



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 2 Meitheamh 2022

Thursday, 2 June 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Emergency Accommodation

1. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Question No. 146 of 18 May 2022, his views on the different categories of accommodation listed therein (details supplied) and their function. [28271/22]

Deputy Pa Daly: This question is further to a previous parliamentary question I asked the Minister regarding making a statement on the different categories of accommodation currently listed, such as emergency reception and orientation centres, EROCs, emergency accommodation etc., as well as their functions.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I will list and describe the various categories of such accommodation. There are seven State-owned accommodation centres in the interactional protection accommodation services, IPAS, portfolio. These buildings are owned by the State and companies are contracted as service providers at each of those centres. Commercial centres are privately owned and operated accommodation centres. Emergency reception and orientation centres, EROCs, refer to centres for refugees coming under the auspices of the international refugee protection programme, IRPP. When programme refugees are accepted in Ireland under the IRPP, they are generally accommodated in EROCs for some six to 12 months. This allows for initial orientation and assessment and access to services such as health and social welfare. Adults are provided with English language lessons and children attend primary school in the EROCs and local secondary schools. This time provides refugees with an opportunity to acclimatise in cultural terms, as well as to recover from the trauma associated with their journey to that point. It also provides refugees with an opportunity to assess necessary basic services in advance of their resettlement within the wider community.

Then we have emergency accommodation centres, which are temporary accommodation locations used by IPAS to provide accommodation where the permanent IPAS accommodation centres are at capacity. These premises include hotel and guest house accommodation. We also have quarantine and isolation accommodation, which was accommodation used during the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate initial isolation of new arrivals to the State as part of the IPAS response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The specific hotels are no longer quarantine centres as there is no longer quarantine for new arrivals. These centres are now being used for pre-reception. Pre-reception accommodation is accommodation put in place to provide initial accommodation to new arrivals where there is no available space in the national reception centre in Baleskin. My Department has contracted NGO support at these locations to assist with meeting the needs of the residents at those locations. Nine such centres are now operating.

Deputy Pa Daly: No one was ever going to be in any doubt that there would be an increase in the number of people coming into the country to seek asylum following Covid-19. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated this situation. The crisis has posed some serious questions. We can address some of those in another question later perhaps. What is concerning in this regard, though, is that we may end up being stuck in the same cycle as we experienced several years ago. That crisis came to a head with the situation in Cahersiveen. It seems now, however, that we are back to a situation where large-scale profits will be made in this context and refugees will be housed in hotels. There is no own-door accommodation or cooking facilities and people are being accommodated away from essential services in locations where there is a lack of transport and so on. Does the Minister think we are making the same mistake in this regard all over again? What is the Department doing to address this situation?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Undoubtedly, there is a challenge being faced now. It one caused by the combination of the war in Ukraine and other major international conflicts, such those in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, that are generating greater movements of people. There are also issues in respect of changes in approaches to immigration and asylum law in other countries that are having an impact here as well. Therefore, we are undoubtedly under pressure. What is different in this case, however, is that in previous times there was an acceptance that direct provision was the way to go and that it was just a question then of letting the system grow to deal with an increase. As the Deputy is aware, and this aspect will be discussed in the next question I will answer from Deputy Bríd Smith, we are seeking to end direct provision. We have a White Paper and a proposal in place to end direct provision. The crisis in Ukraine is undoubtedly putting pressure on that undertaking and we will talk more about this aspect in a few moments. There is, though, this central view regarding ending direct provision and the work we are doing to achieve that goal is being done in conjunction with the NGOs, those organisations that have so much experience in this area on the ground.

Deputy Pa Daly: The White Paper that came out approximately 14 months ago was clear about emergency accommodation. It recommended that purpose-built facilities be constructed. Sinn Féin’s view is that there should be more State-run accommodation centres, because allowing private companies that operate for profit to undertake this endeavour is not going to be the best way to address this situation. The Minister previously said that funding for approved housing body, AHB, accommodation was going to be launched soon. What are the Minister’s plans in this regard? The State needs to play a greater role in this context or else we will find ourselves back, effectively, at Groundhog Day in respect of the mistakes made over the past two decades.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The State must undoubtedly play a greater role but it needs

to be a role centred on an approach based on human rights and an approach that believes in integration from day one. This is not solely a matter of accommodation, and I know the Deputy is not suggesting it is. Accommodation is important, but so are integration supports and ensuring that people seeking international protection are not isolated while waiting for decisions at the edge of towns and villages and instead are fully integrated in our communities. We will be bringing forward details of the funding model for AHB accommodation and builds later this year. Significant work has been done in this regard and it has been done with the AHBs to ensure we are creating a funding model of beneficial use to them. In that context, we have done significant work with the AHBs and with the Housing Agency on how to design the best model.

Direct Provision System

2. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to recent media reports of further delays to his Department's plans to abolish direct provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28434/22]

Deputy Bríd Smith: Is the Minister aware - I am sure he is - of the recent media reports of further delays to the Department's plans to abolish the direct provision system? I ask him to make a statement on the matter. In his response, I ask the Minister to clarify, in respect of the answer he just gave to Deputy Daly, how many of the 37 centres are commercial and run for profit.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: As the Deputy will be aware, I published a White Paper to end direct provision and to establish a new international protection support service in February 2021. In the 14 months since its publication, my Department has placed a significant focus on the delivery of the new model of accommodation and supports for international protection applicants.

As the Deputy will appreciate, the war in Ukraine has had an unavoidable impact on the implementation of the White Paper, as staff in my Department were temporarily diverted to fulfil Ireland's obligations. These members of staff included those working on the White Paper transition team. As the Deputy is aware, upwards of 33,000 Ukrainian displaced persons have come to Ireland under the temporary protection directive, and of those, more than 23,000 have been accommodated by the State.

Last week I met Catherine Day and David Donoghue, two of the members of the external advisory group appointed to oversee the implementation of the White Paper. We discussed the progress made to date on the implementation of the White Paper and the impact the Ukraine crisis was having on that. We also discussed the delivery of the new model of accommodation. As I said, staff from the transition team were temporarily diverted to responding to the need to accommodate Ukrainian displaced persons. I am pleased to be able to say that I have now been able to reallocate those staff back to the implementation of the White Paper process. However, and I am being as upfront as possible, the need to respond to Ukraine has created delays in recent months. We are doing a review of the project timelines now and we will initially bring forward a revised implementation plan to the programme board and will subsequently publish it later in the summer.

The implementation of the White Paper on the ending of direct provision is a priority for

me. It is an absolute priority for the Government. We have the commitment to the provision of resources to undertake that, but we must also respond to the significant pressures my Department has faced over the past four months.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The Minister did not answer my question about the number of commercially run centres, but I hope he will come back to it.

First, we both agree that the scrapping of this inhumane system has to be achieved. If the Minister achieves this, he can be proud but I contend that the entering by the Green Party into a coalition with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which have an appalling record on housing, the dispensing of public housing and lands into the private sector and pandering to the developer-led models they have, was bound to failure. Will the Minister comment on that?

This system was specifically designed effectively to punish people for coming here. In the words of officialdom in the past, it was to lessen the pull factor of coming to Ireland, as if somehow the oceans did not pull people away from either climate disaster, war or famine and all of the terrible things happening across the world in terms of societal collapse. We are failing in our international obligations to live up to that. I do not accept that the war in Ukraine is the whole reason. We were failing before the war.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: As the Deputy is aware, the central problem with the direct provision model is its reliance on commercial operators and that is why the State has so few centres. We have seven State-owned accommodation centres as well as Baleskin, which is State owned and operated. Other than that, the system relied on commercial operators. That is the problem with the system, which the White Paper is trying to change and move away from.

In terms of the commitment to doing this, I have received full support across the Government on the White Paper. There has not been opposition to what I have been seeking to achieve. I share the Deputy’s critique of direct provision and the reliance on that model for more than 20 years, but I believe there has been a recognition across the Government and society that such a model is not the way to go. People fleeing conflict deserve to be accommodated in conditions that are human rights compliant.

Deputy Bríd Smith: We agree on many things and I am sure the Minister does not get verbal or even officially written opposition to the commitment to end direct provision. The problem is that the Minister is in a Government with parties that are dominated by their links to international finance, developers and the idea of private property for rent and ownership. They have handed over public land and facilities that could have been used not just to house refugees but to end the housing crisis and take the people off the streets; today I walked past dozens of people sleeping on the streets. We have an absolutely disastrous housing policy.

The Minister will not end direct provision or indeed deal with the housing crisis with a group of parties that do not have a commitment to public housing or to ending the sort of profiteering that emanates from it. The figures speak for themselves. Seven out of 37 direct provision centres are publicly run. The rest are making vast profits from State money. This is an absolute scandal and I do not believe it will be ended by just getting a commitment from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. There needs to be a much greater struggle to demand it happens at least on a human rights basis if not further, and to stop spreading the idea that the housing crisis is the fault of refugees.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Deputy’s last comment is certainly not one I have put

forward and I do not think it is one anyone in government has put it forward either. However, she is absolutely right in terms of the response to the need to accommodate people seeking international protection. It has to be seen in the context of the wider response to the housing crisis. It is also important that we have a clear plan. For years, we have seen that we need to end direct provision but there has to be an answer to the question of how we accommodate people while they are waiting for their international protection application to be addressed. That is a complicated question. It requires resources and the provision of accommodation. I believe what we have put forward in the White Paper is the way to go in that regard. We will probably have to broaden the assumptions upon which the White Paper is based because there is a greater flow of people migrating internationally seeking protection and that is part of the review process that I have asked my Department to undertake in terms of those timelines.

Ukraine War

3. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the Ukrainian refugee crisis unit within his Department; and his further views on the number of Ukrainian refugees who have arrived and who have requested assistance from the International Protection Accommodation Services. [28272/22]

Deputy Pa Daly: My question relates to the Ukrainian refugee crisis unit in the Department and I seek the Minister's views on the refugees who have arrived. Arising from the previous question and the recommendations in the White Paper, is he confident that between now and the end of the Government's term, in two and a half years' time, that it will be able to implement the recommendations?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on 24 February, and the invoking of the temporary protection directive by the EU, my Department has worked intensively as part of the cross-government response to the Ukraine crisis.

The operational challenges brought about by responding to the conflict are significant. Our country has never experienced an influx of displaced persons such as that seen over the past four months. My Department's role is focused on the immediate short-term accommodation needs of those who have fled Ukraine. To date, some 33,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Ireland and we are providing accommodation to 23,000 of them.

Within my Department, a dedicated Ukraine response division has been established. The team includes more than 80 staff, the majority of whom have moved from within the Department with consequent impacts on ongoing work priorities. The division also includes new staff and those seconded from other Departments and agencies.

Overseeing the provision of accommodation on this scale during this timeframe for all those who require it remains immensely challenging. Due to the urgent need to source accommodation, a broad range of accommodation types have been contracted, including emergency accommodation. While this is not ideal, the priority is to place people fleeing the conflict in safe and secure accommodation. Numbers seeking international protection have also increased adding to accommodation capacity issues.

I wish to take this opportunity to recognise the hard work and commitment of departmental staff in providing accommodation for so many people in such a short period, as well as main-

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taining work progress in other key areas. Many staff have volunteered their time, at night and on weekends, to work in the welcome centre in Citywest to provide the people fleeing Ukraine with an immediate welcome as they arrive here. I also acknowledge the staff from other Departments working in Citywest, including those from the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Justice, as well as medical staff from the HSE. My Department and its staff will continue in their efforts to assist those arriving from Ukraine and those seeking international protection as best they can.

Deputy Pa Daly: I too commend the staff in the Minister's Department and the International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS and I acknowledge the assistance they were given by local authorities around the country in identifying properties. However, tomorrow marks the 100th day of the conflict in Ukraine and it is difficult to see an end in sight to it.

Accommodation centres are around the country, including in west Kerry. There is a centre in Gallarus, south Kerry. Those types of accommodations are clearly inappropriate in the medium term. What plans does the Minister have to deal with the Ukrainians who have been given accommodations in those areas? I note that €16 million was spent in March and April on accommodation to house those who needed assistance from IPAS. It is tied to the housing crisis and the lack of accommodation for the regular asylum seeker, which seems to have stalled just like the Red Cross pledges. Is there any update on the vetting of homes so that we can use that avenue?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The medium-term accommodation needs of the Ukrainians is significant and the Government is examining it. Part of that includes those Red Cross pledges. There are 1,200 people in pledged accommodation now which is a significant support to the State in terms of the accommodation of the Ukrainians here, and those numbers will continue to grow.

As the Deputy is aware, we are engaging closely with the Department with responsibility for housing on a range of medium-term accommodation solutions that it is bringing forward. The Department is looking at a number of issues including modular housing and the refurbishment of large institutional buildings to make them fit for habitation in the medium term. All of those avenues are being pursued and will deliver accommodation in a three- to six-month period. We have to be honest, however, things will be tight this summer. The offering for many Ukrainians will continue to be hotel, guest house or more emergency accommodation. We are offering shelter and security and that is all that we can offer at this stage.

Deputy Pa Daly: One of the Minister's colleagues in government previously said there was a question of perhaps up to 200,000 people arriving. Does the Department have revised or anticipated figures as to how much it will, as the Minister noted, continue to increase? What is the Department planning in respect of the number of people who will continue to come from Ukraine?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: At the start of this crisis, many figures were thrown around. We have to deal with the figures we see before us. As I said, we have 33,000 at the moment. We are seeing perhaps between 1,200 and 1,400 arriving weekly at this point. It has been fairly steady on that figure for the past three weeks. We build assumptions into the various models we use for our accommodation. We use our models based on a slightly higher figure, just to give us a little bit of room for expansion. That is what we are seeing at the moment and it has been relatively consistent over the past number of weeks. Even though the numbers arriving

have dropped quite significantly, when the system is already under pressure additional numbers continue to put pressure on the system. However, we have great support over the summer, in particular from universities and institutes of higher education in terms of using student accommodation to meet need, where perhaps hotels are leaving the system so they can be commercially operational over the summer.

Early Childhood Care and Education

4. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the real concerns regarding viability under core funding within parts of the early childhood care and education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28436/22]

Deputy Verona Murphy: I wish to ask the Minister his views and those of his Department on the real concerns regarding viability under core funding within parts of the early childhood care and education, ECCE, sector and to make a statement on that issue.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The new core funding system announced in budget 2022 amounts to €221 million in full-year costs. Of that, €173 million represents new investment. From the work we have done on this, we see no evidence that suggests services will face viability issues as a result of this significant increase in investment. However, I am engaging with representative groups to understand their concerns and will continue to do so.

The vast majority of services, including full-day, part-time and sessional services, will see a substantial increase in funding under the new scheme. A small percentage of services, about 1%, will not see an increase in funding. These services, which are primarily ECCE sessional services that are already on the higher capitation rate, are currently in receipt of some of the highest levels of public funding of at least €110 per hour of provision, with two adults required to be working with children under the ratios in place.

In addition to a funding guarantee that ensures no service will receive less under core funding, a new strand of the sustainability fund is being designed to provide an extra safety net for providers who have financial difficulties. This new sustainability fund will be open to both private and community providers.

Core funding is distributed in a fair and reasonable manner that is related to services’ costs of delivery. Core funding intentionally addresses some of the existing disparities in funding approaches across ECCE and non-ECCE provision. The significantly increased investment through core funding provides a mechanism to control parental fees and improve pay and conditions for staff through supporting the drawing up of the employment regulation order, ERO. This will ensure that early years educators and staff are paid properly for the very important work that they do.

Every year a number of services close and others open. The current data on service closures and openings are not markedly different to the trend in previous years. Services close for a wide range of issues, such as retirements etc. Only a small minority close due to sustainability issues.

To conclude, the new funding model will benefit providers by improving the level and stability of funding, as well as deliver significant improvements for children, parents and staff.

Deputy Verona Murphy: A lot of that sounds very positive but often the headline figures are used as indicators of Government support for particular areas and the true picture can only be seen when that breakdown of funding is examined in greater detail by those who will be able to avail of it or not, as the case may be. The headline figures do not in this case account for the variety of services being funded, nor do they show any shortcomings in funding for any particular services.

I would like to commend the work of Elaine Dunne, chairperson of the Federation of Early Childhood Providers, and many others on their tireless work and informing us. As my daughter is 27, I do not have a need for the service at this point in time but I see how important it is. The sector itself and people such as Elaine Dunne, who have a depth of knowledge, are worth listening to. At all cost, the Department should meet them to understand their roles. They have highlighted some shortcomings in service provision when it comes to comparing full day care and non-full day care.

Correspondence I have been provided with from the federation gets to the heart of the matter, when it stated it is acknowledged that full day care has higher staff ratios. I apologise; as the Minister also has this correspondence, he might just read through it.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I met the federation. Officials and I had a lengthy meeting with representatives from the federation. We are continuing to engage with the federation, which submitted a detailed document to us. We do not agree with all elements of it and we are working through it.

Core funding is about covering the costs of delivery. One of the key elements here is that as the sessional services, by their nature, have a shorter operating day and fewer numbers of hours per week, their costs of delivery are different to full day centre services. That is why when one does a full analysis of how much a full day centre costs, we are not just talking about big ones but about small community full day centres as well, they are by their nature going to get more from core funding because they are open more. They are open 48 or 49 weeks a year as opposed to 38. They are open 40 hours a week compared to 30. That is where that raw difference comes from. In terms of operating costs, we believe we are meeting the operating costs of providers.

Deputy Verona Murphy: That is something that they would disagree with. That is why I would encourage the Minister to certainly keep talking with them. They have a range of optional extras that they put to him that can be implemented. I think the Minister will find that most of what parents want is quality first and availability second or both in tandem, absolutely. The reality is there are many hidden costs in childcare that nobody has accounted for and even parents do not consider. This includes the training and education that now goes into child carers and everything from insurance to the retention of staff. It is not just about how there are staffing shortages, but also the retention of staff. It primarily comes down to much of what Ms Dunne said is not being recognised as cost. As I said, core funding is there as a headline figure. However, when you delve into it, the problems surface. We can only understand and remedy it through the providers, just as how we can only build houses with developers.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The first year of core funding will be from September of this year. As this is a very significant investment, I ask services to give this a go and to work through this. It will be addressed and refined over the years but I genuinely believe this is the way to go and it will deliver the quality the Deputy spoke of. One of the greatest threats to quality is the

staff leaving the sector and they are doing so because they are not sufficiently paid. Everybody recognises that. That is what the centre of core funding is about. Of the allocation, €132 million is dedicated directly to supporting services and paying staff extra, assuming that this ERO that is being negotiated at the moment is agreed. They have negotiated a base rate of €13 per hour, which is a living wage. It is the first time we will have a living wage for childcare professionals. That is what we are trying to achieve here, and it looks like it is about to be delivered. That is something very positive.

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is very positive and I commend the Minister-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think the Deputy has been in twice.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Have I? I apologise.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think the Deputy has.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am overly enthusiastic.

Childcare Services

5. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the State agency for early learning and care and school-age childcare. [28273/22]

Deputy Pa Daly: No matter where one is on the political spectrum, one has to accept that be it in housing, direct provision or bin collection, the outsourcing of essential services to the market only leads to higher profits, lower wages and high costs for citizens. This is particularly true for childhood, early learning and childcare. This is tied into the cost of living crisis. Families are struggling and more often than not, it is the mother who has to stay at home and cannot afford the cost of childcare and this question is related to that. I hope this disparity is on the Minister's mind.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy for his question. Since I have become Minister, my focus in the area of early years has been on increased public investment going hand in hand with increased public management of the system. Part of that relates to the report I received on 29 March, namely, the Review of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland. The Government agreed with that report, which stated that a dedicated State agency is the optimal operating model for the ELC and SAC sector for the years ahead.

It is envisaged that this dedicated agency will undertake the functions currently carried out by Pobal's early years programmes and the city and county childcare committees, as well as operational functions currently undertaken by my Department. My Department has now commenced a further phase of detailed analysis and open planning, consultation and engagement with sectoral stakeholders to determine how the recommendation arising from the review can best be implemented. This phase will include a detailed design of a new operating model, an examination of all legal requirements, transition and continuity planning, risk management, and an examination of associated costings.

My Department is committed to ongoing consultation with stakeholders throughout this

phase and engagement in this regard has already commenced. Officials from my Department have met all organisations comprising the existing operating model and with other key stakeholders to brief them on the review and to provide them with an opportunity to share their initial feedback and views.

A dedicated State agency will assist in the development of a more streamlined structure to better support the delivery of ELC and SAC, and will facilitate my Department in implementing and progressing the significant reform agenda envisaged under the policy articulated in First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. The next steps on this project will include the completion of a detailed design of the new operational model, as well as a policy on the future role of the national voluntary childcare organisations, NVCOs. There also will be extensive consultation with key Departments and with ELC and SAC stakeholders. I look forward to bringing a further report to the Government next year following the completion of this next phase of what is a significant and transformative reform project.

Deputy Pa Daly: A 2021 survey by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, titled, *Where do rich countries stand on childcare?*, found that families of average income in Ireland are spending up to one half of a two-person earning household to put two children in childcare. Researchers found that a couple with an average income would have to spend between a third and a half of one salary to pay for two children in childcare. The maths becomes very simple then, particularly when other costs, particularly in rural counties when one includes where people have to spend two euros per litre on petrol or diesel. Sinn Féin recently introduced the Employment Equality (Pay Transparency) Bill 2022, which will attempt to address the gender gap in pay by giving workers the ability to understand the going rates for those workers. That is a small step compared to the revolution we need to see in accessibility for women in the workforce with proper childcare, whether it is ELC or SAC.

When will the consultation process which the Minister has mentioned finish and when will the design of policy and the review with stakeholders be completed?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I want to create a world-class childcare system that is affordable for parents, which provides quality in care and education to children and which pays staff well. We all recognise that childcare fees should not be a burden for families and we want every parent to be able to access childcare without worrying about what it is going to cost them. That is why I am moving forward with a whole range of far-reaching reforms in the early years sector, which are informed by the recommendations of the expert group, to develop the new funding model. This will see much greater State management of the sector but will also see much greater State investment. The goal and outcome of this will be to deliver cost reductions for parents.

Core funding also represents a new departure for the State and we have just discussed it there with Deputy Verona Murphy. Core funding, in particular, will deliver on that imperative of paying our early years staff and educators, who are 98% female, better in order that they can continue in this profession and to deliver that very important quality care for children.

