the next steps in the process.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank the Minister for the strength of her reply. We will put it into context. In 2008, phases 1 and 2 of this work started and 14 years later, my colleagues from Galway West and I are attempting to keep the pressure on and get dates. We know the work is complicated. The Minister has been out to the islands herself and she knows the impact that the state of this pier has on business. There is a fantastic business out there, Cniotáil Inis Meáin, that is directly affected with cargo coming in and out. She knows about this; I do not need to say it to her. Each time we ask there is a further delay and the bad weather is interfering with it now. Are we on target to have all the information and studies necessary by August? That will feed into the business case then. When will the business case be ready? Tá sé sin tuillte ag muintir na hoileán ag an bpointe seo, nach bhfuil?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** We need the draft business case from Galway County Council and these different surveys have to feed into it. To be honest with the Deputy, I had to ask my officials what a bathymetric report is. Apparently it measures the depth of the waters, the underwater features and the marine species. It is a mapping of the sea floor. I am asking the same questions the Deputy is asking. She has raised this with me frequently and I have asked my officials the same questions such as how long it takes to do these reports. It is hard to give a timeline because they are technical matters that are time-consuming but I have told my officials to sit on Galway County Council and move this on and they are meeting officials from the council every two weeks. I am placing that sense of urgency on it. I understand the Deputy's frustration; I have been out on the island and I know the points she is making.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** The county councillors say they have to wait for the National Maritime College of Ireland in Cork. Whatever about our frustration the Minister can imagine the frustration on Inis Meáin. Deputy Kerrane has a question on the policy for the islands later, as do I. They have been waiting for a policy for the islands for a long time and an interdepartmental committee was set up in 1996. Then we had another interdepartmental committee set up three years ago and we are still waiting on that. This is a vital piece of infrastructure. The island is doing well with industry but it is being hampered by the inadequacy of the pier. Are there any indications to the Minister from the regular meetings? There are meetings every two weeks to keep the pressure on, which I appreciate. Is there any feedback from those meetings on what the issues are or is the bad weather the final issue with carrying out the bathymetric studies on depth?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** If I knew how to do these reports, I would do them myself and I am sure the Deputy would do the same because it seems to be going on and on. Work has been done on the pier. As we know, it is dangerous for the ferry operators to come in when the tide is at a certain level. There is an issue impacting the cargo ferry in that there are many occasions on which large differences in the sea levels, created by the swell, prevent their docking safely at Inis Meáin. I know about the factory there, which is creating much-needed jobs. The fact vessels were being forced to travel on to Inis Mór, instead of docking at Inis Meáin, prompted the need for the National Maritime College of Ireland to model simulations to inform

the business case. There is also the other report to which I referred.

I can only say to the Deputy that I am committed to pushing this on as quickly as I can. We must wait until we get the reports because there is no point in taking action again and not getting it right the second time. It is a complex issue and I understand the Deputy's frustration.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** As Deputy O'Connor is now in the Chamber, we will go back to Question No. 6.

## **Digital Hubs**

6. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to open further remote working hubs in County Cork, particularly in the Youghal area. [27657/22]

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I apologise, Acting Chairman, for being absent. I was on a call and did not notice the time going by. I welcome the Minister and congratulate her on the wonderful work she has been doing in her Department. She has been a pleasure to work with on the issue I am raising, as my colleague, Deputy Stanton, will agree. My question relates to remote working infrastructure. This is hugely important in my constituency of Cork East and in other constituencies across the country. It is important to recognise that people saw new light and opportunity in rural Ireland in the context of changed work practices during the pandemic. One aspect of this is having remote working hubs in place. I am aware that many private operators also have an interest in potentially looking at this option. Will the Minister update the House in this regard?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for his words of encouragement. Our Rural Future, Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-25, recognises the potential of remote working hubs as key economic assets for our rural towns and villages. Accordingly, over recent years, my Department has invested some €100 million in the sector to build, improve and expand hubs.

In May 2021, I launched the national hub network. This currently comprises 236 remote and co-working facilities across the State. These facilities have been onboarded to *connectedhubs.ie*, which is the shared online booking and payments platform for member hubs and their users. The network includes a range of hubs catering for a wide variety of remote and co-working needs. It is expected that, in time, the network and the platform will include more than 400 facilities. Of the 236 hubs on the *connectedhubs.ie* platform, 23 are located in County Cork. A further 17 hubs throughout the county, including the Enterprise Youghal hub, have been invited to join the network.

Through the connected hubs 2021 scheme, I awarded almost €9 million in funding to more than 100 applicants, enabling them to add capacity to existing remote working hubs and broadband connection points, BCPs, across the country. More than €425,000 was allocated to County Cork, with funding going to, among others, Macroom E Enterprise Centre, the Benchspace hub and Republic of Work. In February this year, I launched the 2022 connected hubs call, allocating a further €5 million in funding for the development of our national hub network. The evaluation process has now concluded and I will be announcing the successful applicants shortly. I am committed to continuing my Department's support for the ongoing strategic development

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of a comprehensive and integrated network of remote working hubs in recognition of the vital role they can play in our post-Covid recovery.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Joe Carey):** I have supplementary questions from Deputies Stanton and Burke. I will take them after Deputy O'Connor, if the latter is agreeable.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** They are very welcome to do so. I already acknowledged Deputy Stanton's work on this issue. I compliment the fantastic work that is being done by the Department.

I refer specifically to a project in Youghal. This very exciting development, which relates to Youghal Library, is being co-funded by the Department and Cork County Council. This would not be possible if not for the funding allocated by the Department. What I really want to see is the Department working with private partners and local authorities to get this infrastructure put in place for Youghal. It is important that it be done given the economic circumstances in the town, with a view to generating local employment. As a Deputy who was born and raised in the area, I know this is of the utmost importance to the business community in Youghal and also to the many workers who want to explore this particular opportunity. I ask the Minister to continue to recognise the importance of this project. It will be very welcome and is of great importance to Youghal Chamber and other organisations in the town, including Youghal Business Alliance.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I support my colleague, Deputy O'Connor, on this matter and I thank the Minister for the great work she is doing. Are Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment involved in supporting the work to provide remote working hubs and centres? We may need to think even bigger on this issue. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been announced recently in various cities. Some of those jobs could be relocated to towns like Youghal if the hubs were large enough to take them. This would mean people not having to travel long distances for work. Is that something the Minister might consider as part of policy in this regard, working in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment?

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister and acknowledge the work she has done on this issue, including in my constituency of Cork North-Central. We have a hub in both Whitechurch and Courtbrack. As a result of her intervention in engaging with private enterprise, a hub has also been put into Inniscarra community centre, which serves a large population. Although my constituency is largely a city one, it also takes in a large part of rural County Cork, going as far as within 2 miles of Mallow. There are a lot of community groups that are looking for support.

I echo what Deputies O'Connor and Stanton said about the need to engage with private enterprise with a view to getting them involved in providing the connectivity that is needed. In Inniscarra, for instance, we engaged with Cork County Council and with a company called Imagine, which put the infrastructure in place free of charge for two years. Will the Minister encourage more private enterprises to become involved in providing the hubs? There are many areas in which there will not be a broadband connection until 2025 or 2026, even though those areas are less than 12 miles from Cork city.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Deputy O'Connor referred to Youghal. I had a great time there with him and Deputy Stanton. It is wonderful what is happening in the town. It certainly is being regenerated and if there is any support we can give to people there, we will, of course,

do so. I visited the boardwalk, which is a great addition to the town. Well done to those involved. This is what I want to see happening. There are many different opportunities to apply for funding from my Department and I want to see a bottom-up approach in order to make a difference for communities, villages and towns. Only last week, I announced a specific strand of funding to acquire buildings in town and villages. Local authorities can avail of that money to buy buildings for community use or for the purpose of providing remote working hubs.