Deputy Pa Daly: When does the Minister expect that the living wage he has mentioned will be obligatory for the childcare providers? It is encouraging that there will be less reliance on private operators because we are far too reliant on those, as with many outsourced agencies.

Does the Minister believe that the consultation process and the design of policy will be completed by the end of this year or by the end of the term of the Government?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: There are two separate things here. The review of the operating model will be completed by the end of this year and I will come back to the Deputy with a specific date on that.

On the living wage, a joint labour committee, JLC, has been set up, bringing together employees, employee representatives and employers. They have put forward a proposal on that entry grade pay of €13 per hour and that is out for consultation at the moment. My understanding that there are further negotiations ongoing about higher rates for a greater degree of experience, such as for graduate staff etc.

A JLC process is obviously independent of Government and I do not have control over that but we have indicated core funding to support the outcome of a JLC and this funding will kick in from September, assuming that we have that agreement on better rates of pay.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 6 replied to with Written Answers.

Early Childhood Care and Education

7. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will provide data on the number of early learning and care and school-age children providers that have closed down in each of the past five years and to date in 2022, in tabular form; if the level of closures has increased and if so, the steps he intends to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28456/22]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: Will the Minister provide data on the number of providers of early learning and care to school-age children that have closed down in each of the past five years and to date in 2022 and on whether the levels of closures have increased, and if so, what steps does he intend to take to address this and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. Every year it is normal for some early learning and care and school age childcare services to close, while other new services open. Services close for a wide variety of reasons, including retirement of owners or other personal circumstances. Tusla is the independent statutory regulator for the sector. Services intending to close must notify Tusla within 28 days of closure.

The numbers of reported closures for the period 2017 to 2021 and to date in 2022 are as follows. The numbers of closures in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and to the end of April 2022 were 117, 138, 196, 197, 141 and 32, respectively. Across that same period, 449 new services opened.

On school age childcare, the data are not available prior to 2020 as there was not a registration requirement. The numbers of closures in 2020, 2021 and to the end of April 2022 were 13, 23 and eight, respectively. From 2020 to the end of April 2022, 1,544 school age services were

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registered. I reiterate, however, that as 2021 was the first year in which they had to register, that requirement obviously drove that significant spike.

As I mentioned earlier in reply to these questions, my Department is currently leading an ambitious programme of reforms in the ELC and SAC sector. This reform agenda is underpinned by a significant increase in investment with the additional €78 million I secured in budget 2022 bringing investment in the sector to a record €716 million.

We will continue to build on this in budget 2023 and into the future and as I have indicated before, in this year's budget my focus is on reducing the cost for parents by increased investment in the national childcare scheme, which is the direct subsidy each parent receives and which reduces the amount such parents have to pay to their provider.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am pleased to see that the Minister's priority is to ensure improved quality, affordability and sustainability of early learning and care and school-age childcare services. I am also aware of the announcement of the crucial and much-needed support to help parents with the cost of early learning and child care both immediately and as part of a longer process of transformation of the sector. While I welcome the Minister's response, I have concerns. The Minister stated that 449 new services have opened, yet an awful lot have closed. He spoke of retirement from the sector but what is the Department's strategy to address this? It needs to be examined. We need specific measures to help parents. I have spoken to parents in recent weeks. There are significant concerns about this matter.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy is absolutely right to put the focus on that issue. I set out three major areas. Core funding will be particularly important for services that are more expensive, such as baby rooms that cater for children under 12 months where the ratio, by its nature, must be higher. In the context of core funding, there is additional financial support recognising the higher cost of delivery. That will make the opening of new baby rooms more attractive to providers. Second, there is a capital investment scheme. We will announce the first part of that later this year for take-up in 2023. The first part of the scheme will focus on the expansion and renovation of existing centres and the second will focus on capital support for the building of new early learning centres. The third aspect involves looking at the planning system and ensuring that the guidelines for the delivery of early learning care are better aligned with the planning of new housing developments. I have already met with a significant number of county planners to discuss that matter.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: All of us have been working with parents and childcare professionals. These people are doing their best. It is important that we listen to all stakeholders and ensure that there is affordable childcare for parents and people who need it and that the sector is viable for childcare providers to remain open. I know how committed the Minister is to working on this. There is a great deal of funding coming on stream but I am concerned that the parents see this and that the childcare professionals in crèches or early childcare facilities also benefit. We need to ensure that it is win-win for everyone and that we have a system that is fit for purpose. Ireland is lucky in its childcare professionals. It is important that no one is in a position where they cannot send their child to a place or that one has to close.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy is absolutely right about the need to listen and engage and I do. I have met organisations and we have an early years forum with which all sectors are engaged. They have a very close relationship with the officials in my Department.

We worked very closely during the Covid crisis and met almost daily at some points. That supported the sector to do such a magnificent job, particularly during the worst parts of the crisis.

On the need to reform, we have brought forward the expert group on the funding model report and we are implementing the core funding part now. We have brought forward the review of the working model and support for the workforce planning, nurturing skills. We are implementing that. I attended a very positive event two weeks ago relating to the creation of a new professional body for early years educators. A lot is happening in the sector. It is happening with the Government working in conjunction with providers and employer representatives and looking to support parents and to do more for them in this year's budget.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am skipping some questions as the relevant Deputies are not here.

International Agreements

11. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has drawn the attention of the Government of the urgency to ratify the optional protocol of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, which would allow people with disabilities to take a case to the United Nations over violation of their rights; his views on whether the State needs to progress the adoption of the optional protocol as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28431/22]

Deputy Verona Murphy: Has the Minister impressed on the Government the urgency of ratifying the optional protocol of the UNCRPD? It would allow people with disabilities to take a case to the UN over violation of their rights. Does the Minister believe that the State needs to progress the adoption of the optional protocol as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Ireland ratified the UNCRPD on 20 March 2018. This marked an important milestone in a process to strengthen the rights of people with disabilities in Ireland that has gathered momentum since Ireland became a signatory to the convention in 2007.

Ireland's approach to meeting the obligations of the UNCRPD is one of progressive realisation by each year moving forward on key reforms, with the obligations arising from the convention being met over time. Initial priority has been given to meeting legislative commitments and requirements.

I recognise the importance of the optional protocol, as does the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. As the Deputy will be aware, the optional protocol is an international treaty that establishes procedures aimed at strengthening the implementation and monitoring of the convention. Ratification of the optional protocol is a commitment in the programme for Government following the State's first review period before the UN committee.

Due to delays at UN level, Ireland's appearance before the committee will now be delayed. The Minister of State and I have indicated that we are open to ratification prior to the first review before the committee but we are conscious that we want to have the processes in place domestically so that we do not sign up to something that we are already in breach of because we have not made the changes. I think that is sensible.

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In that regard, the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act was passed in 2015 but has never been operationalised. We had a lengthy debate at Second Stage debate yesterday, which will conclude today, on the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill. This Bill will operationalise that and make some reforms to that. We see that as a key point in ensuring that we are ready for full ratification.

Alongside that, ratification of the optional protocol requires a comprehensive review of existing domestic remedies for breaches of the convention in order to ensure the state can meet the obligations. My Department is undertaking that review now and examining the final requirements for ratification and we will bring that forward as part of our UNCRPD implementation plan.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Ireland has come in for much criticism by the UN for its failure to ratify the UNCRPD. Mr. Markus Schefer, a member of the UN Committee on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, said it gives the impression that Ireland is not confident or comfortable enough to open itself up to international scrutiny. He was speaking to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters. Ireland signed the convention in 2007 but it took us 11 years to implement it. In 2020, the Government promised to sign up to the optional protocol. I understand that we have been delayed by the UN but it is two years further on. When I brought little Leo Dixon to the Dáil, every Member was notified of his visit but only a handful turned up to meet and greet him. A wheelchair user. A person with a disability. Have I had two minutes?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, that was one minute but the Deputy has a chance to come back with another minute.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Thank you. God bless us. I have so much to say.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Well the Deputy should try and say it in 60 seconds.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I take on board the Deputy’s passion in respect of this matter. I agree about the long delay between becoming a signatory and ratification. I see that in the context in the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act, which was passed in 2015 and which is still not operationalised. That is one reason why I am so committed to implementing the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act and removing wardship which is one of the key areas where we are so out of line with what we should be providing for persons with capacity impairments in terms of the UNCRPD. To be clear, however, we set out a timeline in the programme for Government for signing up to the optional protocol after our first review. Our first review has been pushed back by the UN. We are not saying that we still have to wait; we are open to doing it prior to the first review and getting assisted decision-making passed it a key part of that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I am not so sure that we do have to wait. That is what we committed to but we are not alone. There are ten other countries which have not signed up for it. But 13% of Ireland’s population have a disability. I am a new Deputy. When I was canvassing these groups they told me they only see politicians every five years, meaning at election time. In 2020, when we actually said that we would sign up to the protocol, it was an election ploy. That is their feeling and that is discriminatory. Thirteen percent of America’s population are African Americans. Do you think that we would get away with discriminating in the same way in that population cohort? No we would not and we should not be doing it here. It is shambolic and we need to recognise the 13% and give them, the Leo Dixons of this world, the right to have

somewhere to go to make their complaint when the Government cannot do it.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: In the previous Government, a commitment was made finally to ratify the UNCRPD. It happened. At the start of this Government, we made a commitment to put a greater focus on disability by creating a Department and taking disability out of the Department of Health. There is a stronger focus on disability, recognising the specific needs of that 13% of the population. That is happening. We have made a commitment to implement the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015. That is happening in terms of legislation. I believe we will sign up to the optional protocol within the lifetime of this Government. However, it is important we have steps to put in place domestically so it can deliver for people through the processes that are established.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Is it a priority?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: It is a priority.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, I am not sure did you mean anything in relation to your reference to African-American. I am not sure it was necessary but I do not think you meant anything-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is the significance that it is 13% of a smaller population but, nonetheless, it would not be tolerated.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am not sure if it is helpful to make it like that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Black lives matter. Disability matters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: All lives matter.

I apologise to Deputy Murnane O’Connor. I did not realise she was substituting.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: Not at all.

Magdalen Laundries

9. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the next steps with regard to the establishment of a national memorial and archive for survivors of institutional abuse; when works will commence at the proposed Dublin 1 site; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28468/22]

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor: I will ask about the next steps with regard to the establishment of the national memorial archive for survivors of institutional abuse; when work will commence at the proposed Dublin 1 site and if the Minister will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: On 24 March, the Government approved high-level proposals for a national centre for research and remembrance. The establishment of the national centre is a core commitment in the action plan for survivors and former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions. The national centre will be located on the site of the former Magdalen laundry on Seán McDermott Street in Dublin 1. It will stand as a site of conscience and will be a national memorial to honour equally all those who were resident in mother and baby

homes, industrial schools, reformatories, Magdalen laundries and related institutions.

The national centre will include a museum, an exhibition space, a central repository of records related to institutional trauma and a research centre. It will also contain a dedicated place for solemn reflection and remembrance. In addition, as part of the development of the site, social housing units, local community facilities and an educational and early learning facility will be constructed. The inclusion of these facilities will make a valuable contribution to the social and economic development of Dublin's north-east inner city.

While physically situated in Dublin, the national centre will be accessible for all survivors, whether in other parts of Ireland or abroad. It will provide digital access to records and exhibits, as well as developing physical presences elsewhere, including in conjunction with some local museums, to enable survivors to visit more easily. In this way, the centre will be a national institution which achieves a global and national reach, as well as strong connections to and benefits for the local community.

Work is under way to progress the initial planning and development stages of the national centre. This is being driven by a steering group chaired by the former secretary general to the Government and ambassador-designate to the United Kingdom. The steering group has met on two occasions to date and will meet again this month. It is currently establishing a number of work streams spanning various technical aspects of the initiative, as well as engagement with survivors and the local community in Dublin's north inner city. This will ensure that the development of the national centre is directly informed by those most centrally involved, their families and representatives.

The creation of the national centre is a major multi-annual project. While I am not in a position to provide any definitive timeline as yet, an indicative timeline of five years has been provided to me by the steering group. It is hoped that some initial maintenance and structural work to facilitate building surveys could take place on the site this year.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The establishment of the national memorial and records centre is a central commitment in the action plan for survivors and former residents of the mother and baby and county home institutions. It is right we remember, honour and pay respect to those who were resident in mother and baby homes, county homes, industrial schools, Magdalen laundries and related institutions. The Government action plan contains a number of initiatives to respond to the needs of survivors through a variety of commitments, including access to information and records, memorialisation, financial payments, health supports and other key initiatives. In particular, I welcome that the Government is committed to advancing these actions in a survivor-centred manner and to ongoing engagement and dialogue with survivors. I have brought up several times that timing is very important for survivors. I ask that we try to get this through as quickly as possible. I understand that a cross-Government process is under way to advance works on this, as the Minister said. That is really important. I welcome that the Minister said this would be in consultation with survivors.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy is right that in our response to legacy issues timing is important. This will take longer than some of the other actions. It is a major building project. It will have very positive impacts for survivors, former residents and their families and for the wider community in Dublin's north-east inner city in terms of having social housing, education and early-years elements. We have been moving very quickly on that central right of access to information. Last night, we finished Committee Stage of the Birth Information and

Tracing Bill 2022 in the Seanad. We will be going to Report Stage of that legislation after the recess. That central legislation to allow immediate access to information will be passed shortly. This longer-term piece, in terms of a place where records can be held and accessed appropriately but where there is also a site of memorial and conscience, is also being progressed.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome that. I asked the Minister about the timescale of when the works would commence. He was not able to give me that answer. I know there is a planning process to go through. While we are speaking about survivors, I ask the Minister about the enhanced medical cards. I have been asked about this several times. I ask that we work on that straight away. It is of the utmost importance.

What is the progress on the role of local authorities to deliver on commitments to support memorialisation initiatives throughout the country? All local authorities have a role to play. It is important that in terms of survivors in all parts of the country, there is talks and communication with all the local authorities and that we look at something going forward. How is that being addressed? I know that the Minister has worked tirelessly on this and he has worked with all of us within the children's committee. I welcome that. Timing is very important in terms of payment and medical cards.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The enhanced medical card will be as part of the institutional payments Bill, the general scheme of which is being discussed in the Deputy's committee at pre-legislative scrutiny. I know the committee is working hard to get that report. We will be introducing that legislation early in the September term, with a view to getting it passed and operational by the end of the year. Local authority engagement is very important, too. My Department has been engaging with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. There has been a group meeting. I know a report was sent to me at the start of this week. I have not had a chance to go through it in detail. I hope to read it over next week and engage with that group. Maybe I can provide the Deputy with a fuller update at that point. However, work is ongoing on memorialisation and on how local authorities can better support former residents of these institutions.

Youth Services

8. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of Foróige clubs that are supported by his Department; the number of clubs that are in operation in counties Cavan and Monaghan; the level of activity of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28460/22]

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for being here. I am substituting for Deputy Niamh Smith. Will it be possible to get an outline of Government funding towards Foróige clubs that are supported by the Minister's Department, with regard to support provided for Cavan and Monaghan and indeed, nationally?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In total, my Department provided funding to 264 Foróige clubs nationally through the local youth club grant scheme in 2020, the latest year for which figures have been collated. Approximately 1,200 grants were made that year. Data for 2021 will be collated in the near future. A total of 72 grants were made in the Cavan and Monaghan education and training board area in 2020. Of these, 16 were made to Foróige clubs, making it the largest group to receive a local youth club grant scheme in that area.

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I secured €2.5 million for the scheme in 2022, which represented a 20% increase on 2021. As the Deputy knows, as part of budgets 2020 and 2021, in each year I have been able to secure an additional €5 million for the youth sector. That means that in 2022, including capital allocations, the overall annual budget for youth funding was €73 million.

10 o'clock

The local youth club grant scheme funding supports volunteer-led local youth work activities at a local level. The grants are made available through the local education and training boards.

My Department does not collate information on the activities of individual youth clubs. These will vary according to local needs and engagements with young people. I have been advised that some of the services provided by Foróige local youth clubs include training and education programmes, including ones for potential early school leavers and disadvantaged minority groups, and school holiday programmes, which include activities, courses, workshops and outdoor pursuits.

The local youth club grant scheme has a maximum grant level of €3,000, while the average nationally is approximately €1,500. The scheme supports in the region of 1,400 clubs or groups nationally. In recent years, Cavan-Monaghan reported that 80 or so clubs were receiving grants. As the Deputy knows, we maintained youth funding during the Covid restrictions to support the amazing online work, in many situations, that local youth clubs undertook to support young people. I will continue, in this year's budget, to seek to increase the overall funding for the youth sector, because it does such valuable work.

Deputy James O'Connor: I will certainly relay that fabulous information to Deputy Niamh Smyth, who has been a keen supporter of the work undertaken in her constituency by youth organisations. Covid-19 has done a lot of damage to the growth and development of younger people. It has made it hard for people who are doing voluntary work with organisations like Foróige to get them back up and running and operating in-person again. I wish them well with it and acknowledge the fabulous work done by that organisation in communities across the country.

What particular supports does the Government plan to provide in the next 12 months? It is important that we get a commitment from the Minister about what he intends to do ahead of the upcoming budget. It is also important that we continue to support youth organisations post pandemic.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Absolutely. I hope to continue to grow the overall funding envelope. We have grown it by €5 million cumulatively each year and hope to continue to do that. The key scheme we are looking at is UBU Your Place Your Space, which is a targeted funding scheme. We have announced eight new schemes this year and announced six new schemes last year. We will look to continue to grow that. We had a useful discussion with youth groups from the Deputy's own area about providing additional support. We conversed about how that could be progressed at education and training board level and we are seeking to provide the funding. We are also looking at a major reform of the youth services grant scheme, which is the funding scheme for the more general, universal youth funding. Many groups rely on that. When something like that is changed, it has to be done slowly and in consultation so no one feels left out or that their funding is at risk. We are looking to reform that and make it

fit for purpose in order that we can continue to expand that scheme as well.

Deputy James O'Connor: I was delighted to have the Minister speak on a digital call with groups in my constituency recently. He made a point about funding being devolved through the Department to different organisations, including education and training boards. I often find that those organisations have their own agenda. Sometimes, geographical areas are left out. Unfortunately, Youghal, which is a town I am passionate about because I was born and raised there, has struggled to get grant support through the departmental grant mechanisms, because it is devolved to different units which have their own serious priorities in different regions of County Cork, which is extraordinarily large. I can get from my house in Youghal to Leinster House quicker than I can get to the other side of County Cork. That gives an idea of the geographical scale of County Cork. Will the Minister look at whether there is a balanced distribution of funding to different geographical areas, which is really important for a constituency like Cork?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Deputy made that point strongly when we met. I take it on board. It is good to give some degree of local autonomy when identifying these issues. When my Department and I identify what Youghal, Fermoy or other parts of Cork mean, it is not as good as when local elements do so. We need to ensure there is a wide spread of funding and to recognise the importance of supporting youth in rural areas too. It is not just about supporting what is happening in cities and large towns, but also about supporting rural youth services. At least two of the UBU services announced this year, in Clare and Donegal, are specifically rural services, so there will be a more diffuse model rather than just one youth club somewhere. There are different models to support the different scenarios that young people are in, which I think is really important.

Ukraine War

10. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the engagements that he has had to date with the Department of Transport and Connecting Ireland on the actions to be taken to accommodate transport needs for the influx of refugees to rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28339/22]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Many parts of the country need upgrades to public transport. The response to the humanitarian crisis has added demand in some places more than others. Have these places been identified to Connecting Ireland? Is an agreement in place to accelerate these services for the benefit of the local population as well as the increased population coming in as a result of the crisis?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: My Department is focused on providing short-term accommodation to people fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. As we spoke of earlier, more than 23,000 people have sought short-term temporary accommodation from my Department to date. Once accommodation is allocated to beneficiaries of temporary protection by my Department, transport to that location is organised for them. I have spoken directly with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, with regard to the transport challenges faced by those fleeing Ukraine once they are in State-funded accommodation, particularly with regard to access to the supports and services that they need. My officials have engaged proactively with the Department of Transport in providing information about where the short-term accommodation contracted by us is located, and the number of beneficiaries of the temporary protection directive accommodated there, so that this can inform decision making in the Department of Transport.

On 21 April, the Minister for Transport announced that his Department and the National Transport Authority will be providing emergency public transport services to displaced Ukrainians housed in isolated locations across Ireland. New supports include measures specifically designed to reach displaced Ukrainians in rural areas. One is an acceleration of network improvements which were previously committed to, identified through the Connecting Ireland public transport consultation, including additional stops, route modifications, and more services with the aim of increasing connectivity. Additional bus services are to be deployed to cater for those Ukrainians housed away from the existing public transport network. Another is a community transport fund, which is to support occasional travel requests. This will be operated by Transport for Ireland Local Link and will allow groups supporting Ukrainians locally to apply to that fund for once-off trips. Measures include speeding up of the expansion of Local Link, specific bespoke routes for centres which are not near a link, and that fund too.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The Connecting Ireland plan had a public consultation late last year and was due to be published this summer, then implemented over five years with some routes coming in more immediately. Routes such as route 40, which serves Killarney to Macroom, Ballyvourney and on to Cork, and, similarly, route 257, which serves Killarney, Millstreet, Macroom and goes on to Bandon, were identified for improvement in the context of Connecting Ireland. They are needed. More than 300 people have come to Millstreet in recent weeks and transport is needed. Have these routes been identified to Connecting Ireland to be accelerated? I know the Minister was in contact with the Department of Transport? Have those routes been identified to Connecting Ireland for acceleration? Has it acknowledged the need for those and accepted that that kind of route would be accelerated?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I am happy to engage with the Deputy. I understand that general information was provided by my Department to Connecting Ireland and the Department of Transport about where concentrations of Ukrainian displaced persons are accommodated. The Department of Transport examined the plans for new routes under Connecting Ireland and acted to bring some forward more quickly.

On the two specific routes the Deputy identified, I propose to look at their status to see whether they are being considered in the context of the accelerated delivery of some of the routes set out in the scheme. I cannot answer on the specifics now, but we can find out the position for the Deputy.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister for that. There is a large group of people in Millstreet who are in need of transport. There was always a need to upgrade those services for people who have been there over many years, long-term residents. I will work with the Minister on following up on those routes and link-up routes with them, for example the 233 going on into Cork, to give people access to services. Many of the refugees are keen to work but very few of them have access to transport. If they want to be able to get over to Killarney to work, or into Macroom or anywhere, even to be able to access services and maintain contact with family and friends, there is a need. Those needs were already present in many places that were identified. It is important that Connecting Ireland would acknowledge that these routes are identified as in need of acceleration if that is possible.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I remember during the programme for Government negotiations there was a real focus to ensure that, inasmuch as we were putting significant investment into public transport in city areas, and my own very urban constituency is benefitting from that, there was a real need to focus on enhancing the local network around the country. Connecting

Ireland is the roadmap towards doing that and significant funding has been put in place to support it. Perhaps one of the positive consequences of the arrival of a large number of Ukrainians is the highlighting, if it were needed, of the fact that many towns and villages in rural Ireland do not have enough public transport, as the Deputy has just said. We are actually going to be able to get a benefit now in terms of an earlier delivery of better transport routes for those areas, which will benefit Ukrainians and everyone living in those areas as well. I ask the Deputy to come back to me with the names of those two routes.

Child Abuse

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has any protocols or structures in place for dealing with persons who contact it and who have made retrospective abuse allegations or disclosures relating to their time as children in State care. [27576/22]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We are all familiar with the horrific detail that came to light in the Grace case, specifically with regard to the State's response to the allegations and the abuse suffered by the person known as Grace. Are there any other cases that the Minister is aware of which are similar in nature to that of Grace?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Deputy. While the statutory bodies with primary responsibility for child welfare and protection are Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and An Garda Síochána, sometimes concerns about a child or a retrospective allegation are reported to my Department. My Department is committed to acting promptly when notified of any concerns and follows the principles of Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children. A guidance document for staff of the Department details actions which should be taken if a concern or a retrospective allegation is reported to them. While staff are not expected to make an assessment of any allegation, they are required to make a report to Tusla, or to An Garda Síochána in an emergency situation.

The term "retrospective abuse" refers to abuse that an adult experienced which took place during their childhood. Information about abuse that happened in the past must also be sent to Tusla because the alleged abuser may have contact with other children, even if he or she no longer poses a threat to the alleged victim. Tusla has a specific retrospective abuse report form for reporting in these cases, available on its website. This form is for use by adults wishing to disclose childhood abuse; mandated persons under the Children First Act, and professionals providing adults with counselling, mental health or other relevant services.

Tusla assesses all child welfare and protection concerns that are reported to it. This includes historic allegations of abuse made by persons who were previously in the care of the State. If there are ongoing child protections concerns, Tusla will take the necessary actions to ensure that a child who may be at risk of harm is protected.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: With respect, the Minister has not answered my question at all. Since the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014, some 13 internal case reviews have been carried out by it. My parliamentary assistant has been handed two of these reports by two women who suffered sexual abuse as children. The reports are deeply upsetting to read. In the 1990s, gardaí and social workers did not act on the disclosures when they were made. I stress that these are two separate cases. These two children escaped their abusers

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when they ran away from home. In all the internal case reviews, everyone mentioned is given a pseudonym, similar to Grace.

Has Tusla furnished the Minister with copies of the 13 internal case reviews that have been conducted? Was the Minister aware of these reviews or the content of these reports prior to my raising them here?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: No, I was not. I am not aware of the two cases the Deputy has spoken about. If he wants to provide me with information about them, I will be happy to examine them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The content of these reports is deeply shocking. I want to know what happens to these reports. Where is the oversight and accountability in respect of them within the Department? Can the Minister confirm to me, if somebody comes forward to report retrospective child abuse pertaining to a period when they were in State care or in foster care, whether all other adults who were previously in foster care in that home where the alleged abuse took place tracked down? Are they interviewed by social workers? Can the Minister confirm that this happens? It is really important. It is especially important that we focus on the person who brings the alleged abuse to light but also that we investigate whether there was other abuse in those families.

Have people ever contacted the Minister’s office directly to report retrospective abuse? If so, has his office handled those phone calls or emails? This is not the last the Government will be hearing about this issue. We need an immediate, robust commission to investigate child sexual abuse that happened in the foster care system past and present. A full, unconditional State apology needs to be given to the victims of the State who for decades have said that nobody has believed their stories.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: It is my understanding that when an allegation of retrospective child abuse is being investigated, the full processes of Children First are implemented. I will come back to the Deputy in writing on what exactly that means in terms of whether every single adult is contacted. I do not have the absolute detail on that. It is a fair question and I will come back to the Deputy on it in writing.

As I said, in respect of the two cases the Deputy identified, I am happy for him to bring them to my attention and I can look at them in more detail. I cannot speak with any more certainty on next steps until I have actually seen them. Like the Deputy, I treat issues of child sex abuse with the greatest significance and particularly if that has happened in a situation where someone was in the care of the State. That makes the situation in terms of the State’s responsibility all the more grave.

Questions Nos. 13 to 33, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It looks as though Deputy Tóibín will be on his feet again because no other Deputy is present.

Direct Provision System

34. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of Ukrainian nationals who have entered the direct provision system in

each of the past ten years and to date in 2022. [27575/22]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is the first time in the 11 years I have been in the House that there has been no other Deputy present to ask a Minister a parliamentary question. The Minister will agree with me that the direct provision system has been a disaster. In a country that looks back continuously at wrongs the State has done, the fact that the direct provision system is currently still functioning is a reflection on ourselves. How many Ukrainian nationals have entered the direct provision system so far?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Deputy is correct about the direct provision system. He knows of my efforts to end direct provision. We have the White Paper. We had a quite substantive discussion about that during the taking of questions earlier today and I set out what we are doing. I have been honest about the impact of the war in Ukraine, which has affected my Department’s ability over the past three months.

Fourteen Ukrainian nationals sought international protection here in 2012. There were seven in 2013, 36 in 2014, 33 in 2015, 11 in 2016, eight in 2017 and five in 2018. I will provide the remaining figures to the Deputy after these questions. At the start of the current crisis, in late February, we saw an uptake in the number of Ukrainians seeking international protection, but once the temporary protection directive was introduced, the vast majority of Ukrainians arriving here have not been seeking international protection; rather, they are seeking the rights under the temporary protection directive.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to give credit to all the various community organisations and groups, including churches and State organisations, that have so far made resources available to people from Ukraine who have come to this country. There has been an enormous amount of work. It is important to give credit and recognition to those who have offered the céad míle fáilte to people fleeing what is a terrible war.

There is no doubt that there are already significant pressures on society and that many are feeling the pinch as a result, but in a time of war it is really important that we hunker down and do our best to ease the suffering of people being targeted. The danger is that the Government’s plan for direct provision could in many ways come a cropper if it uses the system to house people who are fleeing from war. I am trying to get a sense of how the Government plan for direct provision and the current reality in the Ukrainian war are meeting each other.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy. I echo his praise for the huge national effort that has been made by communities, local authorities, State agencies, charities and NGOs. An amazing effort has been made to extend a welcome and send practical supports to Ukrainians. The provision of accommodation to Ukrainians is imperfect. It is something we have had to put in place in such a short period for an influx the like of which we have never seen before, and that is at a time when we are trying to end a system that we have all identified as not fit for purpose. I am doing work in my Department in this regard. Last week I met the advisory group, including Dr. Catherine Day and Dr. David Donoghue, overseeing the implementation of the White Paper. I met them to determine how we can continue to respond to the needs of Ukrainians while at the same time ending direct provision. We will be introducing a revised schedule for the implementation of all elements of the White Paper shortly.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Can the Minister give us some information on the number of pledges by the general public of accommodation for people from Ukraine and the number

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of pledges that have been accepted in this regard? Has the Minister any information on the number of vacant homes repurposed to allow Ukrainian refugees to live in them? The issue of vacant homes has been a serious bugbear of mine for a long period. In my constituency about 4,000 people are on the housing waiting list and there are 3,000 empty homes. There are towns in my constituency where you could play hurling on the main street at midday on Friday because everybody commutes to Dublin. Most of the homes on the streets are empty. The solutions to ease the pressure regarding accommodation for Ukrainians are exactly the same as those to address everybody else's accommodation issues in the long term. If the Minister has any information on that, I would be grateful.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I share the Deputy’s concern about the vacancy level in certain parts of the country, particularly in the smaller urban areas and small towns and villages. When the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, announced a package to respond to the Ukraine crisis and the wider housing crisis in April, he changed the measures under which people can apply for funding to refurbish vacant homes. He made it easier to access the funding. I hope that will allow the work to start in this regard.

There are now over 1,200 Ukrainians living in pledged accommodation across the country. Some 2,500 vacant units are being considered by local authorities at the moment. We notified the local authorities of these and they are working to move Ukrainians into them.

On shared accommodation, the vetting process is under way. Protection is obviously important where it is proposed to move a child or vulnerable adult into a house. Zoom calls, during which people show their identification to a vetter, are taking place.

Questions Nos. 35 and 36 replied to with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am going to move to Question No. 37.

Deputy David Stanton: I appreciate that. Things have moved on a lot faster than I expected this morning.

Youth Services

37. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has, or plans to introduce, a funding scheme to support youth clubs and organisations with the purchase of minibuses to facilitate youth activities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28356/22]

Deputy David Stanton: This has to do with youth services. I realise the great work going on in this regard and the funding the Minister has made available, but one of the issues youth services have raised with me is the need to have minibuses to bring young people from A to B. Is there any funding stream that could be used to assist with something like this?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: We had a good discussion about the funding of youth services earlier. Unfortunately, there are no plans for a specific funding stream for transport right now. I realise it is an issue. It is raised with me by those in the sector. We have a capital budget for youth services, amounting to €2.7 million, but the vast majority of these funds are for small grants to help services to maintain their buildings and youth clubs. As the Deputy knows, over the past two years we have been able to grow the overall youth services budget. An additional

€5 million was made available in each of 2021 and 2022. I hope to do that again in this year's budget. It is primarily focused on current expenditure but youth services are very mobile and flexible in repurposing funding.

A transport scheme has to have multiple benefits. There is no point in having a bus vacant all day and used only for a youth club between 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. We see this in the disability sector and with school transport. Work has to be done, particularly in rural areas, on using existing transport mechanisms more thoroughly and efficiently and to ensure they are being used all day. I am aware that the National Transport Authority is considering a project in this regard. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, is very committed to determining whether the transport vehicles of various State-funded NGOs and charitable organisations can be linked to Local Link to ensure they provide a benefit all day.

Deputy David Stanton: I support what the Minister is saying. Many school buses are used during the day by schools and in the evening by youth services. Maybe synergies could be considered in this regard. When I was a Minister of State, I was involved with the youth justice strategy, which referred to integrating services and maximising the benefits, as the Minister has said. I support him in the work he is doing in this area. Perhaps he could talk to other Ministers and service providers to see whether there can be collaboration to maximise the use of existing services, as he has mentioned. It would make a massive difference to some, especially in the youth justice area, if they could get out and about and engage in sailing and activities in the hills and elsewhere. Much of the time, however, they are stuck in one spot. To get them out can make a massive difference and be of huge help.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I agree with the Deputy. I do not want to let this opportunity go by without referencing the young adult travel card that the Government has introduced, which will benefit young people between the ages of 19 and 23. This was an initiative brought forward by Comhairle na nÓg to me. I and Comhairle approached the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and got the funding for that, and it applies as of two weeks ago. All young people between the ages of 19 and 23, whether they are students or working, or whatever their position in life right now, will get 50% off public transport, not just for this year but going forward. It is a great initiative, one I am very proud of and one the Government should be proud of. Particularly at a time when, first, we want to get people back onto public transport post-Covid and, second, the cost of living is high for young people, this is a big help.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Cost of Living Issues

85. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which household electricity bills here are more expensive than the European Union average; the reason for this and the measures that he will take in advance of winter 2022 to address electricity cost and energy and electricity security of supply challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28788/22]

Deputy Darren O’Rourke: I ask the Minister the degree to which household electricity bills here are more expensive than the European Union average and the reason for this, the

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measures he will take in advance of winter 2022 to address electricity costs and energy and electricity security supply challenges, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

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

The Deputy is correct that this is a critical issue for our people. The most important factor affecting electricity prices in Ireland is the continuing upward trend in international gas prices, which is affecting electricity prices across Europe and the world. Nevertheless, it is true that Ireland has higher electricity prices than the EU average. In addition to Ireland's fossil fuel dependency, which is one of the reasons, it is due to a number of other factors, including geographical location, economies of scale and high population dispersion. In the longer term, deepening our interconnection with the EU energy market via increased interconnection and realising the full potential of our indigenous renewable energy resources is essential to addressing these structural issues.

The Government has already taken action, including: the €400 million electricity costs emergency benefit scheme that was introduced this year; increases to fuel allowance so that, for this fuel allowance year, recipients receive a total of €1,139 compared to €735 in 2020-2021; and targeted energy efficiency measures, which are critical. This year, 58%, or some €203 million, of the total Government retrofit budget of €352 million will be spent on dedicated energy poverty retrofit supports and local authority retrofits. This includes a new targeted €20 million scheme for the installation of photovoltaic, PV, panels for households that have a high reliance on electricity for medical reasons, and a reduction in VAT from 13.5% to 9% on gas and electricity bills from the start of May until the end of October.

In April, the Government published the national energy security framework, NESF. Response 6 of the framework tasks the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, with implementing a package of measures to enhance protections for financially vulnerable customers and customers in debt by quarter 3 of this year.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There were price rises again yesterday and we can expect the future to look the same. The Minister knows better than most that the price of a therm of gas was approximately 40 cent for a long time but there is a new normal upon us now, and estimations are that it will level off somewhere in the region of €2.50. There is a huge difference between 40 cent and €2.50. While there are mitigations, for the foreseeable future we are going to live in a reality where the price of gas is at €2.50 a therm or higher. That is the new reality and it is going to force people into poverty. We need a response from the Government and it needs to be aligned with these increases in costs. We need to protect people. The Government needs to go beyond the measures that it has introduced or else we will see more and more people driven into poverty. We heard from some of them yesterday on "Morning Ireland", which was a perfect and depressing example of it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is right. The price of gas has gone beyond compare and up to higher levels. For more than 20 years, it was fairly steady and at a price range typically measured in pence sterling because that is where our gas market is priced from. As the Deputy said, it has gone from some 40 or 50 pence per unit up to about 180 pence in the UK pricing yesterday. I have just come out of a meeting with the European Commissioner for Energy, Kadri Simson. I understand the members of the committee will be meeting her later, which is a good chance to question her on the prospects. From listening to her this morning, this is an ongoing and real crisis. Just in recent days, we have seen that gas to the Dutch market is likely to be cut off, as I understand it, and it is something similar with the Danish market, and even in

the German market restrictions are coming.

In all likelihood, as Europe switches away from the use of gas, there is an underlying need for us to do so for climate reasons but also now for security reasons. As much and as fast as we do that, given the switch away from Russian gas, and 150 billion cu. m of gas were imported from Russia into Europe last year, the commission has said that two thirds or three quarters of that cannot be replaced. That is why, first and foremost, we have to push the development of our own renewable power and really focus on energy efficiency as a way of saving on bills, and also introducing even further measures to try to help consumers through this difficult time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I agree entirely on the transition we need to make. There is huge opportunity and I am sure some of it will be covered later today in terms of what the Government can do to achieve our transition to renewables more speedily. However, this winter, families will be facing increases of over 30% in electricity and gas prices. That is on top of the increases we saw for dual fuel users of €800 in January 2022 when compared to January 2021. Families will not be able to cope. When we meet with St. Vincent de Paul or the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, they talk about people who are self-disconnecting for fear of the shame of actually being disconnected. Sinn Féin has called for a mini-budget and for additional measures in terms of fuel allowance, a discretionary fund and cash payments for people in need. The Minister knows very well that we need to see action before October. Energy providers are indicating they will be increasing prices during the summer and in September, which is going to drive people further into poverty. We need to see a response from the Government.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not agree with the approach being advocated by Sinn Féin and I think the Government approach is better. We are sitting down and talking to a whole variety of partners, such as the social partners, Social Justice Ireland and the other groups who are part of the social pillar in the National Economic and Social Council, as well as the environmental pillar and also unions and employers. We work best in this country when we work in collaboration. I think it is better for us to engage in that process, to look to the budget in October and to look at what social welfare or other measures may be needed to help us through what is going to be a very difficult period in this country and in every country across western Europe. Our problem is that we have that very high use of fossil fuels. We are one of the countries that is most dependent on imported fossil fuels. The fundamental, most important thing we need to do, as well as having those interim, short-term, immediate measures to help people through, is to make the switch away from the use of those fuels. That is what serves the Irish people best.

Cost of Living Issues

86. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the ways in which energy companies can assist the State and consumers to meet the challenges of escalating energy prices for domestic users; if he will outline the work being undertaken by his Department in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28586/22]

Deputy Ged Nash: Nearly 20% of all households in this country are experiencing energy poverty. Up to March, energy prices had gone up by almost 50% in a year. As the Minister knows this is hitting low-income households throughout the country the hardest. Energy companies, as the Minister knows, have posted hyper-profits this year. What plans has the Minister to ask the energy companies to do more to help the State and help citizens combat the ever-

rising costs of keeping the lights and the heating on?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As Deputy Nash knows the responsibility for regulation of the electricity market, including the compliance of electricity and gas suppliers with their licence conditions, is a matter for the independent regulator, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. The CRU was assigned responsibility for that role in the Irish electricity sector following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 and subsequent legislation. It is solely accountable to the committee of the Oireachtas for the performance of its functions and not to myself as Minister.

As part of its statutory role the CRU also has consumer protection functions and sets out a number of rules for suppliers to follow in the Electricity and Gas Suppliers Handbooks. These include special provisions for vulnerable customers around areas such as billing and disconnections. The CRU also oversees the supplier-led voluntary Energy Engage Code under which energy suppliers will not disconnect a customer who is engaging with them, must provide every opportunity to customers to avoid disconnection, must identify customers at risk of disconnection and encourage them to engage and are obliged to offer a range of payment options, such as a debt-repayment plan to those in arrears. In addition the National Energy Security Framework, NESF, recently published, tasks the CRU with implementing a package of measures to enhance existing protections for financially vulnerable customers and customers in debt by the third quarter of this year.

Suppliers have also played a key role in the delivery of a number of governmental measures aimed at supporting people to meet their energy costs. They have a statutory role in implementing the electricity costs emergency benefit scheme where a payment of €200 including VAT went to each household. They were required to implement the reduction of VAT on electricity which has been reduced from 13.5% to 9%. They also have an important role in enabling households to become active energy customers through the clean export guarantee, CEG, to new and existing micro- and small-scale generators. Some suppliers have already advertised that CEG tariff whereby households will be able to export, and eligible micro-generators will start receiving their remuneration for that from 1 July this year depending on their billing cycle. Under the energy efficiency obligation scheme, EEOS, energy suppliers help householders to save energy through measures which include energy upgrades to homes as well as the funding provided by the Government for that important task.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister's response will be cold comfort to struggling families across the country. We need political leadership on this. The best way the energy companies can help consumers is by Government slapping a windfall tax on the hyper-normal profits of energy companies. It is perverse that there is evidence of massive profit-taking going on at this time when customers are really struggling to make ends meet.

The Minister met the EU Commissioner for energy today and knows that the European Commission has given the green light to EU member states to introduce a windfall tax, if that policy decision is taken, on the super-normal profits of energy companies. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, said in a parliamentary question reply to me in April that his Department was considering such a move and he referenced the fact that the officials of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, were engaged in that work as well. The line at this stage seems to have gone cold. That is not good enough. Italy slapped a 25% tax on energy utilities and Spain similarly. The Tory government in the UK overcame its opposition to a windfall tax on the super-normal profits of energy companies and introduced such a tax last week. Based on the figures the Min-

ister, Deputy Donohoe, has, we could raise €60 million in windfall tax on energy companies to bring 65,000 additional households into the fuel allowance net. That would be a very important move. Notwithstanding what the Minister says about the responsibility of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, we need the kind of political leadership that was shown in Italy and Spain.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy Nash is right, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and his Department have a key role. We are working closely together on a full range of different initiatives, the summer economic statement, the Tax Strategy Group this summer and the work to which I referred in engaging with the social partners. I think the right approach for us is to get a blend and mix of different initiatives that we will need. It is right to get those in place and to design them with real thought and precision, really targeting those who are most at risk and also looking at a range of other tax or other initiatives and measures that we can do to manage this crisis. We have shown on numerous occasions in the last year a willingness to act quickly. It is right for us in this process to do it as part of our budgetary process which has already started. We are active, working together to look at a whole range of options in that regard. We will deliver them in the budget package.

Deputy Ged Nash: Has the Minister ruled out a windfall tax in his discussions with the Minister for Finance? Deputy Ryan is the Minister with responsibility for energy. It is interesting that the €200 energy credit was very poorly targeted. I think everybody will agree with that. However, that did not cost the energy companies a red cent. That was derived from borrowing and tax revenue. The ESB, a citizen-owned company, posted €670 million in pretax profits and is paying a €126 million dividend to the Exchequer. It could be paying more and I think the Minister should demand that it pays more. The Irish arm of the company that operates the Corrib gas field, Vermillion Energy Ireland, posted more than Canadian \$1 billion in pretax profits last year. Do not let it off the hook, it needs to be in the sights of this Government. We cannot and should not rule out the prospect of a windfall tax on what are hyper-normal profits being posted by the energy companies. I repeat what I said earlier, it is absolutely perverse when people across this country are struggling to make ends meet, when we will have more people in energy poverty this year than we had last year, that these companies are making super-normal profits on the back of this crisis.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have been doing targeted measures as well as the likes of the energy credit or the reductions in VAT and excise which apply across the board. So many different Irish householders have been hit. There has also been a very significant increase in the fuel allowance and targeted measures such as the reduction in public transport fares which helped those on lower incomes in particular who often use public transport more. The combination of the energy credit and the fuel allowance increases for more than 300,000 families represents a €604 direct cash benefit in recent months. That was appropriate and right. I would not rule out any other measures. We will have to manage this through next autumn, and winter is going to be a particularly difficult period so I will work with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and look at whatever range of measures might be needed to help further.