Deputy Stanton mentioned Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland. We all work together on these issues. The regional enterprise development fund, which is under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, provides funding in this area. The Tánaiste is doing a lot of work around remote working and we must continue that work. We got a chance during the Covid crisis to change work practices. Continuing that requires new thinking and to look outside the box. In a survey this week, funded by my Department through the Western Development Commission and conducted by NUI Galway, 30% of respondents said they would change jobs and even take a pay cut if remote working were an option. People are looking at their options and taking into consideration such factors as quality of life and reduced commuting times. We want to support them. I feel very passionately about this and I know all the Deputies in the House want to see remote working facilitated. It is about securing top-quality jobs in one's own town or village.

### **Offshore Islands**

8. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update the islands strategy; when it will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27707/22]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I ask the Minister to give an update on the islands strategy. Has she received the draft copy and will she indicate when it might be published?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As she knows, the Government is committed to publishing a ten-year policy on island development, with associated three-year action plans. My Department has completed the bilateral meetings with all relevant Departments. These bilateral meetings have provided an opportunity for detailed discussion of the issues raised by island communities and for Departments to assess how they might help address the various issues raised.

The public consultation meetings have also been completed. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, it was not possible for officials to visit a number of islands and the public consultation meetings were moved to an online format. However, some island communities did not wish to engage with online meetings, preferring to wait for public consultation meetings to be held on their islands.

The final consultation meetings were held on Tory Island, County Donegal, and Clare Island, County Mayo, earlier this month. Senior officials from my Department were in attendance at these meetings and engaged with the island communities on the issues of concern to them.

The most recent meeting of the interdepartmental committee for the islands was held on 18 May, where participating Departments reviewed progress on the policy development and agreed the next steps to be taken. Work has begun on an initial draft of the policy document

and I understand that, based on the development work to date, an initial draft is expected to be ready for my consideration by the end of summer.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** That is welcome. This strategy has been delayed mainly due to the Covid pandemic, which was accepted and understood. Have the public consultations been held on every island in person? I know Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann has sought a draft copy of this strategy as soon as the Minister receives it. I have previously asked the Minister and her officials to consider sharing it with that body. This is a ten-year plan and we have not had a strategy for the islands since 1996, 26 years ago. When introducing a ten-year plan, it is important to have the stakeholders on board. If they are not on board with the plan, it is not worth the paper it is written on. I ask the Minister to consider sharing a draft copy of the plan with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann to ensure it is on board with the Minister when she rolls this out. That will really make it a success.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Public consultation meetings have begun and have been held on a number of island communities before Covid-19 restrictions resulted in the suspension of the process. Online public consultation meetings were then arranged for the remaining island communities via videoconference call, although this was logistically more challenging due to various factors such as broadband quality. Thankfully, that has improved on some of the islands since then. Online meetings were not held with Clare Island or Tory due to lack of online engagement and other mitigating factors. I am glad to say Clare Island now has good broadband. Public meetings were held on those islands at the beginning of May.

There is a list of islands that were consulted: Sherkin, Whiddy, Durse, Bere, Inisheer, Inishmore, Inishmaan, Heir Island, Long Island, Cléire in County Cork, Arranmore in County Donegal, Tory in County Donegal and Clare Island in County Mayo. Islands consulted by online meetings by focus group were Inishbofin, Inishturk and smaller Donegal islands represented by Comharchumann na nOileán Beag on 19 November. Most of them got the face-to-face consultation. If they wanted it, they got it. I think the rest of them are happy.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** That is helpful. I am glad those seeking engagement in person were facilitated.

The Minister has spoken about engagement and collaboration on the draft plan. I reiterate the point that the possibility of success in developing a ten-year plan is reduced if the main stakeholder is not on board. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann is a really good organisation, representative of all those islands which people call home. It does great work, and if it is on board, it will be a success.

I also want to mention island-proofing. I know the Minister is working on rural-proofing. Given it has been interdepartmental work to date, I hope island-proofing of policies will be included in the strategy.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** There is a strong commitment across Government to support development of the islands. I could give a list of the different things that have happened on the islands recently. There has been much more investment in them. There has been a major focus on them since responsibility for them has come into the Department of Rural and Community Development. I think that is recognised.

Significant consultation has been undertaken with island communities. There has been a wide consultation process with Departments and Government agencies. The islands federation,

Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, has had an opportunity to make a presentation to the interdepartmental committee and will be engaged with further as policy development progresses. I will be publishing the policy soon. I hope to have it for consideration by the end of the summer. If I keep consulting, I will never get this policy published. I will commit to having a review of it. It should be a living document. If things need to be changed as time goes by, we will do that.

## **Departmental Schemes**

**9. Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the town and village renewal scheme will open for applications; the types of projects that will be eligible for funding in 2022; the number of applications received for Dún Laoghaire in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27395/22]

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I ask for an update on the town and village renewal scheme for 2022 and the types of projects that will be eligible for funding. How many applications were received from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council in 2021 and how they have progressed?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The town and village renewal scheme is part of a range of measures to support the revitalisation of rural areas. The programme is funded under Project Ireland 2040 as part of Our Rural Future. The scheme is administered on behalf of my Department by the local authorities. Since the introduction of the scheme in 2016, more than €113 million has been approved for more than 1,400 projects throughout the country.

In February this year, I announced almost €18.5 million for projects under the 2021 scheme which will benefit towns and villages throughout the country. I can confirm that one application was submitted by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for assessment under the 2021 scheme. However, it was not successful in receiving approval for funding.

I launched the 2022 town and village renewal scheme last Friday, 27 May. As was the case last year, there will be a strong emphasis on projects that tackle vacancy and dereliction by bringing landmark town centre buildings back to life for use as multipurpose community spaces or as remote working spaces. It will also support the development of parks, green spaces and recreational amenities in town centres and support marketing campaigns targeted at attracting remote workers and mobile talent to a particular county or region.

This year I have also introduced a new building acquisition measure that will fund the purchase of vacant or derelict buildings for use as community facilities. This will provide up to €400,000 to each local authority to purchase vacant and derelict buildings for future development as community assets. I know this will make another significant contribution to revitalising our towns.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank the Minister for that welcome update. I would love to get more information about the building acquisition measure she has announced and which is so constructive and positive. I know Dún Laoghaire seems like a Dublin town, but it is very much a community town with considerable vacancy and dereliction. Through Digital Dún Laoghaire and with the council, we are trying to develop the opportunity for remote working to try to keep the pressure off public transport and reduce the number of people going into the city centre so that they can have a better quality of life, but crucially to rejuvenate one of Ireland's

oldest towns. We have 160 shopfronts all the way along the main street. Many of those are vacant either at ground level or above shop level. There are significant opportunities through the building acquisition measure for the council to acquire some of those and turn them into either remote working or community activity centres and to restore the badly needed footfall on the main street in Dún Laoghaire. I ask the Minister to give us more information about the building acquisition measure.

**Deputy David Stanton:** I agree with the Minister and fully support her in what she is doing about vacant properties. The policy mentions the judicious use of compulsory purchase orders, CPOs. Is it possible to acquire property in that manner if the owner does not want to sell it and if it is lying more or less derelict and out of use? Is the Department actively pursuing that?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** In response to Deputy Stanton, CPOs are a matter for the local authorities. It will be up to them to decide to purchase a property compulsorily. We will give them the money and they will need to go through the procedure. They can acquire it.

The building acquisition measure is a new stream within the town and village renewal scheme. It will provide up to €400,000 to each local authority to purchase vacant and derelict buildings in rural towns and villages for development as community assets. That is something to which we committed in Our Rural Future, our five-year strategy. That is there and available for local authorities.