National Broadband Plan

87. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the National Broadband Plan as regards design,

build, premises passed and connections made and any works done on catching up on Covid delays and delivering on an accelerated roll-out. [28792/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am asking for an update on the national broadband plan, including design, build, premises passed and connections made, and the particular works that need to be done to catch up on the dreadful Covid delays, and delivering on the accelerated roll-out we have spoken about many times before. We all know that this plan has been dogged by many issues. People really require delivery on Internet connectivity and the pressure is on us to ensure it is delivered.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The survey and design work for the new high-speed fibre broadband network under the national broadband plan is complete or ongoing by National Broadband Ireland, NBI, in every county in Ireland. Survey work feeds into detailed designs for each of the 227 deployment areas. I am advised by NBI that as at 20 May 2022, last month, over 327,600 premises have now been surveyed, more than 298,600 premises are designed or in design process, and more than 175,300 premises are under construction or complete across 26 counties, demonstrating that the project is reaching scale. I am further advised that almost 67,700 premises are now available to order or pre-order a high-speed broadband connection across 23 counties, with over 56,600 premises passed across 22 counties and available for immediate connection and almost 11,900 premises connected, demonstrating the project continues to gain momentum.

The Department has worked with NBI to agree an updated interim remedial plan, UIRP, which recalibrated the targets for 2022 to take account of the knock-on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and other delays to the programme. The revised target is 102,000 premises passed by the end of January next year. NBI is implementing a number of measures to help lessen the impact that delays have had on the roll-out. Such measures include increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month, bringing in additional NBI resources, earlier procurement of materials used in the build stages and bringing in additional subcontractors. The focus will continue to be on ensuring the National Broadband Ireland build programme is back on track and is gaining momentum month on month.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the fact that when we are talking about premises surveyed, premises designed or in design and premises under construction, the numbers are considerable. That means there is a significant amount of throughput. I am hardly on my own in still being particularly worried about that figure of 56,600 passed whereas we have had multiple targets to hit 60,000 at the end of January and the end of March. The plan is to reach 102,000 by the end of January next. We need to make sure that target is at least met. Beyond that, I will need information.

At one stage, we were talking about catch-up on the Covid delays over the next two years. It happened fairly quickly. Beyond that, we were talking about an acceleration of the seven-year project. Initially, we thought we could bring it down to five years. The conversation is now about six years. It is a matter of ensuring that happens and then the interaction between NBI and Eir in relation to delivering that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: First, I will give Deputy Ó Murchú further details, maybe on his own county, County Louth, to give an example of more precise figures. As of 29 April last, more than 7,800 premises had been surveyed in the county with over 4,000 premises under construction or complete, almost 3,200 premises available to order or pre-order, and almost

2,500 premises passed and available for immediate connection. That is real and immediate. It is there today, here and now.

I would agree with the Deputy's closing comment about the need for real co-ordination between Eir and NBI. It is critical to the success and acceleration of this project. I had a meeting with the chief executive and chairman of Eir recently. We made the case, and they readily agreed, that the flexible fast operation between their contractors and National Broadband Ireland and the dovetailing between those two organisations to get poles up, to get ducts cleared and to get the process really moving fast will be key. My Department, NBI and Eir are working on an ongoing basis to make sure that happens.

I have had ongoing experience with SIRO. It is an example of another similar project involving the large-scale deployment of fibre. In many of these projects, it takes time to get up to speed. It is typical in large complex infrastructure projects such as these that in the first year or two - we were hampered by Covid - it takes time to work out the mechanism or the physical way of deploying the fibre. That is what is happening in the NBI plan, as happened in other big infrastructure projects. I am confident we will deliver for the Irish people.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept, particularly in the beginning, that problems arose specific to the pandemic. We all know that in big infrastructural projects one gets better as one goes along. That is accepted, but it is a matter of ensuring that this happens.

I have had conversations with NBI. It is obviously looking for what it terms "a self-install product" which would give it a greater capacity in relation to delivering on part of the build. Its conversations, as far as I understand, with Eir are that Eir has increased its capacity to make sure it catches up with the Covid delays so that we can deliver a seven-year project but it will be insufficient to deliver on an acceleration of a year. I think there are legal issues. I am merely looking for an update on where that conversation is, on whether we can deliver the self-install product, on whether Eir will increase its capacity and on where we are on putting it on a contractual basis to ensure that we get delivery in six years. Where people have been delivered fibre, it is absolutely brilliant. It is about all those who are not connected.

I also welcome the fact ComReg is working on offering people alternatives in their areas if they will be waiting another four or five years.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is exactly right. ComReg is right to be looking at other innovative ways in which we can provide coverage. The more universal and the quicker we can get universal coverage the better. The Department, as I said, NBI and Eir are looking at a range of different ways in which we can accelerate and dovetail the work of the various organisations.

One of the other issues, which, coming out of Covid, is deeply frustrating, is that across so many sectors in the economy, it is hard to get contractors. It is hard to get many of the people one might need even for the most basic task, such as putting up poles or other contract equipment. Many of the same contractors that would be engaged in this project would also be engaged in other projects ongoing in the State, for instance, putting in renewable power and in retrofitting a range of different resources. One of the real issues is the scaling-up of our contracting capability, particularly in regard to physical infrastructure. That is one of the key issues that we are working on to try to accelerate and help.

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Human Rights

88. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has liaised with the ESB to ensure that a human rights assessment is carried out on the communities surrounding Colombian mines to ensure the protection of indigenous and local communities who have suffered as a consequence of these mines given that Ireland recommenced purchasing coal from Colombian mines. [28727/22]

Deputy Gary Gannon: My question pertains to the fact that the Government, through the ESB, is back purchasing coal from the Cerrejón mine in Colombia. My question is on whether we intend to carry out a human rights assessment on the indigenous and local communities surrounding that mine to see the impact the mine and the fossil fuel extraction around that location is having on their lives.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In 2020, the European Union imported almost 24% of its total energy needs from Russia, including 19% of its total coal needs. Ireland's largest power station, Moneypoint, in County Clare, which is owned and operated by the ESB, uses coal which has in recent times been sourced from Russia.

In April, the European Union adopted a fifth package of restrictive measures against Russia in response to Russia's illegal and unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine. The fifth package includes an import ban on all forms of Russian coal. This affects one quarter of all Russian coal exports amounting to an €8 billion loss of revenue per year for Russia.

Ireland fully supports this action banning that coal. It means that ESB - as well as other European users - is required to source coal for Moneypoint from alternative sources.

As the Deputy will appreciate, matters relating to human rights assessments being carried out on the communities surrounding Colombian mines to assure the protection of indigenous and local communities does not fall under my remit and I do not have a function in this regard.

In the medium term, Ireland must plan for an electricity system without coal-fired power. The National Energy Security Framework, published by the Government in April, sets out a single over-arching response to address Ireland's energy security needs in the context of the war in Ukraine. The framework includes a number of measures which will reduce our demand for coal, including reducing the demand for fossil fuels and replacing fossil fuels with renewables. Of particular importance will be aligning all elements of the planning system to accelerate renewables, reviewing the grid connection arrangements for renewables and expanding the role of microgeneration.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I do not accept that the Minister does not have a function when we take fossil fuel extractions and the impact it has on the community. I do not accept that from Deputy Eamon Ryan, as a Minister in government and in his position as the leader of the Green Party. Whatever these extractions happen, if they impact locally or globally, we all have a function in that regard, which is why I am raising it with the Minister today.

We are no longer taking coal from Russia for obvious reasons, which we all supported, but now we are taking it from Colombia instead. What is the standard that we apply? What if I told the Minister the only public service that seems to be around the Cerrejón mine is a large military base? What if I told him that communities, both indigenous and local, were forcibly removed from their land for the mine's extractions at the point of a gun? Does that standard apply? I am

asking for what human rights and indigenous rights activists are asking for, be they in Colombia or in the rest of the world. It is for the same standards to apply.

We accept the fact that at this particular point we still need to take our coal from somewhere but we have a responsibility to the communities that are impacted by that as we do so. What I am asking of the Minister is to accept the responsibility to engage with the ESB to ensure that we have a human rights assessment, that we do not leave the communities there suffering as they have been for more than 40 years, although it is 20 years since we have been taking our coal from there. We stopped in 2018 because of the human rights injustices that were happening at that particular site. We cannot simply go back now because of human rights injustices that are happening elsewhere and pretend to be blind to Colombia.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely understand. In fact, I visited Colombia a number of years ago on a climate exchange and I was absolutely aware of the range of different issues around the extractive industries in Colombia and the human rights and other elements of it.

As I said, the Department and I do not have a direct role but the Department of Foreign Affairs does. It has been following developments closely with regard to this mine and trying to support human rights defenders to support open civil society space and protection and promotion of fundamental rights and freedoms in Colombia.

11 o'clock

I understand personnel from our embassy in Bogotá have visited the regions of La Guajira, where the mine is located, and the mine itself. The embassy has also maintained regular contact with all relevant stakeholders in order to gain greater understanding of the circumstances and issues around the mine. It has also engaged directly with stakeholders through the EU delegation in Colombia.

This is the appropriate way of doing it and we are engaged in that process. We are in a particularly difficult position as we had to stop the importation of Russian coal. My understanding is that Moneypoint, where the coal is used, can only take certain types of coal, and that is why it has turned to this Colombian contract again. I absolutely agree that we must look at the human rights aspect. Our embassy in Bogotá is doing a very good job in that regard.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Several months ago I visited the Cerrejón mine with members of the Irish Embassy in Colombia and we saw for ourselves the impact that the mine and the potential expansion of that mine has on local communities. I was there and we saw the communities appeal to us as visitors and observers to take an interest in the fact that their lives and their children's lives have been grotesquely affected by our consuming of coal extracted from this mine. They also accept the mine will not close tomorrow. They have asked, however, that we ensure there can be a transition plan when Glencore removes itself from the industry.

They have asked that as we consume from their land, we should take an interest in it long after the coal has been burnt. They have asked for a human rights assessment and, if required, that we pay reparations to the communities and villages being destroyed by the demand for this coal. They accept we will need this coal for the next couple of years until we transition away from its use but they do not accept that they must suffer in the longer term because of that.

We have all campaigned on green issues and we all have a responsibility in this regard. Will the Irish Government and the Minister, as leader of the Green Party in the Government, commit

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to push for a human rights assessment and accept responsibility for what happens after the mine closes? We should not just pay Glencore or the Cerrejón mine but rather the communities that have been affected to ensure they can transition to a better life after we remove ourselves from this dependency.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We can all absolutely support that call for the promotion, support and protection of human rights. In its work the ESB plays a key role and it is working with other purchasers through what is known as the Bettercoal initiative, which is a global not-for-profit industry initiative established to promote the continuous improvement of corporate responsibility in the coal supply chain. The ESB has highlighted that the mine in question is subject to independent assessments and these are conducted in line with the Bettercoal code, which establishes principles and standards to manage and mitigate environmental and other risks.

I agree we can never step back from that work and we must continue to support the ESB and our embassy. I am glad the Deputy accompanied those staff in that visit because I am sure it had an impact on people knowing that although it is on the far side of the world, we stand up for those human rights.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I hope the Minister does not mind me saying that the Bettercoal initiative is industry-led. Those companies are benefiting from the industry and should not be allowed to dictate the conditions by which we combat its impact.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): We must move on.

Renewable Energy Generation

89. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way that he plans to address the high cost of renewable energy here in view of provisional renewable energy support scheme auction results; if he intends to establish a cross-government high-level task force to work with stakeholders in industry and State agencies with the aim of bringing forward policy recommendations within six months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28794/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I do not mind conceding time to Deputy Gannon if it is useful. What way does the Minister plan to address the high cost of renewable energy here in view of provisional renewable energy support scheme, RESS, 2 results? Does he intend to establish a high-level cross-government task force to work with stakeholders in industry and State agencies with the aim of bringing forward policy recommendations within six months?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, is one of the major Government policies to help deliver on the ambition in the Climate Action Plan 2021 of up to 80% renewable electricity by 2030. I recently announced the provisional results of the second RESS auction, which is expected to deliver an increase of nearly 20% in Ireland's renewable energy generation. Bid prices were higher than the first auction, owing mainly to international inflationary pressures in input costs. The International Energy Agency estimates the overall investment costs of new solar and onshore wind plants are from 15% to 25% higher than earlier in the year and last year. Some input costs to solar panels have quadrupled.

It is important to look at the total lifetime costs of technologies, rather than just auction

prices which can vary across countries depending on the scheme design. Renewable energy delivered under RESS 2 will pay back to consumers when wholesale electricity prices are high through the public service obligation levy and will not increase over time with inflation. This will provide significant protection for consumers for the duration of the scheme, especially in the context of the current and unprecedented volatility in gas prices.

Through the measures set out in the national energy security framework and the Climate Action Plan 2021, my Department is working across the Government to rapidly boost the supply of renewable energy generation. Renewable energy delivered under the RESS 2 auction will shield consumers from higher prices and reduce our dependency on imported fossil fuels in the context of the phasing out of Russian energy imports across the EU. As I have said, it the best way of keeping prices down, even while auction prices were higher than previously, as they are still significantly below the cost of the wholesale electricity market price or the gas alternatives. As we said earlier, they have gone through the roof.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister knows as well as I do that when these figures came out, there were wide eyes and people were whispering, such was the shock about them. We want to transition to renewables and they are cheaper the gas alternative but if the suggestion is we are going to move from, relatively speaking, super-high gas and electricity prices in Ireland to, relatively speaking, super-high renewables prices, we will have a major problem.

In the first instance the Minister must look at being aggressive at every pinch point and every factor contributing to those high costs. We support the call from the industry that a cross-government group could formulate policy recommendations. There are questions around grid costs and EirGrid's plan. There are also questions around planning and commercial rates. There are opportunities to reduce costs and the Government must heed that call, or else we will not be competitive on the international export markets that we want to create for hydrogen etc.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am very supportive of that kind of approach. I agree we should work collectively and see how we can reduce costs. I agree that planning is one of the factors, involving long timelines and uncertainty in the Irish planning system. The Attorney General is working now to update and modernise the 2020 planning Act, and that will be completed by the end of this year. That is critical.

I also agree that some of the real uncertainty that may cause some of the slightly higher prices, along with the high price of steel and silicon etc., relates to curtailment and constraints costs. We must give certainty in that with grid investment plans and the regulatory system. That will help reduce the price in further auctions. These are the first of five auctions, so it is an iterative process. I have spoken to developers and people involved with the business and the costs of steel and silicon are the primary reason the higher prices were seen. We must be careful in comparing other countries with ourselves. Some costs are included here that may not be in other auctions. I absolutely agree with the fundamental point made by the Deputy and am willing to work with other Deputies here to see what can be done to bring down prices.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome that but we need to see action. The Minister touched on one of the points, which relates to index-linking. Is the Minister going to reassess the position on that? It is something we do differently here than in other places. Is there an overall benefit and will that be reassessed?

In advance of budget negotiations, which I assume will get under way quite soon, there was

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a report from the Environmental Protection Agency yesterday and a report from the Climate Change Advisory Council at the back end of last year. They consistently point to the lack of delivery and implementation. Going into this budget cycle, will the Minister commit to additional resources for local government, as was mentioned at the climate committee this week? Will there be funding for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, EirGrid and An Bord Pleanála to increase capacity in these vital organisations which facilitate the delivery of the ambition of renewables?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: “Yes” is the answer and we are providing additional resources to the CRU, including staff, and EirGrid. They are less constrained. They have an income stream that enables them to hire the resources they need and to bring in outside expertise as well. Critically, An Bord Pleanála needs additional staff resources. It is hard to get people with the planning and other skills that are needed but it is absolutely central to all of this that we do so.

The particular concern of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, in its report published yesterday was in regard to agriculture and transport. On the energy side, there is increasing confidence that we will meet the targets because the whole world is moving in this direction. The need for energy security, the cost-of-living aspect and the climate reason will see us delivering on our targets.

On the design of the auctions, I have always favoured not including index-linking because, in truth, the cost of wind or sun is not going to change. The upfront capital cost is set and it is covered in any auction bid. One other variation we may look at in the future design of auctions is whether we are right to go with a technology-neutral approach where solar and wind are included in the one auction bid. We may look to see whether their separation into two elements might be a further way of reducing costs. That is one of the measures we may consider collectively.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): Before moving on, I appeal to speakers to stick to the time. There are Deputies in the Chamber hoping to get to their question. If everybody stays within the allocated time, we should get through as many questions as possible.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Energy Prices

90. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if Ireland’s electricity market is characterised by very limited interconnection, with gas having a strong influence on the price of electricity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28483/22]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Does Ireland’s electricity market have limited interconnection and does gas play a strong role in setting the price of electricity? I ask this question because those elements were the justification for an exemption given to Spain and Portugal from the EU rules in this regard. Now that the EU has extended that exemption to all member states, will the Department consider actions to stop gas from setting the price of all electricity and to reduce the overall cost of the intolerably high electricity bills people are facing?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My written response to this question is quite similar to one I gave to a previous question. If I may take that response as given, I will answer the Deputy's question more directly and provide some further information. First, electricity interconnection with other countries is a critical way of bringing down the price of electricity here and giving us security. As we move to very high renewable penetration on a European regional basis, I see the development of what has been called a European super grid, that is, a mesh network grid that also connects into offshore renewable assets, as a way of reducing the cost of developing the latter.

There is real progress in this regard. The Greenlink interconnector is under construction and will be delivered in a very short timeframe - within the next two years, as I understand it. The Celtic interconnector connecting Ireland and France has just been approved through the An Bord Pleanála process and we expect it go to construction and be delivered in a similarly timely manner. We should not stop at that. Indeed, we are looking at a whole range of different areas. One of the issues I discussed with the European Commissioner when I met her this morning was how such a mesh network grid could help to meet our needs.

There has been a wider debate at the European Council on this whole issue in terms of market design and whether the whole of Europe should go with the approach the Spanish, Italian and other governments have been advocating. The clear consensus and view at the European Council is not to take that approach. The view is that it would be seen as a potential dismantling of the market system and would fatally undermine investment, regulation and development of the solutions we need here and now. We need to do a massive scaling up, beyond compare with anything done before, in the development of interconnection infrastructure, including offshore wind, in particular, but also solar and other power supplies. We must continue to review the market system. However, there is a clear majority view at European Council level not to go down the Spanish and Italian route. The view is we need to see what measures can be taken to protect consumers but that we should not fundamentally dismantle the existing European regulatory and market system.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am still concerned by any argument that sees a benefit in high gas prices. Yes, what the Minister outlined will make it profitable to invest in renewables and to attract more companies to invest in renewable projects. However, it does not fit in with a just transition. Is it another market-led approach that will leave ordinary people shouldering the heaviest burden? People cannot see what the Minister is doing right here and now to reduce their huge electricity bills. They want action now, not in six months' or 12 months' time. Is it his view that people just have to bear these higher prices in order to attract more investors to renewable energy projects? Will he comment on the situation whereby gas prices are dictating electricity prices?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is not my view that we should just grin and bear it. Not at all. The key problem we have is that some 50% of our power generation, including the power needed to run the lights in this Chamber, is coming from gas generation, when averaged out over a year. There are short-term and immediate actions around social welfare, taxation and other measures, as we discussed, that are needed to help householders through this difficult period. However, there is a fundamental switch we need to make. The reason I do not support dismantling the investment, regulatory and market system we have is that this system is needed to invest in switching to alternatives. We will continue to need gas infrastructure and gas power generation, although not liquefied natural gas, LNG, in my view. We will need back-up gas power generation that uses less gas. Switching away from the use of gas is the critical way of protecting

householders. In both our offshore generation and our existing RESS, which I have just been discussing with Deputy O'Rourke, we have the mechanisms to do that. This will be the way of protecting Irish householders.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I accept there are issues with the approach taken by Spain and Portugal and that other approaches have been put forward, such as windfall taxes. However, the core issue remains the same, namely, that gas cannot be allowed to set the price for all electricity if, as the Taoiseach said on Tuesday, we are entering into a new era of high energy prices. I agree we need to go from 40% to 80% renewables in the next decade, both for climate reasons and for energy security. However, we cannot be in a situation where we have even higher levels of renewable electricity generation but gas continues to set the price. How high do gas prices have to go before concrete action is taken in this regard?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy referred to moving away completely from the market system and going with the Spanish approach. As I said, the European Council is not taking that approach. However, this does not mean we should not look at the market rules and mechanisms to see whether there are ways in which we can move away from gas being the defining price setter. We will work with the Commission and the Council to look at whatever the options are. At the moment, the fact gas is accounting for such a large percentage of our generation in Ireland, regardless of the European rules, means de facto it is setting the real cost to Irish consumers. The price is set by our high fossil fuel usage. We need to switch away from that. We will continue to review the market rules with the European Commission.

Energy Prices

91. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps his Department can take to ease the gas price increases that are being experienced by residents of an area in Dublin (details supplied), who, as a result of a district heating system, are paying commercial rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28541/22]

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: What steps can the Minister's Department take to ease the gas price increases that are being experienced by residents of Custom House Square, Dublin 1, who, as a result of a district heating system, are paying commercial rates?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I understand the development in question is heated by way of a local heating system, which is fuelled by natural gas. Gas and electricity retail markets in Ireland operate within a European regulatory regime, as we have just discussed, wherein those markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. I am acutely aware of the impact current, internationally influenced, energy price increases are having on people and families. For that reason, the Government has introduced a series of measures to try to alleviate the impact, particularly on lower-income households. Considerations in this regard will also encompass pre-existing district heating and local heating schemes already operating in Ireland.

Deputy Ó Murchú brought a similar issue in Louth to my attention, where a local heating system is powered by gas. I am aware of the development in the Deputy's constituency. There are only a small number of such systems, but they have been badly hit by the impact of very high wholesale gas market prices. Our Department, through the steering group, will examine measures to explore what ways we can assist such developments to get out of what is now a

high-priced system. It will not be an easy switch, but I am very much willing to investigate what policy levers we can seek to use in this regard.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am interested in the differentiation we are making between local heating systems and district heating systems. It is not one with which I am familiar. In the case of the situation in the Custom House Square, there is a gas-based district heating system operated by Frontline Energy. Those residents are paying four times the higher end of the rates available to residential customers. We are all talking about the cost of living now, but this is causing considerable strain. Deputy Ó Murchú raised this issue with the Minister as well. I believe it is impacting Carlinn Hall estate in Dundalk.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, it is.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: In both cases, residents are paying prices that are just through the roof. We are now into the summer months and, hopefully, people will be able to make choices to reduce their heating costs. I take the point that there is a steering group on the regulation of district heating systems. We are also, though, on a timeline here in respect of autumn and people then heading into months of high energy use. I flag this point to the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Absolutely. District heating is going to play an extremely important role in the decarbonisation of the heating sector. There are certain areas, especially where waste heat is available, where this approach will be the preferred solution compared to retrofitting or insulating buildings. It can have real advantages and offer protection for our country. There are slight variations and different forms of these systems. Local heating systems, such as the two in question here, and especially where a specific development is concerned, be that an apartment or housing development, usually consist of a shared heating system, typically with a management fee structure. District heating, as I see it being developed, is more designed on municipal lines across a whole range of different developments and is planned by municipal local authorities and energy companies to help to funnel waste heat to a variety of areas.

These local heating schemes, which exist across the world and are effective, do not tend to use gas as the preferred heating solution. Typically, these types of systems use woodchip biomass or other similar supplies of fuel. One of the things we might do in conjunction with the Deputies is look at their constituencies to explore if there might be ways in which alternative fuels might be used to try to get these developments out of paying expensive gas market prices.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I see the differentiation being made by the Minister. To be honest, I do not know enough about Carlinn Hall to say what the situation is there either way. It is incredibly important, however, that we get this right. I am glad there is a steering committee and I agree district heating must be a major source and option in respect of providing power. I very much hope to see the steering group examine options such as combined heat and power, CHP, systems. I know from a previous portion of my life that such systems work well and especially in tight urban areas, such as in my constituency with Custom House Square. Therefore, I welcome this development, but I again flag the importance of the timeline in respect of the autumn and of ensuring there is some intervention in this regard between now and the onset of those autumn months for these residents now experiencing huge costs. I also highlight the importance, reputationally, of ensuring we do not make the concept of district heating a problem for people. We must make it a good choice and the best choice.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We must deal with this issue of communal heating systems. I

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have spoken many times to the Minister previously about Carlinn Hall. In fairness to Deputy Hourigan, she got to the point that we have a slight break for the moment because of the time of year but that we must examine this issue now. The gas-fed nature of these systems must be dealt with under planning laws. This is an aberration that happened in Britain and Ireland. The laws have been changed in Britain. We need a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grant system that will deliver a change back to using other fuels, and perhaps biofuels of some sort. Equally, we must investigate mitigations, because people are under incredible pressure trying to pay large bills.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I endorse and echo Deputy Hourigan's comments. This is a matter we should be examining. Regarding district heating, we must get the planning right in this regard. Under the national planning framework, the population of our regional cities is set to increase by 60% in the next 20 years. We talk about the need to plan that increase in population around the provision of sustainable transport options, but we must also plan district heating systems. We must be co-locating industries that generate waste heat with residential developments to enable that waste heat to be provided to those residential areas.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We need to switch away from every possible use of gas. It will, though, have an interim role to play in a variety of areas. Regarding heating in buildings, and especially in new buildings, I agree with Deputy Leddin about the need to switch away from using gas connections as the future of heating and towards a range of other options, such as electric, biomass and other alternative sources. Codema, Dublin's energy agency, has done some good work in this area. My colleague, Ciarán Cuffe MEP, shared an interesting graphic from that agency on Twitter recently. It showed a map of the areas in Dublin, my city, where there is potential in this regard. We will have to do the same thing in every city and in every council area. I have been going out to discuss the local climate plans with members of councils across the country. One of the first things I say on such occasions is that as those councils work on their development plans they must explore where there is potential for district heating and where there is waste heat and also examine how we can design new residential communities which can avail of low-cost district heating systems and local heating solutions. Therefore, I agree with all three Deputies that this is the direction we must take.

Energy Policy

92. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if sectoral carbon budgets targets can be met if the State also supports the building of liquified natural gas terminals and if this is in line with current climate science; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28375/22]

Deputy Bríd Smith: This question is on the sectoral carbon budgets, but more in line with how these fit with the building of a liquified natural gas, LNG, terminal. It is clear from the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report this week that we have a serious problem in this regard. It stems not just from the failure to implement the Government's plan but from the Government's plan itself. Even if the sectoral carbon budgets are to be set at the high end of our ambitions, that will still leave us with a serious emissions gap. The problem is that we are not even hitting those targets. The Minister talks about doubling down on the efforts being made. We seem to be living in parallel universes in this regard, however, with talk of ambitions, efforts, strategies, plans and targets. Will the Minister make a statement on this matter?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 commits Ireland to a legally-binding target of a climate neutral economy no later than 2050 and a reduction in emissions of 51% by 2030, compared to 2018 levels. Following the process set out in the Act, the carbon budget programme proposed by the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, was approved by the Government on 21 February 2022, and subsequently adopted by the Oireachtas on 6 April 2022. This carbon budget programme comprises three successive five-year carbon budgets, namely, from 2021 to 2025, from 2026 to 2030 and from 2031 to 2035. Under the Act, as Minister, I must now prepare, within the limits of the agreed carbon budget programme, the maximum amount of greenhouse gas emissions, GHG, permitted in different sectors of the economy during a budget period, including in the electricity sector. Work on this is ongoing.

The Government's policy statement on importing fracked gas, which I understand was one part of the question the Deputy asked-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: It was LNG.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes, sorry, it was LNG. The Government's policy statement on the importing of fracked gas was approved by the Government and published in May 2021. The policy statement provides that, pending the outcome of a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems currently being carried out by my Department, it would not be appropriate for the development of any LNG terminals in Ireland to be permitted or proceeded with. This review is to be completed by later this year.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Therefore, pending the review where the energy security issue will be examined in light of all the hype around the war in Ukraine, we may, indeed, have an LNG terminal. I think there is a disconnect between what is happening and the rhetoric we are getting. The Government's inaction is clear on things like data centres in respect of their huge consumption of our energy. In this context, there is the strong possibility of an LNG terminal at Shannon. This is because there is ambivalence and ambiguity among all the party leaders, which is strongly reflected in a leaflet distributed around Shannon from New Fortress Energy and that quotes the three leaders of the Government parties in a favourable way. Now we find out that the Tánaiste will meet the billionaire, snake oil salesman, Wes Edens, to discuss the project at a meeting set up by an enthusiastic Fine Gael councillor, Mike Kennelly. What we have here is a coterie of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies pushing the siting of an LNG terminal in this area with utter disregard for the implications for the climate and our target ambitions.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): The Deputy really should not name people in the Chamber who are not present.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I am just stating a fact. The leaflet was signed by the very man, Wes Edens.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I heard the Tánaiste state in this House not too long ago, and I agree with him, that the future in regard to Shannon is in hydrogen. Let us consider Cork Harbour and the Shannon Estuary, where much of our heavy industry is located. It is where much of our electricity generation, oil refineries and pharmaceuticals are based, all of which will switch to hydrogen. It is also the location in which we will bring ashore the off-shore wind. That, through electrolysis converted to hydrogen, gives us the perfect, secure, indigenous, gas-alternative green hydrogen, not blue. The Shannon Estuary task force is undergoing its work at

present. I look forward to its views and will tell it that the correct and best investment for us is to switch to a green hydrogen alternative.

Anytime I talk to people with real expertise in the energy area, in thinking forward five to ten years and considering what the best investment is, they believe the hydrogen alternative is the way to go. Frans Timmermans, the Vice President of the European Commission, gave an important speech in recent weeks. He set out how ports, particularly those that develop hydrogen, could be the centre of the new economy. I believe that will be the future for both Cork and Shannon.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I understand the Minister's beliefs and I think he holds them sincerely, but they clash with the continued push from many Deputies and people outside this House, such as local councillors and other business interests, for the LNG terminal at Shannon. An Bord Pleanála will make a decision on that soon. I would argue that the board has been hugely compromised in recent weeks, according to information that has come out about board members. Let us call it for what it is. This will be money-grubbing based on the likely profits of Mr. Edens and his followers from this project. It is the same attitude King Louis XV of France had when he said *après moi, le déluge*, after me comes the deluge. In other words, it really does not matter what happens after this Government. We build an LNG terminal, make money from it now, and the supporters of more fossil fuel infrastructure will be delighted. Once the floods have receded, who will pick up the pieces? This will be a huge kick in the stomach to the climate movement, Fridays for Future movement and local campaigns against the siting of an LNG terminal.

Deputy David Stanton: I am a big supporter of green hydrogen, off-shore wind, biomass and so on. The faster we can move in that direction, the better. I also support Deputy Bríd Smith in that we should not burn anymore LNG or fossil fuels; rather we should be reducing them. However, we are dependent on a pipeline from Moffat. The Minister, Deputy McGrath, told me earlier this week that there is a contingency plan if there is a squeeze in that supply this winter. What is that contingency plan?

Deputy Brian Leddin: We are right to talk about data centres and LNG, we must manage the data centres, and I do not believe that we need to build any LNG infrastructure. The Minister is correct in that there is a better way forward. However, we should not ignore the fact that electricity generation accounts for just about 15% of our emissions. The real challenge with carbon emission is in transport and agriculture, which accounts for 60% of our emissions. If we continually talk about the effects of data centres and LNG while not talking about the impacts of transport and agriculture, we will not meet our carbon emission reduction targets.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In the provision of energy, we must get three things right. We must get the price right because we have to protect our householders. We must get the environment right and stop the planet from burning due to the local pollution that comes with a lot of fossil fuel use. We also must secure energy supply. I believe the development of hydrogen back-up power, storage and usage in power generation and in industries makes energy sense on all three criteria. To answer Deputy Stanton, our circumstances are different to other countries. We are not at risk, in the same way other countries are, because of the switching off of Russian gas. We are at risk of the higher prices because it is a fungible market. However, the real security risk for us is our reliance on fossil fuels, as was mentioned earlier. Those LNG ships, which people have said give security, have shown in the past year that they do not provide security. There is no guarantee. When the UK gas regulator found itself in the middle of the high-price

crisis, it inquired if it could get ships. No, it could not because they were going to Asia. They turned around in the Atlantic and moved the other way. There is no real security in that route, whereas with the hydrogen alternative, we know wind can be converted into hydrogen and stored locally. We are not dependent on anyone else. Everyone is now looking at that as the major investment development.

We are developing a hydrogen strategy that will be developed at the same time as the energy security review and the Shannon strategy. I believe all three will come up with a sound, basic, commonsense energy analysis. In the context of five to ten years from now, that is the investment we should make.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Do I get to come back in?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): Sorry Deputy, your time is up. You came in twice.

Energy Policy

93. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to some households in multi-unit complexes not receiving the full electricity credit, due to the fact that there is only one shared meter point reference number; if he will address this anomaly to ensure that each household benefits from the full payment support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28380/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Has the attention of the Minister been drawn to the fact that some households in multi-unit complexes have not received the full electricity credit because there is only one shared meter point reference number, MPRN, in the complex? Will he address this anomaly in order to ensure that each household benefits from the full payment support? This issue was raised during discussions on the relevant legislation. It has now become a reality for some people.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Electricity Costs (Domestic Electricity Accounts) Emergency Measures Act 2022 established a scheme for the making of a once-off electricity costs emergency benefit payment to each domestic electricity account in 2022 having regard to the exceptional rise in energy prices. The credit of €176.22, excluding VAT, which suppliers began applying in April, will be applied to remaining domestic electricity accounts through May and June and includes prepay meters.

The scheme is one important part of the measures the Government has had to introduce since the last budget to help people through this difficult high-price period. The scheme is operated by ESB Networks and electricity suppliers with oversight by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. To deliver such a widely applicable scheme in a tight timeframe, a single eligibility criterion of a meter point registration number with the credit being applied automatically to all domestic electricity accounts held with suppliers on 29 March was a necessary way of delivering it.

The majority of residential tenants will hold their own domestic electricity accounts and, therefore, will receive the credit directly. In other cases, there may be tenancy agreements in place where tenants pay their share of each bill. In such cases, they will benefit from the pay-

ment because the bill will be reduced by the amount of the credit.

As I understand it, as the Deputy mentioned, a small proportion may have other arrangements in place whereby electricity costs are part of the rental cost. In cases where tenants in rental accommodation have disputes relating to tenancies, including any terms relating to electricity payments, these may be referred to the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, for dispute resolution. That was the design from the start. In any such circumstances, tenants have a mechanism to seek a direction from the RTB and I encourage any such residents to do so. My understanding is that the vast majority of households, some 98%, have received the credit or it is due in their bill. If credit is left out, residents should contact the RTB where they will hopefully get satisfaction and receive the credit.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am not entirely sure that is the avenue but perhaps it is. This is an issue that has been raised by residents of multi-unit apartment blocks. In one case, my colleague, Deputy Mythen, a representative for Wexford, raised the issue about council apartments on George's Street in Wexford. In that case, Wexford County Council confirmed that because there is only one ESB MPRN in the property, the eight apartments have to share the €200 credit. That leaves each household with just €25 in support. Do we have an indication of how many households are affected in such a way? In this case, we have gone to the CRU and Wexford County Council. Is the Minister indicating that they have an opportunity? If they cannot go to the RTB, who should they go to?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The RTB is the best option, and the scheme was designed as such from the very start. In those cases, it is the local representatives working through the council who should make sure that they have it. There is a basic principle that every householder in the country, regardless of their tenancy arrangements, is due to get the credit. If there is a council, such as Wexford County Council, denying that right or Government intention, it is then a matter for the local representatives to perhaps bring the matter to the council management's attention. This is designed to go to the householder, be that a council tenant or whomever.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister for that. Obviously, people are experiencing huge frustration. In the cases to which I refer, they are getting €25 rather than €200. Elsewhere, people are getting multiple payments of €200. There is a deep inequity there. I do not think this is the only such example. I take it from this exchange that the spirit and intent is that the payment of €200 would be made to people who receive energy bills. If they can take the issue to their local authority, such as, for example, Wexford County Council, or the RTB, that is welcome.

Climate Change Policy

94. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress that is being made on sectoral carbon emissions limits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28374/22]

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will pay attention to the number of times I come in this time.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): I am watching the Deputy. I will be timing her when she speaks.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Okay. I will follow up on an earlier line of argument in the context of how we are falling short of our commitments in respect of our emissions reduction targets. Yesterday's EPA report shows that we are falling well short of what is in the climate action plan, which is law. Friends of the Earth issued a number of statements yesterday and did a very good job in pointing out many problems that exist, including that coal use has increased to meet growing electricity demand. That demand comes, in particular, data centres. Will the Minister make a statement on how we are going to reduce our emissions?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The main reason coal use increased is because the price of gas went up so high that coal came in earlier on the merit order. We are also in a very tight situation in terms of power generation, not only because of data centres but also as a result of a variety of other issues.

I attended and addressed at the EPA conference yesterday. I said that, critically, the response is in the establishment of six acceleration teams. One team would work on each of the following: the development of offshore wind; the development of sustainable mobility; the development of heating solutions, some of which were mentioned earlier; the acceleration of a just transition and the statutory commission; the communication of this climate issue; and, most importantly, the examination of how we develop and accelerate a land-use review that optimises matters in the context of rural development, decarbonisation, biodiversity restoration and the reduction of pollution.

We can and will meet these targets. We have to do it not just for the moral obligation and because we have national targets, but also because they are European targets. There are slight variations to different accounting rules, but the basic trend and direction are clear. The European and Irish economies are going green. That has to be done for security, health and environmental reasons, but also because such economies are more stable and represent a better investment. It will take time to ramp up. There are difficulties at local political level when making particular investment decisions. I refer, for example, to decisions relating to reallocating road space, the delivery of the sort of new forestry we need and a range of other matters.

Data centres will have to live within the climate limits. Everyone will. Every Department will have to go to the maximum of the ranges that we set out within the carbon budget this House discussed in the context of the sectoral targets. That is the scale of the collective leap needed. No one is exempt or will have an opt-out. No industry, data centres included, can see its future without living within those limits. I echo what Deputy Leddin said; that cannot be our only focus. We must address, as the EPA did yesterday, the real challenge we have in transport, agriculture and energy use. Transport and agriculture are the ones in respect of which we have to apply political pressure, attention and focus in order to facilitate a switch to a better way, which is what we can do.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The emphasis here is on what you choose to pick out of it. Friends of the Earth is right. The amount of energy from the national grid used by Data centres is absolutely shocking. It currently stands at around 14% and is set to rise to 30% by 2030. These kind of figures are unbelievable. The Minister seems to live in a fantastical world where, on the one hand, the Chair of the climate committee believes that we need more data centres if we have no more renewables but where, on the other, the problem is cows and cars. The Minister needs to look at the facts. There is a real problem in that we cannot attempt to reach our targets if we continue with this policy. New Fortress Energy is distributing leaflets around Shannon quoting the Minister and others. It thinks it can convince the population that it is doing the right thing.

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We are on a hiding to nothing because lots of people are going to make lots of profits out of this crisis. We have to call a halt to this. Let us be absolutely clear: responsibility for that rests on the Minister's shoulders. The policy of promoting data centres, on the one hand, and saying, "Nothing to see here, move on", on the other, is absolutely hypocritical.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No one is saying that. The Deputy should recognise that no new data centres have been approved since September 2020. I have been very clear. EirGrid and the CRU have both recognised that in terms of the development of that industry. Digital industries here employ more than 140,000 people and we need to hold onto those jobs. The industry recognises that, as EirGrid, the CRU and I, as Minister, have clearly stated, it has to live within the climate limits.

It is true that the scale of the change we need to make is very challenging. We have an immediate challenge in terms of a tight power supply. However, there are signs that people want to make this change and be part of the solution. They see it as a better way forward. It is happening in how we are retrofitting buildings. The SEAI plans introduced in February are starting to be delivered. Deputy O'Rourke and I disagreed on the numbers. For example, we have pretty much reached the goal of 400 warmer homes per month. I highlight pick numerous other examples whereby in transport, agriculture and energy, we are starting to make the switch. I think the Irish people want that. Our job is to focus on where the real challenge lies.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will sum matters up by saying that any attempt to develop an LNG terminal in this country will be met with the ire of the climate movement that the Minister once represented. I feel he will let the members of that movement down in vast numbers if this development goes ahead. It cannot just be down to an energy review and An Bord Pleanála; it has to be down to our national and global climate commitments and obligations. If we have power outages because of the data centres taking too much power from our national grid, then the policy we have adopted is insane. Again, responsibility in that regard rests on the Minister's shoulders. He is not representing the youth of this country who came out and marched in the thousands. When you look at what is happening across the globe, for example, in India, Africa and Australia, you can see that people are terrified by the knowledge of what is coming down the track. If sectoral budgets support data centre expansion and if the Minister leaves the renewable energy market to the private sector, we are going to fail. We have to be very clear: no LNG terminal, no private market in renewable energy and an end to the proliferation of data centres.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Denise Mitchell): I ask the Deputies to keep it brief. There are others who have been sitting in the House since the start and who are still waiting to ask their questions.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: As a long-time supporter of renewable energy and tapping into all resources in that regard, I would point out the necessity, as the Minister did, to ensure that we have a balanced approach and achieve one before we lose the other, otherwise we could find ourselves in the midst of a full energy shortage similar to those that have been experienced in other parts of the world.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Acting Chair for letting me in again. I recognise that I have spoken a few times. I just have to correct the claim that was made a few minutes ago that I, as Chair of the joint committee, believe we should have more data centres. I said that the proposed moratorium in law is a very blunt instrument. There is an effective moratorium in

place as it is. There has not been a data centre connection for the past two years. I just wanted to correct the record on that point. I thank the Acting Chairman.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Climate Action Plan 2021 sets out where we are going. The plan will be revised and assessed this autumn. We learn by doing. This will make for a better country. Waving fingers at or blaming people is no good. Doing this as a device of politics whereby someone is identified as being to blame or having responsibility does not work.

This country is well placed to make the leap. One of the reasons for this is that in recent years we have worked in a collaborative and collective way and recognised that where there are hard decisions to be made, we will make them because at least it is collective. They will be hard decisions, particularly, as I have said, in respect of transport and the need to reallocate road space. In truth, where I find real challenge is in that area.

There will also be hard decisions - but, I believe, the right ones - in the areas of agriculture, forestry and land use. We have a real issue with land use because the figures issued yesterday show that it is a further source of rather than a sink for carbon. That is also the case for industry. Certain industries are going to find it hard and will have to adapt and accommodate to the climate challenge. On this side of the House and in our party, we will show real leadership in standing up for what we have always stood up for, namely, ecological justice matched by social justice on the part of government, both local and central, and the Opposition, which has a role to play.

Wind Energy Generation

95. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will discuss the engagements his Department has had with the offshore wind sector; the potential for offshore wind that has been identified, particularly in Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28009/22]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister and I have spoken before about the enormous potential of Cork Harbour not only in employment terms but also in respect of the significant reduction in emissions because the offshore wind proposals in the long term can power homes for hundreds of thousands of people. In the first instance, there are issues to ensure that we get the benefit of this in regard to employment because there are skills shortages. What is the Department doing in conjunction with, for example, Skillnet Ireland and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to ensure that the shortages that exist in engineering and various other occupations can be filled in order that we can get the employment benefit from offshore wind in Cork?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The key measure for the development of offshore wind will be the acceleration task force that I mentioned in reply to the previous question. We have four or five key tasks to do in offshore renewables. We have to give the consent now for the first phase of the offshore wind projects, get them through planning - some of them will get through and others will not - and get them under contract in order to start construction. The first phase will be mainly on the east coast. When we start phase 2, we will need to get the consenting done in the next two and a half to three years. That phase will be moving south and west, together with further projects on the east coast. In response to this issue, we need to work out a hydrogen strategy in order that we can connect with what happens when energy is brought ashore. We

must also look at how we store and share information.

We must also get to phase 3 of the offshore development. This will be the enduring regime - the really big project with an enormous scale of power. As I said earlier, it is deepwater ports like Cork, Shannon and a number of others where we will have the biggest and best opportunities in this regard. This will be State-led and cannot be a Klondike-type regime where everyone runs out, stakes their claim and says “This is my patch and I will decide how it is developed”.

EirGrid will have a critical role in designing how we bring this energy ashore and how we ship it, share it and use it. We have to develop our ports such as Cork and elsewhere to facilitate the deployment of these first turbines.

We must also look at the grid, in particular in Dublin city, where there is a significant grid development. We need to bring the power ashore but we also need to heat our homes with heat pumps and power our cars by alternative means.

What we need to do, therefore, is look at the grid, our ports and the first three phases. The project acceleration team is critical because it will bring in different Departments and Government agencies, including the Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, because they have a critical role in ensuring that we match the deployment of the power with job opportunities, and that we also have the people to power it into the future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have previously put on record my view that Cork can be a world leader in this area because of the depth of the harbour and the potential for bigger projects, including floating offshore wind projects, to be located there.