The Town Centre First policy framework contains a range of actions designed to achieve key objectives, such as social and economic revival in our towns and the provision of housing, as well as addressing challenges such as vacancy and derelict buildings.

The town and village renewal scheme is focused on the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages. Applications to the scheme each year far exceed the available budget but the scheme is subject to a competitive process with each application being assessed on its merits. I will come back in with respect to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown in particular.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank the Minister. One cannot but make one's spake, if you know what I mean. I am glad to hear that Dún Laoghaire made an application because, of course, if it were the case that other councils had not had the same proactivity and made applications, funding may well have been available. Who knows, that might even be the case now?

I was wondering about the supervision of the Department over the different local authorities if there are those who do not make applications. I cannot imagine that would be the case. Every local authority will be putting up its hand. However, I am making the case that in the event that all of the budget is not allocated this year, Dún Laoghaire could be considered. Glencullen, Kiltarnan and Stepside have received funding under rural schemes before and as a representative of Dún Laoghaire, I can but make the case.

**Deputy Joe Carey:** I wish to ask the Minister about a new fund she announced last week for turning dilapidated and run-down buildings, landmark buildings in some cases, into community assets. The Minister might give us an overview of that scheme.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Deputy Carroll MacNeill is dead right to make the case. I suggest the council continues to send in applications. Kiltarnan got €80,000 in 2017. Stepside got €100,000 in 2018. I encourage the Deputy's local council to keep sending applications.

The urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage offers possibilities in tackling larger areas of population. There is also the connected hubs fund. Whether remote working facilities are private or run by a local authority or enterprise centre, funding can be applied for under that fund.

Under the town and village renewal scheme, the building acquisition measure is especially set up to acquire property. Up to €400,000 is available per local authority if an application to buy vacant properties is made. We all know of banks that are vacant properties in a number of towns. There is no reason we could not acquire some of those for community use.

### **Departmental Strategies**

10. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide an update on the rural proofing strategy as set out in the Our Rural Future strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27704/22]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** My question seeks an update from the Minister on the rural-proofing strategy as promised in Our Rural Future.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Our Rural Future is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades. The policy contains more than 150 measures for delivery across the whole of Government, with the underlying theme of economic, environmental and societal sustainability.

The policy has a vision of ensuring vibrant and thriving rural towns and villages, with a key objective to maximise opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas. It recognises that rural areas play an integral role in the economic, social and cultural recovery and well-being of the country.

The policy commits to developing an effective rural-proofing model. This will aim to ensure that all Departments fully consider the effects of new proposals on rural communities and the need to better target the particular challenges and opportunities facing rural areas.

Following a competitive tender process, my Department engaged independent consultants to fully examine the issue of rural-proofing in Ireland in order to provide a strong evidence basis for further action. Their work included consideration of rural-proofing initiatives internationally so as to inform our approach based on the experiences of others. The consultants have now provided my Department with their final report which will be given full and detailed consideration to determine the next steps. My objective is to deliver an effective, efficient and implementable rural-proofing model that will support rural policy development and ensure that we capitalise on the opportunities for rural areas to the greatest extent possible.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** It is welcome that the Minister has received that final report. Will it be published? The Minister said she will now consider it. How long does she think that will take? This is an important mechanism for rural communities and it is going to be particularly important as we face into measures that are going to have to be taken with regard to climate action because it is important that we bring rural communities with us. It is also important that the policies brought forward in respect of climate measures or otherwise across Departments consider rural communities and any impacts that may not necessarily be foreseen. It is important

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that all measures are examined through the lens of rural-proofing. That is why it is so important to get the mechanism right.

The Minister will be aware that rural-proofing is in place in the North of Ireland and works quite well. I presume that was one of the areas examined. Will the Minister give us a bit more information about the final report and if and when it will be published?

**Deputy David Stanton:** The Minister said that each local authority gets €400,000 to acquire old buildings. Cork is approximately four or five times the size of some other local authorities and yet each local authority gets the same amount. How is that decision made? A local authority with a fifth of the population gets the same amount. Is there not something unfair about that?

There is a proposal to locate State agencies in rural towns and villages. Has there been any movement or is there any news to report in that regard?

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank Deputy Kerrane for her question on this interesting topic of which I was unaware. I am pleased to hear there is a policy brewing in this regard. It would be of great benefit to a great number of rural companies in the northern part of Fingal which have benefited from a great deal of investment in recent years. I am not sure how much joined-up thinking there has been with regard to those benefits. I would welcome the publication of the report the Minister has mentioned.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** In response to Deputy Stanton, decentralisation is now by choice and is called remote working. That is the best decentralisation and it is working. That is the good news.

Deputy Kerrane raised the matter of the report on rural-proofing. I have only just received the report. I will fully consider the options presented in consultation with my officials and I will weigh up the merits and challenges of each option. As I have said, my objective is to ensure we have an effective, efficient and implementable rural-proofing model that will support rural policy development and will consider and capitalise on the opportunities for rural areas. It is important to remember that rural-proofing, as the Deputy said, is about making all Government policies more effective by ensuring the specific needs and opportunities in rural areas are taken into consideration as early as possible in the policy development process. That will ultimately lead to better outcomes for rural communities, which is what we all want, as Deputy Farrell said.

## Vacant Properties

11. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will detail progression of the town centre first policy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27393/22]

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** My question relates to the progression of the Town Centre First policy, which I know the Minister announced recently. I understand she has significantly increased the funding.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. The Town Centre First policy is a major cross-Government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. Key to this is the establishment of the national

implementation office to assist in the delivery and implementation of the policy, and to co-ordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level. This office will be responsible for supporting town regeneration officers, TROs, in driving implementation of the policy. My Department has agreed the structure and funding for the national office and the TROs with local authorities. The first step is the appointment of the head of the national implementation office. The recruitment process for this key post is currently ongoing.

Similarly, local authorities have now also been authorised to commence the recruitment of TROs who will drive the development of town centre first plans at local level across the country. Key to the town centre first approach is the range of support funding in place, including the town and village renewal scheme. This year, I have included under that scheme a new building acquisition measure that will provide up to €400,000 to each local authority to purchase vacant and derelict buildings in rural towns and villages for development as community assets. This new measure will be a key support for towns in implementing the town centre first approach locally.

I am committed to ensuring that the continued roll-out of the town centre first policy will work to deliver on the goal of revitalising rural towns and villages as set out in Our Rural Future. Under the town and village renewal scheme, we still have the other stream of funding whereby up to a maximum of €500,000 can be applied for to acquire a property and carry out refurbishment. That funding can also be used to repurpose properties that are already in the ownership of local authorities.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I really appreciate the Minister's response. Looking at every rural town and village across the State, particularly against the backdrop of the recovery from the economic crisis, there is a great deal of dereliction and vacancy. It is clear that this particular policy, as originally envisaged and now as an improved scheme, is really the foundation for co-ordinating the various funding streams that are available through various Departments, including the Minister's Department. It is really important to highlight the work of our colleague, the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Joe O'Brien. One of the towns in our constituency, Lusk, was successful in its town centre first application. This is an essential part of the Lusk vision for 2030, which is a great opportunity to evaluate the community using the various officers that are going to be appointed. When does the Minister expect the rural regeneration officers to be appointed?

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I wish to follow on from what was said earlier in response to another question from Deputy Stanton about the use of the compulsory purchase mechanism. In cases where property owners have defective title, I have seen that mechanism used by Cork City Council. The property owner engages with the council, the council serves a derelict sites order and rectifies the title problems through the derelict sites procedure and then conveys the property back to the property owner again, at a charge to the owner, obviously. This rectifies the title and allows the property to be developed and put to use. Has there been further engagement with local authorities about using this mechanism where property owners cannot develop because they have defective title and need to rectify that?

**Deputy David Stanton:** I want to come back to a question I asked earlier and to the fact that largest county in the country, Cork, quite often gets the same funding under various local authority schemes as the smallest county. I ask the Minister to have a look at that and determine why that is the case. It is clear why the people of Cork feel hard done by. We are very humble and do not like giving out but the Minister might have a look at this and let us know why she

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feels this should be the case and whether it can be rectified. It does not apply to all schemes. Under the sports capital scheme, funding is awarded on a *per capita* basis.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am also interested in the timeline for the national implementation office and, in particular, when regeneration officers will be appointed at local authority level. We have spoken previously about necessary works at the Creative Spark Downtown Hub in Dundalk, the remote working hub that is up and running now and is a real success in what was a vacant site. We have a lot more to do and it is important that a town the size of Dundalk has sufficient resources to enable it to increase footfall in the town by enabling people to live in the town centre. Compulsory purchase orders and some of the other issues raised by Deputies tonight must be tackled.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That was a bit like a rapid-fire buzzer round.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I will go back very quickly, starting with Deputy Stanton. A sum of €400,000 is being provided to every local authority. We have just kicked off this new scheme and naturally we will look at and keep it under review. To be fair, if a line is drawn from Dublin across to Galway, the greatest increase in jobs recently has been south of that line. A lot of employment is being created. Thank goodness we are almost at full employment, which is good news.

I take on board what Deputy Farrell said.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, the local authorities have been given the go-ahead to start the process of appointing town centre first officers. We will get the national implementation office up and running first and that recruitment process is under way. The recruitment of the TROs will follow on from that in the coming weeks. Local authorities have been cleared to start the process. They can get the ball rolling. We do not want to hold this up. We want to get them appointed because I want them liaising with the town first teams, the chambers of commerce and local communities. What we want here is joined-up thinking.

Deputy Burke spoke about the local authorities and the use of compulsory purchase orders-----

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I referred to the use of the derelict sites orders.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** Yes. That is something I will leave with the local authorities. They acquire the sites and we just provide the funding. That said, I am happy to raise it with them. I am meeting all of the CEOs of the local authorities in the next few weeks and I will mention that to them.

## Island Communities

12. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the Dursey Island ferry is operational while repairs works are carried out on the cable car. [27816/22]

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As the Deputy may be aware, I have agreed that once-off emergency funding would be made available by my Department to Cork County Council to support the provision of a temporary ferry service for Dursey Island while the county council

repairs the existing cable car infrastructure, which is owned and operated by the local authority.

It is important to note that council is responsible for all aspects of the temporary ferry service to Dursey Island, including its procurement, operation, timetabling and the frequency of the sailings.

My Department stepped in to provide once-off emergency funding for a temporary service to ensure that Dursey Island residents and the local farming community would continue to have reliable mainland connectivity while Cork County Council repairs the existing cable car infrastructure. I engaged extensively with Deputy O'Sullivan on this and thank him for raising the matter with me initially.

I understand that the local authority has now procured and signed contracts for an initial temporary service for a period of nine weeks, which commenced on Monday, 23 May. This service will operate for one hour each side of high tide for three days a week, currently Friday, Saturday and Monday, for people who are full-time residents and farmers on the island. Cork County Council has indicated that it will run another tender competition for a medium-term service that will provide a ferry service until the end of the year. I understand that competition will take two months to complete.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** I will only ask one supplementary question. I also want to acknowledge that Deputy Sherlock allowed me to put this question on his behalf. He loves west Cork and mentioned the fact that he brought his young child on the Dursey Island cable car many years ago.

When it was announced that the Dursey cable car would close back in February with no warning, the Minister and her Department intervened in March. She was asked to solve a problem that was not of her making or of her Department's making. She came forward with funding for an alternative form of transport to the island, namely a ferry service. Cork County Council was tasked with procuring that ferry service but it is not working and is not fit for purpose. It is only running three times a week for one hour on either side of high tide. This is not the Minister's fault. This is an issue for the council. The Minister intervened once and I am asking her to intervene once again. I ask her to meet the CEO of Cork County Council, the Oireachtas Members for the area, the council members, if possible, the marine safety officer and some islanders so that we can find a solution that works.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** I know that the Deputy is absolutely committed to finding a solution. My Department has tried to do everything it could but the tender response received by Cork County Council in April 2022 was limited.

*10 o'clock*

We thought we would be able to assist in providing a seven-day service but, as it transpired after the tenders came out, all there is now is a much smaller service, in the short term anyway. The Deputy is right that at this stage we need to sit down and figure out a few things. I am happy to agree to the Deputy's request to meet the CEO of Cork County Council and to meet a delegation from the council with Oireachtas Members. The council in Cork is a big council and I would not fit them all in the one room.

31 May 2022

## Rural Schemes

13. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when successful projects in County Clare will be announced under the rural regeneration and development fund; the total value of applications received under the latest round; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27843/22]

**Deputy Joe Carey:** When will successful projects in County Clare under the rural regeneration and development fund be announced? What is the total value of applications received under the latest round?

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** The rural regeneration and development fund provides funding for the development and construction of capital projects in towns, villages and rural areas across Ireland. To date, 191 projects have been approved for funding of €278 million for projects costing €377 million.

Calls for applications to the fund are sought under two categories – category 1 and category 2. Category 1 relates to large-scale ambitious capital projects with all necessary planning and other consents in place, and which are ready to proceed. Category 2 provides smaller grant funding to enable the development of project proposals suitable for future calls for category 1 applications.

The fourth call for category 1 applications to the rural regeneration and development fund closed on 29 April 2022. My Department received 42 applications to this call, together seeking funding of more than €149 million. I understand that three applications were received for projects located in County Clare.

The application process for the fund is competitive in nature. Applications are currently being processed by my Department under the oversight of the project advisory board, comprising representatives from key Government Departments and independent experts. Once the assessment process is complete, my Department will prepare a report setting out recommended projects. My role as Minister will be to consider that report and make final decisions in relation to the allocation of funding. I expect to be in a position to announce the successful projects later this year.

I have visited the Deputy's county twice when I had the pleasure of coming down and visiting many group projects. Clare has a good record when it comes to putting in applications, but I must be impartial in these matters. They are being assessed. Some really good projects have come out of Clare. I had a great trip that day to Clare. The Vandeleur Walled Garden is one project I went to see. That was just one and there are many others. I believe I will be going down again shortly. There is a big SeaWorld project that will be coming on stream that is being funded through this Department. I am looking forward to seeing them. We should celebrate success and there has been a lot of success in County Clare.

## Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Michael Fitzmaurice - the urgent need for the Wildlife

(Amendment) Bill 2016 to be republished in view of the fact that this Bill was passed by the two Houses of the Oireachtas in 2019 subject to Seanad amendments being debated and approved or rejected by the Dáil; (2) Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, following the opening of public consultation recently; (3) Deputy Brian Stanley - to ask the Minister for Health to discuss the future of the mental health facility Erkina House in Rathdowney, County Laois; (4) Deputy Colm Burke - to ask the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to outline what action is being taken by his Department along with local authorities to ensure all applications under the local authority home loan scheme are processed in a timely manner and if he will carry out a full audit with local authorities to ascertain how long it is taking for these loans to be approved, and if he will make a statement on the matter; (5) Deputy Gary Gannon - details of the alternate sitting of leaving certificate exams 2022; (6) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the need for the expansion of the homeless housing assistance payment scheme statewide; (7) Deputy Joe Carey - the need to rebalance national aviation policy by utilising space and capacity in Shannon Airport; (8) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to ask the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to outline the steps being taken to address the absence of any available emergency accommodation in Limerick city and if he will make a statement on the matter; (9) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to ask the Minister for Health for an update on the expert team deployed to tackle crisis levels of overcrowding at University Hospital Limerick, UHL; (10) Deputy David Stanton - to ask the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to debate the need for more affordable housing units in County Cork, especially in east Cork, given the huge demand and small provision currently planned; (11) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the conditions for refugees, particularly from Ukraine, in the east Cork area; (12) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss SET allocated hours being reduced; (13) Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss the shortage in special class places across the State; and (14) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the need to expand the An Bord Pleanála review to decisions made relating to a development at Millbourne estate, Ashbourne, County Meath.