The Minister spoke earlier about resourcing of An Bord Pleanála, the CRU and EirGrid. The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority is going to be vitally important in ensuring that we get the benefits in this regard. Does the Minister have a clear plan as to how these bodies are going to be adequately resourced, the number of staff they will need and for how long?

I recently attended at a wind energy conference, Our Offshore Renewable Energy Opportunity – Is Ireland Ready?, at the National Maritime College of Ireland in Cork. One of the points raised was that the seafood working group had not yet been convened. That was in February. Can the Minister indicate whether that working group has been convened, particularly as we need to avoid conflicts with those who are already using the sea in those areas?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My understanding is that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage recently announced the appointment of Captain Robert McCabe as chairperson of the seafood offshore renewable energy working group. This group will dovetail with this acceleration task force so, yes, it is starting its work.

The scale and the speed required are beyond compare. In the context of these deployment ports, Cork has a real potential advantage because it has deepwater berths where one needs at least a 10 m quayside and the quay needs to be able to hold a 1,500 tonne piece of metal or concrete, if it is floating facility. These must be delivered in the Port of Cork and elsewhere in the next three years in order that the construction at sea can start in 2026 or 2027. We must get these projects through planning and get investment in, all of which must be done while we are engaging in the auction process. I am confident that we will do it. Every other north-west European country is doing the same thing at massive scale.

One of the things I was discussing with the European Commissioner this morning is how we co-ordinate with other European countries and the UK in order that this massive expansion in cabling, shipping, steel and electrolyzers can be delivered in a co-ordinated way. That is key.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the Minister. I ask him again if there is a plan for the resourcing of those key bodies. How clear a signal can the Minister give to those who are planning offshore floating wind projects about the timeline for and scale of the auction? Those details are not in place as yet. Those involved need a clear signal.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: This phase will not include offshore floating wind projects, but phase 2 and phase 3 certainly will. As we go into the western waters, where it becomes deep very suddenly, these facilities will have to be floating in order for them to work. Close to shore, there is not as much depth. There is real development-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Can the Minister indicate approximately when this will happen?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The consents in the phase 2 process must be agreed in the next two and a half to three years. That is the timeline so that we meet our 5 GW target by the end of the decade.

The third phase, or the enduring regime, is where this really opens up. Returning to what we were discussing earlier, with many of these projects, the potential deployment of offshore renewables for hydrogen so storage, and so on, could be part of that regime. It is not just what goes out, but how we bring it ashore, store it and use it. That is where the ports have such a critical role to play. Frans Timmermans, Vice President of the European Commission, gave a very important speech in Rotterdam three weeks ago in which he set out the European vision for that. I am of the view that that vision would apply to Cork, Shannon and elsewhere.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. We have literally two minutes left for questions. If Deputy Burke would like to use one minute of this time, I will allow then one minute for the Minister to reply.

Renewable Energy Generation

96. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his Department's strategy towards expanding the possibility for more households to switch to sources of renewable energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27964/22]

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle very much. Can the Minister outline the strategy towards expanding the possibility of more households switching to renewable energy? Sufficient effort is not being made on that. Can the Minister outline his proposals in the context of making more information available and accessible to households across the country.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We launched a microgeneration support scheme in December. The scheme is targeting support for 380 MW of installed microgeneration capacity, to contribute to the target of up to 2.5 GW of solar renewables. The microgeneration support scheme domestic solar photovoltaic grant is available from the SEAI, with grant levels up to a maximum of €2,400 available.

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On 15 February, I signed the regulations that create an obligation on suppliers to offer the clean export guarantee tariff to new and existing micro and small-scale generators so that they will receive payment for excess renewable electricity they export to the grid, reflective of the market value. Some suppliers have already advertised their clean export guarantee tariff. Eligible microgenerators will start receiving tariff remuneration from 1 July next, depending on their billing cycle. Under the national energy security framework, the Government has also announced a fully funded scheme for medically vulnerable people with high electricity usage to install rooftop solar photovoltaic. That is a targeted measure there to where we help those at most risk of fuel poverty.

That is only the start of it and we need to go further into the farming and business communities with roof top solar provision on public, industrial and on-farm buildings and the price for that will also be coming through for that.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

12 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: An deireadh seachtaine seo caite, chonaic muid radhairc dhoch-reidte ag Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath nuair a bhí paisinéirí ag fanacht taobh amuigh den fhoirgneamh aerfoirt ar feadh uaireanta fada. Chaill níos mó ná 1,400 duine a n-eitiltí dá bharr. Ní raibh 1,400 ábalta a n-eitiltí a fháil. Ba náire náisiúnta é gur tharla a leithéid ag an deireadh seachtaine, ag déanamh dochair dár gclú agus ag cur isteach ar phleananna daoine a d'íoc as a gcuid eitiltí. Mar Aire Iompair, tá an Teachta Ryan freagrach as sin agus níor tugadh cuntas ar an mhéid a tharla go fóill. Lig Údarás Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath 1,000 jab chun bealaigh le bliain go leith. Cén teachtaireacht a chuireann sé amach don phobal mór nach bhfuil an Rialtas ábalta a chinntiú go bhfuil ár n-aerfoirt ábalta feidhmiú i gceart?

Last weekend we witnessed crazy scenes at Dublin Airport, as passengers were forced to wait for hours on end outside the terminal. More than 1,400 people missed flights because of the chaos. It was a national embarrassment that should never have happened. The Minister for Transport is responsible for transport and aviation but he has not been held to account for his role in this.

When the Dublin Airport Authority laid off 1,000 workers, Jerry Brennan of SIPTU told it that it will need to hire people because its queues will extend through the carparks. That is exactly what happened. The Government sanctioned this level of redundancy. Why did it do that? Everyone knew aviation would rebound once the pandemic subsidised, with pent up demand for international travel such as it is, except the Minister and the DAA.

While the DAA is responsible for operations at the airport, the Minister has responsibility for transport strategy. We constantly hear about the strategic importance of Dublin Airport given we live on a small island. It is a small island where connectivity to Europe and the rest of the world is so vital. It is a small island economy in which tourism is so important, supporting jobs, businesses and employment. It is crucial. In 2019 alone, almost 33 million passengers

travelled through the airport. Many were tourists, business passengers and people travelling on a well-earned holiday. What does it say to these people that the Government cannot get an international airport to function properly on its watch? What does it say to our tourism sector that relies on Dublin Airport to function properly and provide a service that tourists can depend on?

I am not convinced by what the DAA had to say yesterday. The wait times it set out are still too long. The idea that passengers would be triaged into some sort of holding areas is embarrassing. The fact that the airport plans to function with security staff levels at 70% of pre-pandemic levels is not acceptable. The Minister has been unable to give an assurance that we will not see scenes like we did last weekend. Frankly, he has been asleep at the wheel right throughout this process only to appear last weekend.

What does the Minister intend to do as Minister responsible for transport and aviation strategy if we witness scenes like we did last weekend happen? Can he say that heads will roll unless things are put right at the airport and passengers have speedy access through the airport and not suffer the indignity and chaos that we saw last weekend?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I have been meeting the aviation industry throughout, particularly in the Covid period. I met the board of the Dublin Airport Authority several months ago as well as the airlines and I meet all three airports regularly. It has been a difficult time. It was very difficult managing through Covid but we have absolutely been focused on what is in the interest of the Irish public and the travelling public to make sure they are served. They were not served last weekend. Everyone accepts that. It was totally unacceptable. Mistakes were made in rostering and in making sure there were enough people. It is inexcusable. It seriously let down the airport, the workers and the country. That is agreed. We have to rectify it. Myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, have been meeting the airport authorities every day to make sure they do put plans in place to make sure it does not happen again. They cannot guarantee that but we will make sure that everything is done to avoid it.

At a meeting this morning, they said that some 225 new staff are in place. It will take another three weeks with about an additional 30 staff a week as they come out of training. They committed this morning to hire and train a further 100 staff to make sure they have room for any eventuality so that what happened does not happen again. We in government will do whatever we can to support them to avoid that.

They made a mistake - I think it was in May 2020 - when the original decision was made to apply the redundancy scheme. Too many workers were let go. That is clear now but the critical thing the Irish public wants to know is that the additional staff will be put in place so that they can get through the airport without missing a flight and without being put through a triage system that requires them to stand outside the concourse. That is only there in case of emergencies. It will be introduced this weekend but only on a very small-scale basis. In the event that anyone is restricted from entering, they should not be standing outside in wet weather. That is not how airports can or should run.

Dublin Airport has a long history and is an excellent airport. The staff and management there have real skills in running airports and they need to get back to that. They can and will do that and the Irish public will not have to queue for two-and-a-half hours. However, it is important that we put out the message that the public arrives within the timelines suggested.

This morning it was slightly difficult because, again, a lot of people probably arrived too early. Following advice about when to arrive is the first thing we need to do. It will be managed and people will get through. I am confident about this weekend and the summer period. If it does not happen, we will have to take further measures. Nothing will be avoided to ensure Irish passengers do not have that uncertainty or huge stress. When you are meant to go on your holiday, starting with huge uncertainty over whether or not you will make it is the last thing we can tolerate or accept. We could spend the whole time scoring points or just talking down about people or kicking them in the process. The key thing is to make it work. That is what the workers and the management in Dublin Airport are committed to doing. It is not just those airports. It is happening in airports throughout the world. We see the neighbouring island's airports suffering the same but that does not excuse it. No one will make excuses. We will make sure it works and make sure the travelling public is not inconvenienced because that is what it expects.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: From what the Minister said, one would swear this happened out of the blue over the past couple of days. The Minister talked about further measures. He talked about how the DAA has committed today to another 100 staff being employed. Back in March, we had a problem. The travelling public would have expected that the Minister, who is responsible for transport and aviation and part of the Government that signed off on a redundancy package for 1,000 staff which has left that airport at a point at which we cannot guarantee that passengers will not miss their flights this weekend, would have taken a hands-on approach at that point. The fact the Minister is telling us today that the DAA is committing to employ in the future another 100 staff shows us that the Minister has not been dealing with this issue effectively and that he has been asleep at the wheel. Assurances were given last week that we would not see the chaotic scenes that happened at Dublin Airport and yet they materialised. As the Minister for Transport, if we see those scenes again, will he hold those individuals at DAA accountable? Will they continue to be in their positions? Will the Minister explain to the Irish public why his Government signed off on a redundancy package that was completely and utterly unacceptable?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It tried to cut too deep and the Irish public and tourism sector were left exposed as a result.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In March, we realised there was a problem and we engaged directly with the airport, which also recognised there was a problem. There was a particular problem coming into the Easter period. We engaged with the company, the European Commission and others to try to make sure that the security arrangements in the airport would allow us to get those passengers through. We got passengers through. It was not an ideal situation. No one wants to queue for an hour, let alone any longer, but people did not miss their flights. It was managed up to last Sunday. No one can excuse what happened last Sunday because that was intolerable. However, to describe the period from March to then as inactive is not true. Yes, it was slow and not as many people got through the training programme as quickly as had been expected. The airport was the first to admit that in the committee hearings yesterday, but there was no inactivity from anyone. No one was shirking the responsibility.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How many meetings did the Minister have with the DAA at that time?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not know how many dozen times I have met it over the past two

or three years.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Since March?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, meets it on a daily basis with my adviser and I come in on a regular basis to check and make sure what we are doing. I engaged with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and others to make sure that the whole of Government was involved. We were active. We were engaged.

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

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Everyone was let down at the weekend and we all accept the responsibility for that, myself included, but-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I also wish to raise the issue of Dublin Airport. Just two months into the pandemic, the DAA announced its redundancy programme. A gun-to-the-head programme was announced. It was obvious that some organisations used the pandemic as cover for a restructure and to reduce costs. The DAA falls into that category. Despite Mr. Phillips's insistence that the DAA was desperate to hire security staff, its initial recruitment guaranteed just 20 hours. People had to be available for 40 hours, but DAA guaranteed them only 20 hours, which has now increased to 30 hours, at €14.14 per hour. This is a job with significant responsibility. People have to be available over weekends. Shift premium is built into that €14.14 in these flexible contracts. Is it any wonder that the airport has a shortage of hundreds of staff, when it offers those kinds of terms? That has to be part of this discussion. That kind of flexibility is not sufficient to allow people to pay their rent or childcare and certainly not to have a second job.

After the Minister met with the DAA back in March, passengers were advised that they should be at the airport two hours in advance of short-haul flights and three hours in advance of long-haul flights. Today it is two and a half hours and three and a half hours, respectively. However, if a passenger wants to put a bag in, which most do, it is another hour. One is really talking about three and a half hours to four and a half hours, respectively.

What I would describe as a fiasco that has flown under the radar until now is the fact that Dublin Airport abysmally failed an EU security audit some time ago. Officials from the European Aviation Safety Agency tried to smuggle dangerous items such as firearms, knives and improvised explosives through the airport. Of the ten smuggling attempts, seven were successful. What has the Minister been told about the absolute guarantee of security? What evidence has the airport given the Minister?

I have no doubt the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, met with the DAA, but what did it tell the Minister? What was the discussion about? Was it a discussion about delays? Was it a discussion about recruitment? Did it talk to the Minister about the payroll problem? What was the substance of the issues that the Minister discussed with the DAA? What assurance did it give him? Did the DAA give them the evidence of how it would resolve these issues? What did it tell him about security and how it can guarantee that what happened with that security audit will not happen again?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We meet on a daily basis about what is happening in the airport on

a given day and the resource situation. This morning, there were 13 lanes open in terminal 1 and ten lanes open in terminal 2. In regard to the times, while not in the ordinary manner of the way an airport works, were nothing like the scenes that had been seen previously. We need to check on a daily basis to make sure that the public is not inconvenienced. That is the first and most important thing we discuss every day. It has been primarily about how we get in the staff and resources and deploy them. That has been the key issue, not just in this sector or airport, but in others. Training and making sure that those people are in place has been the key issue going right back to March.

As the Deputy said, the original redundancy occurred two years previously, in the first few months of the Covid pandemic. No one knew then what the future of aviation was. For long periods, there was real concerns as to whether our airlines and the airports would be able to survive. What we in government also discussed on an ongoing basis was the provision of supports for the airports, especially regional airports which were further and worse hit, but also Dublin Airport, to try to make sure we got through the crisis during which aviation disappeared for two years, in effect. The numbers went down.

Since that time in March, there has been razor-like focus on resources in terms of training, deployment and staffing. Up to last weekend, it was incredibly tight and it is still tight. The reason Dalton Phillips was not able to give cast-iron guarantees at the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications yesterday is that we are still in a very tight situation. There will be some 50,000 passengers today, 45,000 tomorrow, 49,000 on Sunday and 50,000 on Monday. The airport is counting those because the resources are not yet back. Those are pre-Covid passenger numbers and our resource numbers are not yet back. They will be very shortly, but in this tight intervening period, we talk about how we can make sure we manage through this difficult period. We will manage by throwing everything at it. We will throw staff at it and bring staff up from Cork. We will look at a range of different options and further options as needs be.

I will speak about the wider issue. The Deputy has a long record in discussing issues about working conditions, the nature of work practices and their ethics or ethos. We need to look at just-in-time contract arrangements for workers to create much more stable and certain working conditions in order that we hold on to people, do not have to employ more people and can get the best sort of working environment. Dublin Airport can be, has been and will be that. However, we need to look at the industry in a broader perspective with regard to practices of keeping a very tight margin and tight timelines.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: The Minister did not address the issue of security. Will he address that when he replies? This is an important job. Significant training is required. An issue that will be central to sustaining the airport in the future is the quality of the employment. What is being offered to people who have to be available over any 40 hours in a week? It could be a Sunday, a Tuesday or a Friday night. What kind of quality of life is that for €14 an hour? That has to be addressed with regard to the future sustainability of the airport.

There were other issues such as filthy toilets. If people have to wait for three and a half or four hours, they need places to sit, even in this chaotic time. That is unacceptable and it is often the last thing that people recall when leaving the island after having a holiday or doing business. Will the Minister address the security and job issue, please?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The point about security is well-made and publicly acknowledged. It shows that the training, getting the right people and the skilled nature of this work are very

real. One frustration in recent weeks has been from people who have gone through the training process but did not eventually get the job. When we were short and every number mattered, people wondered if we could just turn a blind eye, but we cannot do that with security. It is a highly-skilled, demanding and testing job. It is not just about the scanning job, although that is the critical pinch point, but also about how one interacts with the public. If they have to search someone, such as with a body search, that has to be done in a careful and experienced manner.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is not yellow pack.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No. That is why we cannot just turn around in an instant and say we will let everyone in. That does not work in aviation. Aviation is based on the most secure systems, with nothing being left to chance and with the highest protection levels. That is one reason it has been difficult for the airport to get the numbers in in the timelines we need it to.

Deputy Cathal Berry: Good afternoon to the Minister and colleagues. I raise a local issue with the Minister today. While it is primarily local, it has international significance. I had a pint in the South Pole Inn in Annascaul, County Kerry, a while back. It was Tom Crean's old pub. Last week, I got to visit the Shackleton Museum in Athy. I am not sure if the Minister has been there but I thoroughly recommend a visit. Many people do not appreciate the links that Kerry and Kildare have with the south Atlantic and with the Antarctic, in particular. It is on that basis that I raise the issue of the Antarctic Treaty with the Minister and specifically the fact that Ireland has yet to ratify it. It is an excellent treaty. Like all good treaties, it is very short. It is only seven pages long. It is written in plain English with no legalese. It is fully available on the Internet with just a single click. The essence of the treaty is noble. It wants to maintain the Antarctic for peaceful purposes only, to make sure that it remains a demilitarised zone, that there is no nuclear testing, that there is no disposal of nuclear waste, and that any research from scientific stations there is shared with other signatories to the treaty. It is unusual that Ireland is not involved in this. The treaty was established in 1959. It initially had 12 signatories and now has 53. Those 53 countries represent 80% of the planet's population.

Despite the great links that Ireland has with the Antarctic, there is no intent to sign up to this treaty that I am aware of. There has been a campaign for the last 20 years. I give credit to Senator Mark Wall, as well as to Senator Vincent Martin from the Minister's party, who have raised this in the past. There have been positive soundings and there has been no official resistance to it, but as yet there has been absolutely no delivery. Perhaps it is appropriate that Shackleton's ship was called the *Endurance*, because this campaign has displayed remarkable endurance in persevering and trying to wrestle with the bureaucracy to get this project over the line.

Has there been any process in advancing Ireland's ratification process of the Antarctic Treaty? Will the Minister kindly update the House? Is there any indication that the ratification process will be completed by the end of the year, as previously committed to?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy is right that there has been a long tradition in this country, because we are a small island nation, that we look out. Looking out on the world, why not look all the way, like Shackleton and others who engaged in that exploration and period of discovery and caught people's imagination? Today, the Antarctic is the subject of razor focus again because it is one location where the future of humanity on this planet will be decided. If the Antarctic ice sheets disappeared, the level of flooding would be beyond compare. Dublin would be gone. Annascaul might survive because it must be 50 m or 60 m up, but Tralee, Inch and Dingle would be under water. It is in all our interests to understand what is happening in

the farthest reaches of the world. I commend the Deputy on the question, because sometimes we need to think big and look beyond just the immediate issues to think of the real challenges facing us.

The Deputy mentioned some politicians who addressed this. When we were last in government, my colleague, Mary White, pushed for us to be a signatory of the Antarctic Treaty. The Department of Foreign Affairs and other Departments were commissioned to look at what was required. The answer was that there was a complex legislative issue. We left Government as time passed and no more progress was made. In this Government, last year, the Taoiseach wrote to the Minister for Foreign Affairs to ask the Department to lead work to re-examine the merits of signing the Antarctic Treaty. The Department of Foreign Affairs undertook to carry out an assessment to establish an up-to-date picture of what would be required in administrative policy and legislation. Its report was provided two months ago, in April. It outlines the complex legislative requirements. The Attorney General advised that what would seem a simple stroke of a pen has implications for the law that would apply to our citizens.

The great thing about the Antarctic Treaty is that it creates a safe neutral space, at a time when the world is a war. It is a space where it is agreed that the ordinary rules of international agreement are different. It is a place for sharing scientific knowledge, for prohibiting nuclear testing, for real environmental conservation, with rules relating to fishing, waste disposal, territorial claims and military activity. All of those require underpinning to make sure that we adhere to them. They are real commitments with real consequences. That report from the Department of Foreign Affairs was completed recently and is now being shared with other Departments with a view to bringing it to fruition. It will not be easy. It is a legislative and bureaucratic challenge, but we should overcome it. Particularly with the wider world today, Ireland thinking globally would be good.

Deputy Cathal Berry: I thank the Minister for his response. The treaty is only seven pages long but I accept that there are some bureaucratic hurdles. I am slightly reassured that there has been some progress. This year is important because it is the centenary of Ernest Shackleton's passing. The climate crisis and the war in Ukraine are still raging. I appreciate and welcome the fact that public funds are being pumped into the Shackleton Museum in Athy at the moment. There can be no better, more fitting or appropriate way of honouring Shackleton's memory than signing off and ratifying this treaty before the year's end. In summary, Ireland and the Irish have been actively involved in the discovery and exploration of the Antarctic. We should remain committed and be actively involved in its conservation and preservation.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I met one of Shackleton's relatives recently. She is an organic farmer who is doing advanced, interesting science, research and farming, using new, innovative techniques to reduce emissions and create high quality food. That spirit and capability lives on in this country. We need the Department of Foreign Affairs to work with the other Departments, which it has committed to, to untangle a short treaty which requires complex legislative changes. The Taoiseach has been in communication with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and all three parties in government are engaged in this. I very much take the Deputy's question here as an opportunity to press the issue and push for the signing of the treaty. When that happens, we might invite all the Shackletons and all others to come to witness it as recognition of that historic tradition we have.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In Ireland our circular economy rate is at 1.6% while in Europe it is at 11.3%, which certainly shows a shortfall. Today I want to talk about Shannon

Airport. Does it not make sense that the national aviation strategy be changed to address the under-capacity use of Shannon Airport and the overuse of Dublin? Where is the regional development strategy in all of this? Shannon Airport, gateway to the mid-west region, has the largest industrial base outside of Dublin. The region has transitioned to a low-carbon economy driven by industry. The airport has been voted best for customer experience and digital. It has the latest technology in its scanning system. Its infrastructure is suitable. It cuts down on flight emissions to be landing in Shannon rather than Dublin. It saves many people travelling by car, bus and train to Dublin where services are over-utilised and car parking is at an all-time premium cost. It supports a circular economy.