The matters raised by Deputies Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, Éamon Ó Cuív and Michael Fitzmaurice, Maurice Quinlivan, and Colm Burke have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence**

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to come back to this important subject as the third national strategy is prepared and published. I want to use this opportunity to recognise why we are doing this and to keep the awareness of why we are doing this at the forefront of our minds.

I acknowledge the presence of Deputy David Stanton, who, when he was with the Department of Justice, brought through the groundbreaking legislation on coercive control and who has chaired the interdepartmental group on gender violence for some time. I also acknowledge Deputy Alan Farrell, who has done huge advocacy to raise awareness around how women feel at risk in various different situations, including while on public transport and while out and about. Deputy Farrell has been a huge advocate and champion in trying to advance the cause

against sexual and gender-based violence.

Although we have had the very serious outpouring of care in the response after the death of Ashling Murphy, it is important that we remember all of the women who have died as a consequence of femicide. The Ceann Comhairle will be aware that we are trying to do this throughout the year to remember the women at different stages. I will take the opportunity now to read into the record of the House the names of the women who died in the months of May and June since 1996. In the month of May there were 21 women: Angela Collins, Kitty Gubbins, Georgina O'Donnell, Helen Donegan, Martina Halligan, Donna Cleary, Patti Bainbridge, Mairéad Moran, Niamh Murphy, Marie Hennessy, Breda Cummins, Rita Apine, Anastasia Kriégel, Mary Ryan, Lorraine Crowley, Georgina Eager, Siobhan Stapleton, Bente Carroll, Patricia Murphy, Patricia O'Connor, and Giedre Raguckaite. In the month of June there were 12 women: Mandy Wong, Sinead Kelly, Gertrude Dolan, Veronica Guerin, Karen Guinee, Sara Neligan, Tracey O'Brien, Jolanta Lubiene, Lynn Cassidy, Antra Ozolina, Skaidrite Valdgeima, and Valerie French Kilroy. These names are from the Women's Aid Femicide Watch, which was published in March 2022.

I shall now outline some of the figures: 249 women have died violently between 1996 and 2022; 18 children have died alongside their mothers; 158 of the women died in their own homes; 196 cases have been resolved; in the 87% of cases that have been resolved, the women were killed by a man known to them; 13% of the women were killed by a stranger; and one in two victims were killed by a current or former male intimate partner, which is 55% of the resolved cases. It can, of course, be a woman of any age but women under the age of 35 make up 50% of the cases in Ireland. In almost all murder-suicide cases, which is 22 out of the 23, the killer was the woman's partner.

The reading of the women's names into the record is more important than I had realised. I was contacted by a woman last week who reminded me about one of the women, whose name I read out previously, who had died in 2004. They had known each other and the woman rang to tell me the story of how she had pleaded with the woman not go back to that house and how she felt it was only going to end one way. She spoke of how it matters to people, to the friends of the victims, to their families, to the nieces and nephews, to the children and to the brothers and sisters of victims that we remember these women and that we remember why we are doing the work on the third strategy. They were voiceless in death. Unless we take this time - and I am glad of these few minutes - to acknowledge them here they will remain voiceless and their experience will remain voiceless. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to do it this evening.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank Deputy Carroll MacNeill for raising this matter. You do us all a service by naming the women involved. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, for being here to take this matter.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I thank the Deputy for reading those names into the record of the House. It is important to remember that these were women with families, and their lives were cut short tragically and violently. It is very important that we acknowledge and remember them. I thank the Deputy for doing that. I also acknowledge our colleagues Deputies Stanton and Alan Farrell in the work they have done around coercive control and attacking gender-based violence. It is very important that collectively we work collaboratively across the House in tackling this issue. This strategy will be the most ambitious to date and will be structured

around the four pillars or goals of the Istanbul Convention, namely, prevention, protection, prosecution and co-ordinated policies. It will set an overall goal of zero tolerance in our society for DSGBV. The strategy has been developed in partnership with the sector to ensure it is targeted, comprehensive and effective in achieving all of the goals set out. Earlier this year, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, briefed those working in the sector on the progress of the strategy and, as part of that ongoing consultation, a wider public consultation run by the Department of Justice concluded in March. Officials in that Department are currently working to finalise the strategy for submission to Government in light of submissions received in this final consultative phase.

To deliver on the high ambition of the strategy, it will be accompanied by a detailed action plan for the rest of this year and next. This action plan will ensure our work is targeted, precise and deliverable. It will set out how each of the aims will be achieved, which Departments and agencies are responsible for them, and the timeframe for delivery. The Minister intends to bring both the finalised strategy and the action plan to Government in the coming weeks, well before the summer recess, and they will be published as soon as possible thereafter. I commend the Minister for her work. She is taking this issue very seriously, to the point of acting with determination and a sense of urgency, which we all want over the next number of years and beyond.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** Femicide is the most extreme end of gender and sexual violence. However, it is part of a bigger problem and what leads to it is a cultural acceptance of entry-level harassment and misogyny, which Deputy Alan Farrell called out in a very public way in his experience on public transport. It is the controlling behaviours that have been exhibited, which Deputy Stanton tried to address through his legislation on coercive control. People said there was no point, that one could not prosecute a pattern, an idea or a set of behaviours, but that was shown to be wrong. I commend the Garda for following up and prosecuting what people said could not be prosecuted, that is, that controlling and manipulative set of behaviours.

So much of this issue is rooted in education. The Joint Committee on Gender Equality is working away every Thursday morning down in the committee rooms. We have heard from the secondary school students' unions, Safe Ireland and academics. It does not matter who we speak to; it all comes back to education. We need fact-based and consent-based education that respects personhood from the earliest age and is open and transparent about sexuality, facts and equality. Unless every child in Ireland receives this appropriate education, we do not have a chance. When Deputies in this House drop their kids at school they might look around the playground and wonder which of these children will suffer this fate in 20, 25 or 30 years, or any other form of misogyny or harassment, and which of them will be the perpetrators. What are we going to do today and over the next five and ten years that is different from the education I got, or the education other Deputies got 20, 30 or 40 years ago? What are we doing to make it radically different and give us some chance of delivering a better outcome for those children 20 or 25 years from now? Objective education for all children is the only hope of a solution.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** The Deputy is absolutely right. Fear of harassment and violence should never be normalised, be it in the home or as people go about their daily life. The prioritisation of this hugely important work is evident in the policy and legislative developments implemented by this Government, as well as those currently being progressed. It is also evidenced by the increased budget allocations that have been secured this year in order to address such heinous and unacceptable behaviour. That said, we know we need to achieve a lot more. We need to increase the provision of refuges and have committed to ensuring that everyone who needs a refuge space will have access to one. As part of its work to finalise the

new strategy, the Department of Justice is examining how to advance the recommendations made in the Tusla accommodation review, on both improving the delivery of these spaces and how quickly they are delivered.

The Deputy is correct about education. It is a vital part of this issue. Education must begin in our schools and preschools, in primary and secondary schools and right throughout our education curriculum, in order to ensure girls and women feel safe in their communities. That point is very important. The strategy the Minister is developing will take that whole-of-government approach, including to education. It is vitally important that it does that. There is no doubt that we can break this cycle, collectively, and that is something we are committed to doing. There is a huge responsibility on the education system to try to deliver that. We want to achieve that zero tolerance the Minister has referred to. I commend the Deputy for raising this issue, and not just this evening. She has campaigned and advocated continuously for a complete culture change in how women and girls are treated in our society.

### **Legislative Programme**

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It is with deep regret that I raise this issue again, along with my colleague, Deputy Fitzmaurice. We raised it some time ago and were given assurances that work was ongoing on the matter. I then submitted a parliamentary question on it. To say the reply was opaque and less than satisfactory would be putting it mildly. We are talking about a Bill that had passed the Dáil and the Seanad, where some amendments were made, and fell because an election was called in the beginning of 2020. This is basically an Aladdin's lamp Bill. The issue was that the bogs that were degraded and had been cut were being swapped for pristine bogs that would be designated as natural heritage areas, NHAs. Unlike Aladdin's lamp, this really was new for old and there was no genie one had to rub to find the old one was better.

It is hard to understand how it has taken the Department three years to come to this point - or not come to it, which is the issue - and we still have not had sight of a recommitted Bill. Either the amendments from the Seanad were satisfactory or they were not. One would think that if they were not satisfactory, the Government would have gone back to the original Bill passed by Dáil Éireann and recommitted that to the Dáil or introduced a new Bill, the wildlife (amendment) Bill 2022. We need a certain date by which this Bill will be introduced into the Dáil so it can get swift passage through and become law, as was promised before the previous Government was formed back in 2016.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I concur with what Deputy Ó Cuív has said. We brought this issue up in the Dáil previously. We had a meeting with Department officials on it and I thank the Minister of State for that. On that day, we were told the Bill was basically going to be brought back or rewritten. There were obstacles but the officials said they had found ways around them and we were going to have it. That was my understanding. It was going to be gone through before the summer recess. I have looked at schedules and maybe I have missed something but I cannot see it there. The Government does not realise the torture this is causing. There are people who want to plant land and cannot because this Bill is held up. There are people who want to build a house and cannot because the very minute a council looks at the application, the area is put down as an NHA and the council walks away. That is what they do. When the forestry service gets something that is in a designated area, it is bye-bye. That is the seriousness of it. With the planting situation at the moment, we have hit 50%. When

you have people willing to do things, you need to work with them. I have been involved in all of this down through the years. As Deputy Ó Cuív pointed out, this was not done by ordinary people. It was ecologists and scientists who went out and checked the different bogs. It is not only bogs. There is one place I know where a person's shed, where the cows are milked, is within it. Those are the facts in County Leitrim, on the border of Roscommon, and it is as fine a field as has ever been seen. It should never have been put in but it was put in and, in fairness, the National Parks and Wildlife Service was going to rectify that. What it did was grade it all, and we were putting away what was not required and was of no use. The service was going to give compensation and so on.

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

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What is happening? Will we have the Bill back before the summer recess in order that these people can be taken out of their misery?

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I apologise to both Deputies because I did not expect to be back here again to discuss this. I thought we would have advanced the Bill but it has been complex. The principal purpose of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016, as initiated, was to provide for the review of raised bog habitats, the making, amendment and revocation of natural heritage area orders and, for those purposes, the amendment of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000.

As the Deputies will be aware, the Bill was originally presented to Dáil Éireann. There was a very constructive debate on the Bill in both Houses, including in respect of extending its scope to provide for a review of blanket bog natural heritage areas, and later in the Seanad in respect of placing a duty on public bodies to promote the conservation of biodiversity. The Bill had completed all Stages in the Dáil and the Seanad and had been returned to the Dáil for consideration of the various amendments made by the Seanad, for what is colloquially known as the cream list stage, when the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Thirty-second Dáil on 14 January 2020.

Standing Order 227 provides that where a Bill passed by the Dáil is subsequently amended and passed by the Seanad, those amendments are then returned to the Dáil for its consideration. Standing Order 228 provides that the Dáil may accept, amend or reject the Seanad amendments. Amendments in the Dáil to the Seanad's amendments may be moved only where they are "consequential upon the acceptance, amendment or rejection of a Seanad amendment". There is no mechanism under Standing Orders to move amendments to a Bill returned to the Dáil under Standing Order 227, other than as set out in Standing Order 228.

As discussed when I met the Deputies in December last, the restoration of the Bill to the Order Paper is not straightforward. Once the complexities have been resolved, however, and the amendments made in the Seanad re-examined in consultation with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, OPC, to ensure they have been worded correctly and are legally robust, it is the intention of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to bring a memorandum to the Government to seek approval to have the Bill restored to the Order Paper. At the same time, the Minister will also bring a memorandum to the Government to obtain approval to the amendments made in the Seanad to the Bill. This process is at an advanced stage and is expected to be completed shortly, although I cannot give an accurate date for that. I met officials this morning about the issue to try to get it advanced as quickly as possible. My hope is it will be completed before the summer recess.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Perhaps the Minister of State will confirm whether the Bill will be recommenced in the Dáil or whether there is going to be a new Bill with the same information in it, just to go through the procedure *ab initio*. It seems to me that if there were this much difficulty with the Standing Orders, the best thing to do would have been to reprint the Bill, title it the wildlife (amendment) Bill 2020 - we had hoped it would be 2020 but the year is now 2022 - and bring it back to the House, with whatever examination of amendments was required. I cannot believe it has taken three years in the system to examine a number of amendments made in the Seanad, which no doubt were well debated there. I accept the point about the wording, which is always an issue.

Nevertheless, when a Bill is going through the Dáil and the Opposition brings in an amendment the Government deems to be a good idea, the normal process that happens every day of the week, with which the Ceann Comhairle will be very familiar, is that the Minister comes back with a properly worded amendment, drafted by the OPC. I find it awfully strange that the OPC could not give the Government a new wording for any amendments, the substance of which it accepted but not the wording. I welcome that the Bill will be back before the summer, if that turns out to be the case, but some day I am going to write a dictionary of terms used in the House such as “shortly”. Does that mean one, five or ten years, for example?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** There is simple question the people who have been frustrated over the past three or four years and who want to do some good things for our country want to be answered. When I was going to school, “shortly” never meant a defined period of time. The simple question is whether the Minister will go with a memorandum to the Cabinet and whether we will have the Bill, whether that is the old one, a new Bill or some other Bill, before the summer recess in order that we can kick it into gear and get it sorted. That is all we want. We are not unreasonable people. We had the meeting with the Minister of State and we thank him for all that. My understanding on that day, however, especially in light of the way Deputy Ó Cuív explained the matter in his experience, was that there would be a way of getting around it and getting the Bill back. If there is not, that is fine, we can just call it the wildlife (amendment) Bill 2022, away we will go and we will hammer it through.

We cannot keep waiting. Will the Minister of State please confirm whether a memorandum will be brought to the Cabinet and the Bill will be brought before the Dáil before the recess in July?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** To be helpful, the Bill can be recommitted in the Dáil from the point to which it was dealt with in the Seanad, with the Seanad amendments to be considered.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** That is exactly it. I acknowledge it is frustrating and it has been complex, and I appreciate the frustration of both the Deputies and the communities they represent. I will endeavour to get a definite date for them both and to give certainty to this. I take on board the points in regard to what “shortly” means. It has been frustrating from our perspective as well. It will not be a new Bill. We are in a separate process of reviewing the Wildlife (Amendment) Act, but that is for another day. It is our intention to get this completed. We appreciate the Deputies’ concerns.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Will the Minister of State give us an indication as to how many amendments were made in the Seanad?