How can any Government justify having 87% of traffic through Dublin and 13% of all other traffic going through the other regional airports? The Minister comes in here day by day saying he wants to lower emissions yet we have thousands of cars parked in Dublin. People are travelling up from the country to get cheap flights from Dublin because the Government has allowed that airport expand from 31 million and now they want to go to 40 million. The Government starved every other airport around this country from business by letting a monopoly go in Dublin so they are priced out of the market. If I was to fly tomorrow morning the cheapest flight would be from Dublin. However, if I work in the cost of travelling to Dublin, the car parking charges which are three times dearer than any other airport in Ireland and the emissions, it costs more to fly from Dublin.

The Minister is supposed to support all of this country. He roars and shouts every day about emissions, emissions, emissions, yet he supports Dublin Airport for 87% of the traffic and the emissions from airlines flying out of Dublin also. The Minister is here for the whole country. Dispersal of traffic was mentioned to him in the convention centre over a year ago. Shannon Airport can cater for up to 4.5 million passengers. Cork can go to 5 million. However, the monopoly of all the businesses are shoved into Dublin. The Government asks people to go there from all over the country where there is no infrastructure and they have no choice but to drive to Dublin to get cheaper flights although it is costing them more. The Government takes the most out of it in tax.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy. I was going to bring it up when I was answering Deputies Doherty and Catherine Murphy earlier but I did not have time. Out of what has happened in Dublin Airport in the past few weeks and last Sunday in particular, we looked to see if we could bring people up from Shannon Airport to help in the immediate crisis but that was not possible. We need to look the other way to see if we could bring people down. I do not disagree with the Deputy. We have an imbalanced country. It is not just that all the flights are coming in and out of Dublin; all the roll-on, roll-off trucks are coming in and out of Dublin. Half the housing is in the greater Dublin region. We need better balanced regional development. There is no two ways about it. Particularly, we need the cities of Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick to grow as poles of attraction.

I agree with the Deputy about Shannon Airport having a real potential role in that. That is why right through this crisis, I did not just meet Dublin Airport but went down to Shannon Airport. I was very impressed with the management team there, I will be honest. I thought they were really top notch. It was not their fault that the airport numbers had not grown, particularly with Covid. It was no one's fault, it was Covid. Their numbers had not grown in the same way as those in Cork or Dublin, particularly Dublin. Part of what we need to look at now in aviation policy is whether we can do some rebalancing and take some of the pressure off Dublin Airport and give Shannon a lift.

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In the middle of the Covid crisis, we paid for a whole new scanning system in Shannon. Passengers going through Shannon do not have to take anything out of their bag, no little plastic bag for liquids, laptops and everything - none of that. They go straight the way through because it is state of the art. I met the head of security in Shannon Airport and he was telling me about how it is working. It works like a dream. People can get in and out in no time. We have to provide better connectivity, bus services immediately. I would love to build rail and we are looking at that. That is one of the first things I said about Shannon Airport. I do not disagree with the Deputy. Better balanced regional development is one of the things we need to do, and not just in aviation, but it is as good an example as any.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is great that the Minister and I agree on something for the first time since I have come up here. Tomorrow morning the Minister could divert flights from Dublin to Shannon and 3 million people would get out of this country with no delays. Some 2 million more people in Cork can be redeployed. The Minister was talking about bringing them up to Dublin but I am talking about taking them out of Dublin.

I have people from Dublin ringing me on a constant basis telling me the Government has destroyed their future and that of their children and grandchildren because it allowed Dublin to be overpopulated and they can no longer afford for their children to live there. They want the Minister to deploy everything back to the regional areas so all our families can live, if they want to live in Limerick or if they want to live in Dublin they are allowed do that. Dublin has been overpopulated for years and all the business has been shoved into Dublin. It is time it was dispersed around the country. Then the proper transport infrastructure would work on a business case basis because the population would be dispersed. We could have proper rail, bus and transport systems. The failure of the Government is that everything for years has been shoved into Dublin that needs to be dispersed around the country.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Dublin will still grow but the others need to grow faster. That is what the national planning framework says. It is not that it is going to do down Dublin. If everything is in Dublin, that is not good for Dublin because we will not be able to cope. It is in Dublin's interests that Limerick thrives. Shannon is very much connected to Limerick and has to be seen as part of the Limerick metropolitan area. The centre of Limerick, particularly, has to thrive.

Deputy Catherine Murphy asked earlier about what we talk about at meetings. One of the things we were discussing in the past week is whether we could do exactly as the Deputy suggests. Could we not just divert flights down? To be honest, it has great complexities and difficulties and it would not work. We would have people coming in to the country who may be going to Dublin and have already booked a flight. If we just switch the flight we will cause significant disruption and difficulty in that regard. In looking at this over the last week after the difficulties we had last Sunday, there was not that easy solution. Some other airports have done it in the UK and in Frankfurt as I recall. It tends to be done on a voluntary basis from the airlines if they see they can do it in a way that does not disrupt passengers. We cannot do it unilaterally. It is difficult enough having to queue but if people are told they are arriving somewhere they did not expect to go to, that would present difficulties. It is not an immediate solution but the longer-term solution is to look for better balanced regional development, I agree.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is the Green Party Minister responsible for transport. We have another Green Party Minister responsible for tourism. Bruce Springsteen is coming to town next year to play three nights at the RDS. So out of control have hotel prices become that a caller, Stephen, from the west called in to Ocean FM today to explain that the cost to see Bruce Springsteen and to stay in Dublin for a night was so high that he looked at alternatives. He found it is €200 cheaper for the concert ticket, the flight and a night in Rome than to travel up the road to Dublin and stay a night in a hotel here after the concert. Stephen and his friends are flying off to Rome to see Bruce Springsteen in the Circus Maximus instead of the RDS, replacing one circus with another. We have a Minister who wants people to travel less while the accommodation crisis in the city is making people travel more. We could not make this up. I am going to ask the Minister again as I have been doing for weeks now what the Government is going to do about the rip-off hotel prices that are being charged in this city.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Minister going to reply in Italian?

Minister for Transport(Deputy Eamon Ryan): No, I cannot reply in Italian.

It is a real issue. It is not good for Dublin or for anyone. What is happening has to stop. We have to find less expensive ways. It is not an easy challenge but the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, will work on it. The Tánaiste and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment also have a role. Tourism is one of the most important industries in the country. It brings some €6 billion into the country every year. It is not as much as we spend abroad, mind you, but it is still an important industry. I worked in tourism and noted that, as with many industries, it works well when there is collaboration. It works where industry groups come together to say we cannot have prices at that level, even if it means, obviously, the industry is hugely profitable and it is very tempting, because in the long run it will kill the industry. That has to stop.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On Tuesday, the Labour Party called for an urgent debate this week on special education, given the mounting issues in the area. We are very disappointed that the Government did not support the proposal put forward by my colleague Deputy Ó Ríordáin to amend the Order of Business to have the debate this week. We are glad it is being scheduled for two weeks' time but the reality is that every week counts for children with autism and their parents. We are very deeply concerned that the right to an education is not being vindicated for many children, including the almost 270 with autism who are without an appropriate school place for this coming September. We are concerned that the Government is simply not accord-ing this the urgent priority it requires. The Government is not a bystander in this, yet we heard a proposal to introduce so-called special educational needs centres, which apparently has now been jettisoned. We are hearing about delays in assessments for children and in allocation of special needs assistants, so we believe the Government priorities are not sufficiently urgently targeted. What emergency measures will be introduced to give relief to parents and, most im-portant, children?

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

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Every Deputy in this House has an interest in this subject and every party has a commitment to do what it can for young people with autism or on the spectrum. As recently as Tuesday's Cabinet meeting, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Re-search, Innovation and Science, Deputy Simon Harris, introduced significant new legislative measures regarding autistic people in universities. I have to be careful because I have a special interest. I had a son in a special educational needs centre school. It was brilliant. Some people

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probably need that sort of special education. We cannot mainstream everyone. There will be occasions when we will need special schools for those with autism. I know these schools. They are doing an incredible job; that is my personal experience. However, we also need mainstream schools. The Deputy and I know this from our constituency more than any others. The problem is worse in Dublin 2, 4 and 6, and perhaps Dublin 15, than elsewhere but it does not belong to any one party or group. There has been a massive increase in expenditure.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is still not enough, particularly in education centres. From personal experience, I believe the connection between the health and education systems is poor in this area.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time. If we do not co-operate, I will not be able to facilitate the other Members. We should try to remember that.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, concluded there is a massive gap between the target of cutting emissions by 51% by 2030 and the actions needed to deliver on it. Even in the unlikely event that every measure in the climate policy and climate action plan is acted upon, emissions will fall by only 28% by 2030, just over half of this supposedly legally binding target. Let us be clear: even if all the Minister's current plans are successful, they will still result in only half of what is required. The next eight years are the most significant if we are to prevent the worst impacts of climate change and give future generations some hope, but now we learn the Minister's plans are wholly inadequate. It is clear that the climate action plan and carbon budgets need to be changed radically. Is the Minister willing to do this? More important, are his partners in government willing to take the necessary action?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I believe they are. We do not have a choice. The EPA report referred to European measures. These differ slightly from those in our climate action plan, which is our national plan, but they are analogous. Particularly with the increased ambition in Europe, and because of REPowerEU and the Fit for 55 legislation, there is not much of a difference now. If we do not do this, we will face fines, miss out on the new economies that are developing and face reputational damage. Also, there will be a missed opportunity. The EPA said that we absolutely need to do more, but it also said there is an opportunity. It is important that we frame it in that way because if we always frame it as negative, a cost and burden, or if we focus on any one sector or blame certain people, we will miss the boat or what we need to do. There are additional things we could do. Earlier, during questions on the climate, district heating was raised. That is one of the areas where we could really-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister will have to avail of an opportunity later. We are way over time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Some of our most vulnerable young people in child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, are being thrown off a cliff when they reach the age of 18. I have a letter in front of me from a mother who is terrified for her daughter, who was admitted in May to an adolescent mental health facility for six weeks of residential treatment but who is being thrown out before it is complete because her 18th birthday falls before the completion date. She is now absolutely terrified of going into an adult unit, where, as the Minister knows, there is no upper age limit. She is scared and has a history of self-harm. Her life is in danger. The mother says she is fighting for her child's life. She has been badly let

down over the years by CAMHS and so on, so I am asking for urgent intervention in this case. I will not mention the name here. Something has to be done so that people, when they reach 18, will not be thrown over a cliff in child and mental health services.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this important issue. As he knows, since I became the Minister of State responsible for mental health, we have had a new vision – Sharing the Vision – and a strategy. We have a national implementation monitoring committee to ensure the vision is realised. As part of this, I have tasked a subcommittee in CAMHS to investigate exactly what the Deputy is talking about, namely the ageing out of people at 18. In a case like the one mentioned or that of someone with an eating disorder in the care of CAMHS for three or four years, it is very problematic to be aged out at 18. Obviously, it is a really serious time in the individual’s life. I think the case mentioned has been brought to my attention yesterday, but the Deputy might send me the details. I assume it is the same case because it sounds similar. I have already made a representation on it this morning, but I will be happy to discuss it with the Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to raise with the Minister a number of issues concerning children with special needs. I have been contacted by very frustrated and upset parents of children with special needs in my constituency, Laois–Offaly. There is currently no dedicated special educational needs organiser. We always had a number of special educational needs organisers in Laois-Offaly. To the best of my knowledge, there were at least two, because I contacted them over the years. It is shameful that this Government talks about supporting children with special needs. It is able to talk the talk but unfortunately cannot walk the walk. I am asking the Government to take urgent action to ensure that Laois–Offaly has a dedicated special educational needs organiser in place to assist families and schools that are trying to make sure children with special educational needs are provided for. What is happening is shameful. Also, we need special needs assistants. There is a crisis associated with their provision. I ask for this to be looked at. Children with special educational needs are being failed in Laois–Offaly and it is now time for urgent action.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I absolutely agree. I lauded some aspects of the system earlier but there is an issue, as I had started to say, particularly regarding the connection between the health and education systems. The special educational needs organisers and National Council for Special Education have a particular role in this regard. The Deputy is right that the role of the special educational needs organiser is critical. I did not realise there is none in Offaly, as she stated.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Or Laois

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Or Portlaoise. I will contact the relevant Minister to see if something can be done about that.

Deputy Michael McNamara: For people who lived in or near the towns on the old Limerick–Dublin road, including Nenagh, Roscrea, Cloughjordan, Birdhill, Castleconnell, O’Brien’s Bridge and Killaloe, the M7 was a godsend. They can now commute to Dublin in a reasonable period. However, we want to move people off the motorway and onto the trains. The direct line to Limerick, on which all trains going directly to Limerick went previously, is now barely served. There is a speed limit of 20 miles per hour on parts. In Ballybrophy station, which is great in the morning, there are only two trains in the afternoon. As Minister for Transport, will the Minister tell me when we are going to upgrade that line? We see the difficulties with the “all planes go to Dublin Airport” approach. At the moment, all trains go to Limerick Junction

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and there are vast swathes of the country that are just not served by a train service. People want to get the train. As Minister for Transport, what is Deputy Eamon Ryan going to do about that and when?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As it happens, that is true. I took the train to Cloughjordan on Saturday and I wanted to come back on Sunday and-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: The times.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes. I had to get a bus to Roscrea and then switch to a minibus for the final leg. It was a lovely trip and great people but we had to take buses because the line was being upgraded. We have just spent €6 million on upgrading the track, which is the first thing we need to do to be able to get the speeds up. The reason the speeds were low was the track quality, so we put the money into the track.

We were talking about better balanced regional development and I made the point about Limerick needing to thrive. Limerick can thrive on the rail lines that lead into it. That Ballybrophy line can be a commuting line or shopping line into Limerick, as well as improving the service for people coming down from Dublin. Let us forget about Dublin and think about the south west and that region. If we have really good metropolitan commuting services from places like Cloughjordan, Nenagh or even Ballybrophy and Roscrea into Limerick-----

Deputy Michael McNamara: Or Adare.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Adare, for sure.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is up. I call Deputy Higgins.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am a member of the special committee that was established to make recommendations on legislating for international surrogacy. We are working hard to a really tight timeframe to make that happen. In our committee room, stories have been shared and tears have been shed. We have heard from legal experts, international experts, researchers, psychologists and medics, and we have heard the extremely personal stories of families who are family because of surrogacy, of children, now adults, who were born through surrogacy and of women who have given the gift of life to other families. Yesterday, however, those stories, those tears, that hard work and those expert witnesses were all undermined by a single Seanad contribution by the Minister for Health. Can the Minister, on the record of the Dáil, confirm the Government's commitment to legislating for international surrogacy?

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): First, I recognise the really important work that has been done by the Deputy and her colleagues on that committee and the hugely significant testimony that has come in from so many experts, but particularly from families in terms of what surrogacy means to them. As the Deputy knows, the reason this committee was established was because the Government identified that this issue is critical, it is complicated and we want to get the legislation right. It is the understanding of the Government, and the reason the committee was established, that this committee would bring forward Committee Stage amendments that would be able to be added to the assisted human reproduction Bill that is moving forward and be able to resolve this issue. That is my understanding about how things are proceeding. It was on that understanding that the committee was formed.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I want to ask the Minister about the public electric vehicle, EV, charging network. I am aware there is funding for local authorities to install EV charging points and there is a public consultation going on at the moment. However, there seems to be some delay in the roll-out. I am not sure if the difficulty is at local authority level or in trying to get an ESB connection. Most of us would agree that the best place to charge an EV is at home or at the workplace, but we need a public network. Will the Minister outline when the public consultation process will be published?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will have to come back to the Deputy directly as I do not have a date. I do not believe the ESB is short of ambition. Its recent new strategic plan includes real ambition in terms of the roll-out of charging points for electric vehicles and, actually, it was one of the first companies to have a national network, so we were ahead of the game on that. This is recognised, and it was commissioned by the London Transport Authority to roll out its network. I do not believe the ESB is lacking but it is important it gets funding and has the ability to invest in this. It is not just the ESB and there is a whole range of other providers across the country, as people with electrical vehicles will know. However, we need to scale it up. Obviously, the supply of electric vehicles at the moment is incredibly tight because of the shortage of chips and supply chain problems coming out of Covid, but that will be resolved some time in the near future. Once that happens, we will see a massive expansion in the roll-out of electric vehicles and our network has to be ready for that. The local authorities have to step up too.

Deputy Mark Ward: At the committee on children it was revealed that 20 children under the care of Tusla accessed south Kerry's child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, during the period covered by the Maskey report. Of these, six children suffered harm or significant harm, that is, 30% of all children under the care of the State who accessed CAMHS in south Kerry were placed at some form of harm. The Department of Health has revealed to me that it had no engagement with Tusla on this until it received a parliamentary question from me. I was further advised that the statutory and operational responsibility for the delivery of children's welfare is a matter for Tusla, whereas CAMHS is managed by the HSE and is a separate entity. Nobody seems to be talking to each other. What plans has the Government in place to address the deficiencies between the two arms of the State that failed these vulnerable children in order to stop these vulnerable children falling through the cracks?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: It is an important question. Deputy Ward and other Deputies have raised legitimate points about the interaction with vulnerable children and, in particular, children who are in State care. When we have different State agencies looking after them, silos can sometimes build up. I have dealt with that in respect of Tusla and the HSE in the context of children with significant needs who are in long-term care. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I will engage on this issue and will get back to the committee on children. Maybe it is something we can take further within the confines of the committee on children.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I want to raise the issue of the extension of the youth travel card to commercial operators. Students and young adults who use private bus operators are at a severe disadvantage to those who are able to avail of the 20% discount on public transport and the 50% discount on the youth travel card. This is very significant for the thousands of young people who rely on private operators every day. Clarity will allow people to make decisions based on fair prices about future commuting plans in this cost of living crisis. Introducing one discount for public and not private operators is not open competition. I understand the National Transport Authority has established a joint working group with commercial bus operators and the Department of Transport to consider options and develop a plan to implement a youth adult

card for commercial bus operators. It is vital that the Government provides clarity on this issue as soon as possible by confirming an introduction date for the discount on private transport.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Absolutely. There is no intention of discriminating between commercial bus operators and public bus operators on either the 20% or the 50% discount that we have introduced. There were real technical difficulties on the 20% cut in particular, given we do not regulate fares and we do not monitor cash or other systems. On the youth travel card and the 50% reduction, because of that working group we are on the path to apply it across all bus operators, including commercial operators. While I do not have a specific timeline, we are looking to deliver it as soon as possible. It is absolutely right that it should go to all bus operators.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Chuir mise ceist Dála scríofa síos le haghaidh freagra ar 10 Bealtaine i nGaeilge agus ní bhfuair mé freagra i nGaeilge fós ar an gceist sin. B'fhéidir go dtógfaidh an tAire an cheist sin anois. Ceist Uimh. 875 a bhí ann agus bhí sí curtha ag an Roinn Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara.

The programme for Government commits to implementing the Galway transport strategy, which was published as recently as 2016. My understanding is that the Minister has organised a review of this strategy before it is even implemented. First, can the Minister outline why it was imperative that we would have a review of a strategy that was of recent gestation? Second, is the implementation of the existing strategy put on hold while we review this strategy and when will the review be completed?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Those reviews are an ordinary statutory process. For example, we have just come through a review in Dublin. Those strategies tend to be reviewed every four years. That is a normal occurrence and it does not put on hold any existing plans within existing strategy. It is a normal process of assessing the latest information, including the census and other data material. I was in Galway recently to meet the local county council and city council. There is a recognition that of all our five cities, Galway is the one with the greatest transport problems and the greatest urgency. One of the things I said to Galway City Council was that it needs to come back on this and that we need acceleration projects that we can deliver in the next three years.

I o'clock

Whatever about the big projects and long-term futures, the here and now is what is important to Galway. Advancing such things as BusConnects, active travel and other projects which we can deliver in a three-year time period is what I am keen to really push.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I wish to raise the pay and terms and conditions of school caretakers. While I welcome the deal that was done in March for school secretaries, which was overdue and well-deserved, caretakers are not included in this deal. I met a caretaker recently who has worked in his local national school for 30 years. I hope the Minister will agree and acknowledge that caretakers do invaluable work in our schools along with school secretaries. Schools would not function without either. It is important that we do not replace one two-tier system with another in regard to caretakers and have a difference between caretakers and school secretaries within our school communities. We need to see a similar deal for caretakers throughout the State.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree. I am not sure what legislative or other mechanism the Department of Education has to make sure that takes place. I will pass on Deputy Kerrane's

comment to the Minister for Education to make sure it is heard.

Deputy Colm Burke: There is a report in the *Irish Examiner* this morning that the Glashaboy flood relief scheme may not proceed, that the current contractor is running into difficulties due to increased costs and that there is no provision under the contracts offered about price variation. What action will be taken to resolve this issue in order that we do not have to go through the entire tender process again and delay it for another 12 months? Will the Minister clarify what the relevant Department is doing on this matter?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will ask the relevant Department to contact the Deputy. If I understand correctly, this project was tendered and contracted, which raises the question as to whether it might qualify for the variation the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, brought in recently.

Deputy Colm Burke: The contract is not signed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If the contract is not signed, that is the reason. The Office of Public Works, which is the contracting authority, must manage its resource allocations within its budget timelines. However I will pass the issue on to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan----

Deputy Colm Burke: The concern is about the 12-month delay. It needs to be prioritised.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I understand fully. I will discuss it with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan.