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I do not know.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will raise this tomorrow at the meeting of the Business Committee and we will do so at each such meeting until we get a date on which it will be returned to the House.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I would welcome that.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

### **Homeless Accommodation**

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The issue of homelessness in Limerick is spiralling to new and concerning levels. We have never seen it so bad. There is a complete absence of available emergency accommodation for those who desperately need it. Homelessness service providers have spoken to me, as they do regularly, and have advised me there are simply not enough available beds in the city. In fact, they understand there are none available at the moment. People who were once able to afford their rent can do so no longer and there seems to have been a significant increase in the number of notices to quit being issued across the board, given all my Dáil and council colleagues tell me the same. The recent issuing of such notices *en masse* to the residents of the Shannon Arms apartment complex is evidence of this, and with the severe lack of affordable rental units available in and around the city, it is no surprise there has been an increase in the demand for homelessness services.

My office, as I am sure is the case with those of all Limerick Deputies, has been inundated with calls from those at risk of losing their residence. Many are working families, often in great distress, who feel utterly abandoned by the State in their hour of need. Many simply do not earn enough to be able to afford a mortgage, but neither do they meet the income thresholds to avail of social housing supports. Even if they did, the Limerick housing list extends to 2,214 people and they have no hope of being housed, with thousands more people in precarious housing assistance payment, HAP, properties who live in fear of getting a notice to quit. Emergency accommodation in Limerick often includes a variety of properties such as hotels, bed and breakfast accommodation, hostels and temporary accommodation, and there is now a deep concern some families will be unable to access any of these forms of accommodation.

Where are these people supposed to go? For too long when it comes to housing, governments have relied on the housing assistance payment, but HAP is at the discretion of the landlord and in many cases landlords will not accept tenants who want to avail of that payment. Even if they do, the payment itself is modest. HAP's usefulness has passed and without review it can no longer be fit for purpose. What we need is an increase in the number of available social and truly affordable houses. Today in my office, we were dealing with a family in which both parents are working. They are due to be evicted and have simply nowhere to go. There are no affordable units to rent and they earn too much to avail of State support. The limits that would allow them to get some State support have not changed since 2011. Their notice is nearly up and there is nothing we can do for them. This family of seven will be homeless and on the streets. We cannot direct them to a temporary emergency accommodation solution as the units are all full. We have a cost-of-living crisis, rising unaffordable rents and landlords selling up and exiting the market. These factors combined are pushing people to their limits. We need an immediate ban on evictions to be introduced while we work through this cost-of-living crisis. I

appeal to the Minister of State to personally intervene to ensure emergency spaces are opened and hard-working families are not put on the streets. A ban on evictions is needed immediately but an increase in the social income thresholds is also desperately needed. As it stands, the cut-off point is too low and excludes many of those who need such support.

We are facing a tsunami of evictions in Limerick and it must be stopped. As I said to the Minister of State, I have never seen anything like the current number of notices to quit and nor have any of the services in Limerick. I want to put that on record. The Minister of State should not say he has not been warned about what is happening. The rental crisis is one the Government and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage desperately need to resolve. Failure to do so will leave many families without a home. This is a crisis to add to the twin problems of homelessness and overcrowding. Sinn Féin believes much more can be done. It is time the Government stepped up to ensure increased investment in delivery of affordable and cost-rental houses.

Despite the challenges we are facing in Limerick, I commend the work of the providers of emergency accommodation in the city, including the council's homeless action team, Novas, Focus Ireland, the Simon Community and others that do great work. However, tonight, tomorrow and the day after they face the unenviable task of telling people they have nowhere to put them. They are under huge pressure and do tremendous work but are now limited in what they can do. Just before I finish, I mention in particular a voluntary, community-based organisation in Limerick called Help the Homeless where Jackie Purcell Duhig, Annemarie Sheehan and other volunteers do sterling work. The organisation is really the final front line. It feeds and clothes people in often appalling weather, like we have today.

We need action on notices to quit and an immediate ban on evictions.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I thank the Deputy for the question. I was in Limerick last Friday meeting officials in relation to my portfolio but I also dropped into Limerick Men's Shed and I commend all fantastic work being done there.

I will try to address some of the questions the Deputy has raised. Supporting individuals and families facing homelessness is a key Government priority. The role of my Department is to ensure that a framework of policy, legislation and funding are provided to ensure housing authorities are in a position to address homelessness at a local level. I assure the Deputy that resources and funding are not an obstacle to the urgent efforts required. Budget 2022 reflects this commitment by allocating €194 million for homelessness services.

It is acknowledged that there are currently severe pressures on access to emergency accommodation in Limerick city for a variety of reasons. I understand that Limerick City and County Council is doing everything in its power to address this matter. Under Housing for All, the Government has committed to working to eradicate homelessness by 2030. The plan includes 18 distinct actions tailored to eliminate homelessness. These actions recognise individuals experiencing homelessness have additional support needs and include specific measures to address these needs. They include measures to engage with and support rough sleepers into sustainable accommodation, the continued expansion of Housing First, a focus on the construction and acquisition of one-bedroom homes and, importantly, ensuring provision of the necessary health and mental health supports required to assist homeless people with complex needs.

Tackling homelessness requires an inter-agency approach. In order to drive better co-or-

dination in respect of policy measures and actions, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has established the national homeless action committee, NHAC. All of the key Government Departments, agencies, NGOs and stakeholders are involved. One of the initial priorities of the NHAC is to examine additional measures to prevent individuals and families from entering into homelessness before they receive the notice to quit the Deputy spoke about.

The key to addressing homelessness is an increase in the supply of housing. That being the case, the Government has committed to the increased supply of public, social and affordable homes. We will increase the social housing stock by more than 50,000 with an emphasis on new builds. In budget 2022, we backed this objective with funding of €4 billion for the delivery of housing. In this regard, Limerick City and County Council has a target of over 2,600 units to be delivered under Housing for All. There are already 1,000 units in its pipeline and the council is currently working to add additional projects and units under a variety of delivery streams.

I assure Deputy Quinlivan and others in the House of the work being done. Addressing homelessness continues to be an absolute priority for this Government. The points raised about the HAP are valid. The overall thrust of Government policy is to try to reduce reliance on that payment. While the ESRI report outlines that these rental income supports are an important part of the infrastructure, the Minister is committed to ensuring we reduce that reliance. The only way we will do that is by delivering social housing stock. We are committed to doing that and it is important we do so. I will raise with the Minister the issues of emergency spaces and the social income thresholds.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I thank the Minister of State. I missed him in the men's shed last week. I was there a few minutes after he arrived. St. Mary's Parish Men's Shed is a good facility.

I trust that with the answer he has just given, the Minister of State is being sincere. However, none of what he said bears fruit in the real world. Families are desperate. Rental prices are too high and too few, if any, properties are available. This has put immense stress on people. As I said, the homeless services are under severe pressure. They do a fantastic job but they cannot house people when there is no accommodation available. I want to know what we are going to do.

The Government's failure to provide a sufficient level of new social housing, coupled with the shrinking private market, is driving homeless presentations. The figures speak for themselves. The number of homeless adults and children has risen to over 10,000 according to the Department's own figures. On the Minister's watch, there has been a 24% increase in homelessness compared with the same month last year. As with house prices, there is increase after increase. The figures for adult homelessness tell us there are 283 adults homeless in Limerick. Obviously, there are many more people who have nowhere to stay and there are more on the streets than we have ever seen. Many are couch-surfing or just living in very poor conditions, often in extremely overcrowded homes. Many such people are not on any of these lists. The mid-west has 109 homeless children, the bulk of whom are in Limerick city. What is striking and also very disappointing about these figures is the number of young adults in homeless accommodation. People who should be in the most exciting period of their lives are battling with having to settle for homeless accommodation. There has been a 70% increase year on year in these figures.

There is something seriously wrong, and if the Minister of State thinks the Government's

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housing plan is working, he is delusional. I do not say that as a means of abusing him but I do not think he gets exactly what is happening on the ground. My office is inundated as a result of this and it is not the only one. As we speak, there is no emergency accommodation available. Where are people supposed to go?

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** To reiterate, there has been an increase in homelessness and a rise in notices to quit, along with a decrease in availability of HAP properties as landlords leave the market and rents for those remaining increase. There is, therefore, a real and significant challenge. Local authorities use commercial hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation but as the tourism market opens up, that accommodation is becoming restricted as well.

The Department sets the overall policy and legislative framework that provides the necessary resources and decisions on the range of homeless accommodation required. The funding of such services is a matter for the individual authorities. The administration of homelessness services is organised on a regional basis with a lead authority in place for each region. Limerick City and County Council is the lead authority for the mid-west region, which includes Clare Country Council. Some €8.2 million in Exchequer funding was provided to the mid-west region in 2021, with over €3.8 million in funding recouped to date in 2022 and further payments to be made. I again assure the Deputy that resources are not the problem.

We have a significant challenge, as I said, across a number of sectors. This will be addressed primarily in the medium to long term by the coming on stream of social and affordable housing. The Government is doing all in its power under Housing for All and Housing First to work with local authorities, including Limerick City and County Council, to ensure they are able to meet their requirements. There is no doubt it is a significant challenge.

I will take the specific points the Deputy has raised back to the Minister and we can expand on them in a further response, if that is okay.

### **Local Authorities**

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister of State for being here at this late hour. This is an important issue. I have come across a number of people who have applied to their respective local authorities for loans. The process seems to be cumbersome and drawn-out. To give an example, I was contacted by a couple who applied for a loan over six months ago. They were advised by the local authority that they had to get a mortgage protection policy with a particular insurance company and they proceeded to do so. They filled out all the documentation over five months ago. They contacted the insurance company consistently throughout January and February and were advised that the company could not give them the information about whether they had been approved for mortgage protection. Eventually the local authority wrote to them on 8 March advising them that they had been turned down for mortgage protection. Therefore, they were back to square one and had to go and organise mortgage protection. However, it turns out that the mortgage protection company had notified the local authority on 21 January and the local authority did not notify the loan applicants until 8 March, a gap of six weeks. The problem now is that by the time it eventually came for approval to the local authority the house had gone back up on the market and the price has gone up by €20,000. That is not acceptable.

It reminds me of a time when I dealt with nothing but house purchases and when people were on 18% bridging finance. The entire process was drawn out. People were on bridging

finance for up to six months. They could not draw down the loan until they were registered as owners of the property, the mortgage was signed and a mortgage was registered in favour of the local authority in the Land Registry or the Registry of Deeds. We are going back to the same system as we had in the 1980s, where processes are far too slow and hurdles appear to be constantly put in place. It is time there was an audit of every local authority regarding how many applications they are processing, the timeframe from the time the application is made to the time it is approved and then with regard to the draw down of funds. Again, I have received a complaint about the delay in the draw down of funds. Vendors are getting frustrated and they are using conditions in contracts to get out of contracts because they know they can get a higher price for the property they are selling. The price of property is going up by the day. It is a major problem. It is an issue we must deal with immediately. There must be a fast, efficient system.

The other issue is why local authorities are advising people that they must have a particular mortgage protection policy. It is normally left to the person's own devices to get mortgage protection. Yes, it must have certain rules and must be in accordance with what the local authority has in place, but why is it specifying that the person must go through its company first and if the company turns the person down, he or she can start to seek mortgage protection from another company? Finally, the mortgage protection company has been engaged by the local authority. That company advised this person that the company could not correspond with the person to tell the person whether cover was being provided. That is wrong. These are the people who will be paying the premium and they are the people who should be told first whether they have the policy.

These are the issues that are arising. I am hearing this constantly from legal colleagues as well. It is a long, drawn-out process. It was fine when the market was stable and prices were not increasing dramatically. It is a different ball game now, and we have to deal with it.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** The local authority home loan is a Government-backed mortgage for first-time buyers and other eligible applicants delivered through local authorities. The scheme provides mortgage financing for those who are unable to secure a sufficient commercial bank loan. It was introduced on 4 January 2022, replacing the previous Rebuilding Ireland home loan.

My Department is in regular contact with local authorities regarding the local authority home loan and stands by to offer any assistance or guidance that is required to support the timely processing of these loans. At this stage I do not see a need for a policy change or audit regarding processing. However, my Department keeps the operation of the local authority home loan under review and will respond if further information comes to light, as the Deputy has brought forward tonight. I do not have county breakdowns but under the previous Rebuilding Ireland home loan 2,700 home loans were drawn down from 2018 to 2021. The data on draw downs is not yet available for the local authority home loan, which commenced on 4 January this year. The underwriters for the home loan have reported that 26 Rebuilding Ireland home loan applications and 213 local authority home loan applications were processed by the Housing Agency in April 2022. Of the 213 applications, ten were invalid, 82 were recommended for approval, which is 43%, and 121 were recommended for decline.

The Deputy also asked a question about the mortgage protection policy, which is left to the homeowner. I will make an inquiry within the Department about that for him.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I am concerned about this. It reminds me of the 1980s when there

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was a long, drawn-out process for getting loans. We are back to square one. We are in a world where the market is moving very fast and we must respond accordingly. It is like with the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme where landlords have started saying that if somebody is drawing the HAP, they would not take the person on as a tenant. This will happen now with vendors. They will say they will not take people on as purchasers if they are going to get a local authority loan. That will happen and there will be a large number of people excluded from the market.

We must deal with the real world. A credit committee meeting once a month is totally inadequate. That is an issue we must prioritise. We must examine it now and see what can be done to expedite the process. If there is a step-by-step process set out for the applicants and each of the boxes are ticked before the local authority gets the application, including all the documentation, it should not take six months for the application to be processed. This is happening with some of the other financial institutions as well; it is not just the local authorities. It is causing massive problems for young people who have only one opportunity of getting on the housing ladder. What if they miss it?

The couple I am dealing with, and I have dealt with a number of others who have the same problem, are unlikely to come back onto the market again. This is the sad problem we have. That is why this issue must be prioritised before we have the same thing as happened with the HAP scheme whereby the vendors will say that if it is a local authority loan they will not get their solicitors to send out contracts to people. I ask the Minister of State to give serious consideration to what I have said.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If I could comment, and I probably should not, it occurs to me that we are living through a housing emergency and if the Housing Agency can turn around a recommendation in five days to a local authority, that the local authority should then take a month to look at that recommendation is patently ridiculous. It is certainly not the local authority recognising anything by way of an emergency.

**Deputy Malcolm Noonan:** I take those points on board. There are very important issues raised by the Deputy that we have to address.

The processing time of individual loans can legitimately vary. There may be specific information required to confirm eligibility or creditworthiness, depending on the facts of the case. There may be delays in the transaction that are not under the control of the local authorities, but I accept that there may be some variations in processing times across local authorities. I agree with you, a Cheann Comhairle, that this needs to be addressed. I will ask my Department to look into the concerns Deputy Colm Burke has raised this evening. It is really important we do so. The last thing we want is to inhibit families from taking up the important opportunity to be able to purchase a home.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.50 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 1 Meitheamh 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.50 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 1 June 2022.