Deputy Gino Kenny: My questions in on the pandemic recognition payment. That payment, which everybody welcomed, was to recognise the sacrifice that healthcare workers made during the pandemic. Thus far only two hospitals have paid the bonus to healthcare workers. It is incredible that this situation is continuing. Who is getting the payment is quite arbitrary and there is much frustration in regard to front-line workers. Will the Minister address the issue as to when workers will get this payment, hopefully within the next couple of weeks?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will have to come back to the Deputy on that. Everyone, including the Government, is frustrated because this is undermining its intention, which was to be a recognition. It was not meant to be stressful or disappointing. I will contact the Minister for Health directly and ask him to come back to the Deputy with the timelines. It has to be imminent because it has been far too long delayed.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I wish to raise the issue of means-testing carer's allowance for the parents of incapacitated children. A case has been brought to my attention where the mother of a nine-year-old girl who cannot walk, talk or eat gave up her job to look after her child full-time. This woman left a very well-paying job to care for her daughter. The means test for carer's allowance is now affording her €46 per week for what is a 24-7 caring role. The family's mortgage repayments, health insurance, increasing expenses and the cost of heating the home for a child with this level of needs were not considered. This woman works 24-7 to take care of her child. This is without mentioning the additional costs on the family of caring for a child with complex needs. On top of this, the State is being saved thousands of euro per week by the mother staying at home to care for her daughter rather than leaving it to the State to pay for her care full-time. I believe this injustice needs to be tackled immediately and means-testing should not apply for the care of incapacitated children.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for the question. There has been some relevant change in this area very recently. Just this week, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, announced a change in the capital disregards in the means-testing for carer's allowance. It has been increased from €20,000 to €50,000. That may or may not impact this case but if Deputy Cahill contacts me I will be glad to pass on the details of that particular case to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Ireland seems to have emerged as a country noted for its waiting lists, including for hospital services, health services, mental health services, transport and tourism services and airports. At every juncture, there seems to be an emergence of waiting lists to a greater extent. In that context, will the Minister encourage the Government in general to identify the most acute waiting lists in order to address them as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is hard to pick but some of the cases we have heard here today, in particular parents or families with someone who needs healthcare immediately must be at the top of any waiting list, particularly if it is a disability. Some of the examples we heard earlier about children with disabilities and so on, would come to mind first. What might help us in that regard is if some of the risk assessment processes within the State could be adapted to performance measurement assessment within the State to ascertain where are the worst delays. An independent regular statutory review of the performance of the State in delivery of services might be good place to start.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I wish to ask about the situation on valproate. I understand it is intended to bring a memorandum to Government within the next few weeks to seek an approval into the non-statutory inquiry that is required there. It is important that the terms of reference are agreed by the families who have fought for decades to get the truth of who knew what, when they knew it and why nobody did anything about it. Without that line being in the terms of reference that enables the chair to recommend remedial action be taken, the inquiry will be of no use to anybody. This is critically important. Will the Minister meet representatives of Organisation Anticonvulsant Syndromes Ireland, OACS Ireland, and the families to agree the terms of reference before this goes to Government?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I certainly will ask the Minister whether he would be willing to do that and meet the families in the way the Deputy suggests.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: I want to make a point about Dealgan House, where 23 people died during Covid-19. In January, the Taoiseach promised me in the Dáil that the Government or the Department of Health was examining options to respect and meet the needs of the families and their concerns about these deaths. Since then we have heard absolutely nothing. It is a disgrace that the Department of Health is refusing to act in this matter. I challenge the Minister, if these were children we would have our inquiry. Is it because they are older citizens that we hear nothing from the Department?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will pass those comments along when I am passing on Deputy Conway-Walsh's request. The Deputy's comments and request are absolutely heartfelt, sincere and true and I am sure they reflect the views of the families of those who died.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: On Tuesday many of us stood outside Leinster House to witness demonstrations on the mental health crisis in the Traveller community. I wish to raise the issue of unemployment. I was shocked to hear that 86% of people within the Traveller community

are unemployed. For example, 17 people took a Safe Pass course of whom 16 got jobs. The one person who did not was a member of the Traveller community. Until he changed his address, he was unemployed. That needs to be addressed in terms of a mental health crisis.

Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputy Donnelly for raising this issue. He is quite right. There was a protest outside Leinster House on Tuesday. There is an action plan, which will be published very shortly. The action plan will not relate only to mental health. It has to relate to educational prospects, to prospects for apprenticeships and to education and social protection. All of those key factors exacerbate the challenges Travellers have in regard to their mental health. I hope this will be published before the summer recess. That is what I am trying to do, for my part. It is a cross-departmental report but it is important that it is published soon.

In December, when I had the allocation of €10 million in relation to mental health, €365,000 was allocated to Travellers' mental health. Last year, through the National Office for Suicide Prevention, NOSP, €270,000 was also allocated to support Travellers' mental health.

Planning and Development Regulations (Amendment) (Solar Energy for Schools and Community Buildings) Bill 2022: First Stage

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision for the installation of solar panels on school and community buildings without the need for planning permission, and for this purpose to amend S.I. No. 600 of 2001.

Putting solar panels on the schools is a no-brainer. There are 4,000 schools in the State. The overwhelming majority do not have solar panels. Imagine the energy that would be saved if they had solar panels. Imagine the money that hard-pressed schools would save if they had solar panels.

Nearly four months ago, the Taoiseach gave commitments that regulations would be introduced within three weeks to allow schools to erect solar panels without the need for planning permission. We have had neither sight nor sound of any regulatory change since then.

The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, sits next to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, at Cabinet. It is within Deputy Darragh O'Brien's gift to bring in these regulations overnight if he wanted to.

Schools have enough on their plate without having to go through the arduous process of obtaining planning permission to erect solar panels, let alone the costs involved with these applications. The administrative burden is disincentivising schools from switching to solar power.

I have spoke to schools across the country and they are under pressure. The rising energy costs and reduced ability to fundraise mean their budgets are squeezed more and more. These are environmentally conscious communities, as Deputy Eamon Ryan will be aware from green flag initiatives and various other initiatives, but this is not something that they can do the way things are. Without active steps to ease the financial burden on schools, the additional costs could fall onto parents in the form of voluntary contributions in September.

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By erecting solar panels on school buildings, and, indeed, on community buildings, schools can reduce their energy bills as well as generating extra income through selling off excess electricity back to the grid. It is a win-win for schools. It is a win-win for climate. It is a win-win for the community as a whole.

Tá sé seo furasta a dhéanamh. Ní thuigim cén fáth nach bhfuil an Rialtas tar éis bogadh ar seo cheana féin. It is an obvious and easily-implementable environmental win. I do not see why the Government is dragging its heels on this. It is World Environment Day on Sunday. I call on the Government to urgently amend the regulations and simplify the process of solar panels for schools and for community buildings. It is within its gift to do so and I hope it treats this with the urgency it deserves.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Report after report highlights the escalating reality of global warming and stresses the urgent need for action to try and mitigate climate change. Shifting our energy sector away from fossil fuels to renewable alternatives will be key to reducing our carbon emissions. In addition to major investment in offshore and offshore wind and solar, microgeneration will play an important role in our energy transition.

We have thousands of State-owned schools and community buildings across the country that are perfectly placed to generate clean energy via solar photovoltaic, PV. This is as much about empowerment as anything else. People have paid in to climate action but they have not necessarily been allowed buy in. This is a real opportunity.

This is the lowest of the low hanging fruit. We are bringing forward this legislation. We know there is other legislation there but this is our way of banging the table and saying to the Government to get on with, and we will support it in, the work.

A colleague, Deputy Stanley, brought forward similar legislation in 2019 and, in 2017, brought forward the Microgeneration Support Scheme Bill. This is the low-hanging fruit. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, said yesterday that there is climate rhetoric but not climate action and the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, says the same. There is one word, and I note the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was at the conference yesterday with the EPA, namely, "implementation." That is what this Bill is about.

I hope the Minister takes it in the spirit in which it is intended but we need to see action in relation to it. There are so many positive benefits of this, including opportunities for schools and communities. It is the real opportunity of the climate transition. It is fundamentally about a just transition.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):
No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.16 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.56 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.16 p.m. and resumed at 1.56 p.m.

Higher Education Investment and Costs: Statements

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss plans for future investment in the higher education sector. I have just come from Trinity College Dublin, where we have made an investment that I am particularly pleased we have managed to make together. I thank Deputies on all sides. I know they all work on and support this issue. We have announced that €3 million will be provided immediately to make our campuses more autistic inclusive in order to support autistic students in navigating third level education. This €3 million is being disbursed across all publicly funded higher education institutions and will cover things like: sensory rooms; student and staff awareness; pathfinder and wayfinding apps; and using technology to teach. It will make a real and substantial difference in the context of making sure that autistic students can access third level education and thrive within it. There is a second aspect to this as well. We have announced €3 million in funding each year from now out to 2026 for universities to come forward with pathways and programmes for students with intellectual disabilities. We have the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, which is quite inspiring, and we have good work going on in many places but we want more ideas and we want people to put up their hands in universities and colleges saying they can provide programmes for students with disabilities, pointing how they can do it and drawing down from that €12 million fund that we are announcing today. It is timely, therefore, that we are having these statements today.

We have also been embarking on significant reforms in the sector through the publication in recent weeks of the Funding the Future policy document. In addition, we have made significant policy announcements on the important issue of reducing the cost of education and the cost of living for students and their families. We cannot be found wanting when it comes to addressing the question of investing in and sustainably funding higher education in the longer term. It has profound impacts for our economy, society and, most importantly, for the citizens we serve. I also believe that we need to have a system that is sustainable for students and their families. It irks me when people try to play one off against the other and suggest that it is not possible to do two things at the same time. Of course it is possible. You can sustainably fund the universities while still believing that the registration fee and needs to be reduced. In the new Funding the Future document, we have outlined €307 million in funding that must go into the universities if they are to be properly funded. This is not my figure; it was not plucked from the air. It is a figure on which we worked with the European Commission, Indecon and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and we have published a technical paper as to how we got there. It is a figure that we must put into the system over the three budgets left in the lifetime of this Government.

2 o'clock

We have also said that alongside that we must address the cost of education. I get irked when people say it is all about the core funding. It must be about both. It must be sustainable for the universities and for students and their families.

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On the same day we published *Funding the Future*, we also published the review of the student grant scheme. It is essential we get this right too. The cost of living, and indeed circumstances generally, have changed an awful lot over the course of the decade that has passed since the SUSI scheme was first put in place. In publishing our funding document we have ruled out the possibility of introducing student loans into the system. Instead the Exchequer - the citizens, the taxpayer - will increase public investment because education is a public good. Employer contributions will remain through the National Training Fund but we are not intending to increase them. The student contribution fee, while being retained, will be reduced over time. We have that twin-track approach now. A funding gap of €307 million is identified and there is a plan on how to fund that but we are also progressing addressing the cost of education for higher education students.

Our plan for the future revolves around an effective system performance and universal access to education. In prioritising core funding increases, we must also ensure we deliver the system we want. As Deputies may know, we have established an implementation group co-chaired by myself, Professor Tom Collins and Professor Anne Looney. It had its first meeting last week. The purpose of the group is to ask, if and when we have sustainably funded higher education, what we want this system to look like. Again, I do not think this is controversial; I think we have a shared understanding of what the system should look like right across the sector. It must mean better staff-student ratios. The European average is about 15:1. In Ireland it is about 20:1. The €307 million must get us to a better staff-student ratio and get us in line with that 15:1 figure. It must mean better pathways between further and higher education. Gone must be the days when the person who does the nursing post-leaving certificate course must then go abroad to get a nursing degree place. That is not right and it does not work.

We must also deal with the issue of access. This means access for people from a whole range of backgrounds, including those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities and others. We must put the skills in place. Our universities are not just there to serve the economy but we must ensure they help us meet the skills needs of our country with respect to how we are going to build the homes we need, bring about the climate action we need and how we are going to prepare for the digital transformation that is well underway in our country and in our world.

The fifth pillar is we must reduce the cost of education. Hand in glove with the increase in funding there is a reform process. That is important and it will be overseen by the implementation group. I will come back to that in a moment.

The SUSI grant review was a significant piece of work because now we have an evidence base and not just anecdote for what we must do to progress student supports over the next number of years. I am sure colleagues will be interested to hear over 9,000 people participated in our consultation on the SUSI review. This perhaps gives an indication of the depth of feeling around the issue. As a result of the review we have already made some early decisions in the last budget to address some of the recommendations. For the first time in over a decade there will be significant changes to the rates of eligibility for students accessing the student grant scheme. There will be an increase to all student maintenance grant payments of €200 per year. There will be an increase in the income thresholds to qualify for the standard rate of a student grant by €1,000 and the non-adjacent rate of the grant will be available to qualifying students who live 30 km or more from college rather than 45 km, as was the case up to now. This will apply to students from September. That is quite significant, by the way. I sometimes hear people saying a €200 increase in the grant is not going to cut it but as a result of those changes,

many students could see their grants increase by 25%, 30% or 33%.

I wish to be very honest with the House that we cannot shy away from the findings. They are stark and clear. We have much more we need to do. We need to start doing that in the next budget and we need to keep doing it in each subsequent budget. The report has highlighted that while Ireland has achieved high rates of attainment, other changes during this time, including student costs and inflation, have the potential to impact on some of these important gains. The research from the review also confirms that without student grant support, many would not have attended third level education. Overall, it shows a system that has worked well in targeting those most in need but one that now needs to be reformed to catch up to where we are in terms of the world and country.

Starting this year - this is an important development for the Oireachtas and not just the Government - my Department will continually assess the cost of education for people who use the system and will publish in advance of the budget an annual cost of education paper. This will be a key lever for Government and I am sure the Opposition, to consider transparently and accurately the costs involved in accessing third level across the population and bringing forward proposals and ideas such as what will happen if I increase the grant by a certain amount or if we reduce the registration fee by a certain amount. It is my honest belief student representatives have a legitimate point when they say the single most effective option to advance access to education is to address upfront costs for students. Those families who do not qualify for SUSI also need a policy response to soften the blow of the rising cost of living. I believe that very strongly. I am committed to ensuring younger generations have their voices heard and their lived experiences expressed in policy outcomes. The cost of education paper each year in advance of the budget will provide an opportunity to do that. It is crucial the Government and my Department use all the policy levers available to reduce the burden on families subject to annual budgetary decisions.

I turn to the reform agenda for higher education. Hand in glove with funding must come reform. We plan on providing more funding for universities, we have developed new technological universities in the regions and plan on bringing about new academic contracts for staff to ensure those technological universities can reach their full potential. These are a number of the reforms we will progress over the coming years. In the last week I have established the implementation group I referenced. It is there to provide guidance to my Department on the roll-out of the funding and reform framework and to focus on creating a unified system and improving pathways between further and higher education. As I have said, I co-chaired the first meeting of this group on 25 May and thank Professor Tom Collins and Professor Anne Looney for agreeing to co-chair it with me. The group membership is comprised of enterprise, student and societal voices and Government and agency representatives. I am really excited about what this group can achieve for our third level system for our younger generations like school-leavers but also for adults learning through life. At the meeting on 25 May the group agreed to divide its work stream into two core working groups with one focused on unifying the higher education system and improving quality and one driving skills, engagement and participation with and in the system, as well as addressing cost barriers to participation. These working groups will follow the fivefold approach to drive accountability and improvements in our higher education sector, as outlined in the plan I have published and taken Deputies through.

I also want the Oireachtas to know it is my clear view passing the Higher Education Authority Bill 2022, or HEA Bill, is an essential part of the reform agenda. We have worked quite constructively on this. We have had Second Stage in this House, Committee Stage at the select

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committee and we will shortly have Report Stage - I think this month. This will be an important system to ensure there is an appropriate governance, oversight and performance framework. We remain on track to have this legislation passed and enacted this year.

I mention also an issue I have been commenting on in recent days that is important. At the moment students have an income disregard of €4,500. He or she can earn €4,500 outside term time and not have it accounted towards their eligibility for SUSI. That figure was last set in 2016. It was €3,000 before that. It is time to increase it further because €4,500 is not the same now as it was in 2016 in the context of both inflation and the minimum wage. If a student wants to work this summer, such as by helping out the local pub, restaurant, shop, hotel or whatever business is in need of staff, we should be rewarding work rather than penalising it. It is my intention to increase that threshold so a student can earn more this summer without it impacting on their student grant when they next apply in 12 months time. I will provide the House with details of that once I have finalised my consideration of it but I hope to make an early decision on it in the coming days as well.

I should also tell the House it is my intention, when we talk about how we are going to invest in higher education, to publish a new national access plan at the end of this month or the very start of next month. This will endeavour to build on some of the progress we have made on access to third-level education. I do not mean that in a political sense but refer to the progress we have made as a country. We now see 66% of school-leavers going directly from school into higher education but that masks a reality and another headline figure, which is that transfer rate is lower in certain schools. It is lower in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, schools. From memory it is around 40%. We are looking at what we need to do in the form of concrete actions in the national access plan to improve participation rates in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and for lone parents. It is about recognising not every student is a school-leaver. Students are now in their 40s, 50s and 60s with full-time jobs and have dependants and mortgages. They need an education system that is more flexible.

I also wish to give Deputies a preview that we intend to bring forward and include as a priority group care-leavers, that is, people who have grown up in the care system. There has been great work done across this House on highlighting them as a priority group. Also, as I have announced today, we are including for the very first time students with intellectual disabilities and students with autism. I could stand here, as could predecessors and successors, and say we are making great progress on access, and we are, but again the headline figures flatter because we have not been measuring participation rates of certain groups of people with disabilities or indeed certain groups in society. What Deputies can expect to see in the national access plan - we would be delighted to go before the committee and work with Deputies across the House on this - is new priority groups but also a new way of measuring. It is not enough just to say they got in the door of the college. It must be about how they got on in college and what happened after college with employment. We will bring that to Cabinet at the end of this month and publish it over the summer.

A range of important policies that set out a vision and direction for higher education funding are now in place. After years of debate, and, perhaps, ducking and diving, we have endeavoured to settle the question of how much sustainable funding needs to go into higher education. Deputies would be correct in telling me that how we deliver the funding in the forthcoming budget and the remaining budgets due during this Government's term of office is what we will be judged on. It is a challenge I very much accept. I look forward to working with people on all sides of the House.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister for his statement and I welcome this opportunity to debate higher education again. I was very encouraged earlier by the announcement of ring-fenced funding for autistic students. I know the Minister agrees that it should have been done years ago. It is also important to measure and track outcomes so we can get real value for money and that the money can make a real difference to the lives of autistic students and students with intellectual disabilities. I have always felt on a broader level that we have missed out so much as a nation by not investing in young people with autism and autistic people of all ages. Many of them have unique talents that have not been fulfilled, and it is important to see that happen now.

I do not know if the education of staff will be done through the Middletown education centre. That centre was set up in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement. We visited it with former Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin. The work done there is really good. The centre is important because it has much experience and knowledge built up in the context of training staff.

The Minister will have heard about the plight of international students this morning. There are some shocking stories. These are mostly students coming here to study English. For a long time there have been reports of landlords, employers and agents taking advantage of these vulnerable students. We have heard of six students crammed into a disused nightclub and charged €4,000 for the privilege. We must do something to protect these students. The Minister must engage with his Government colleagues because this cuts across a number of briefs. We must end both this racketeering and this exploitation of these young people. Since inflation became an issue and with the economy the way it is, racketeering and exploitation seem to be going on wholesale. This type of behaviour needs to be called out across all Departments.

Many of these students and workers are in low-paid but vital jobs. Many of them worked in nursing homes as carers during the pandemic. They deserve to be treated with respect and protected. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 contains legislative provisions for the establishment of a new national learner protection fund and the international education mark. These measures were intended to increase the quality assurance protection of learners in the practices surrounding recruitment, information provision and student welfare. I have raised this matter with the Minister in the past but there has not been any progress in respect of it.

There is also the question of protecting our own students who are heading abroad on J1 visas. Many are in danger of losing large sums due to the delays in securing their visas through USIT. That cohort of students and their families should be looked after.

I commend the Minister's clear statement that fees will not continue at their current level. That is really important. Over the years we have seen the financial burden arising from a deficit of funding at third level being pushed onto students and their families. We have the highest fees in the EU, unaffordable on-campus accommodation and no support for part-time students. I have much more to say about this matter but I am really concerned about the number of families who have contacted me in the past few weeks because they were refused the SUSI grant. I welcome the measures that will be introduced in September but even with those, the thresholds are too low. Any of the increases introduced in last year's budget have been eaten up by people's household spending. The financial status presented in a grant application bears in no way any resemblance to the reality for many of these households.

I welcome that the Minister has said he will increase the threshold for working students. Is

there any possibility, in light of current circumstances, that the measure could be brought forward in order that those who worked over the past number of months and are being assessed now could be considered retrospectively? We need these students in the labour market as well. We should find ways for the really hard-working families and parents just over the threshold to find some relief this year because of the economic circumstances.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was the first person in my family to go to university and I am very proud of that. I said it before on the record of the House. When I graduated, albeit a small bit after I could have, shall we say, it was a very proud day for me and my family. I experienced third level as what we might call a straightforward student, or one going straight from secondary school to university. I returned to university at the age of 21, after my daughter was born, to finish my degree. I also went on to do a master's degree. I have seen it from both sides; I know what it is like to come in straight from school, which is grand, and how to do it as a mature student with a small child, which was challenging but extremely worthwhile. When studying for my undergraduate and master's degrees, I worked in UCD. I worked in catering, security and administration for a while. Back then, the jobs in UCD were considered very good but, thinking back now, it was the start of the introduction of precarious work, fixed-term contracts and the commodification of the work of educators. That was in the early to mid-1990s.

I have seen the very positive impact that access to third level education can have and it can be transformative, particularly for people who come from disadvantaged working class communities. There is power in education and the confidence it gives to people. It is something we must share because it is so important and valuable. I was very lucky to work in the education sector for a number of years when I was with a small independent college. I also worked for the Higher Education and Training Awards Council for a number of years, which is now Quality and Qualifications Ireland. That gave me insight into how the education system works, and sometimes does not work, for learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Towards the end of my time as a union organiser, I spent two and a half years in the education sector representing people in the education and training boards, institutes of technology and the university sector. That was an eye-opener all right. There was a quality in the job and I saw the erosion of what would have been considered very good jobs by precarious contracts, people not being paid over the summer or as-and-when-required contracts. This was in an area it would genuinely not be expected; as a union official, I certainly did not expect it.

This is on the Minister, the Government, aided and abetted by its previous partners in government, namely, those in the Labour Party, and Fianna Fáil. There is a crisis in the education sector and it is no longer considered a great place to work, although it should be. It does not have that reputation any more. Between registration fees, textbooks, the cost of transport and rent, many families cannot afford to send their kids to college. They are looking at taking out loans so their kids can access college. On the flip side, the quality of jobs at third level is being eroded.

We all know some students being forced to undertake significant part-time jobs. I referred to my working in catering at UCD, which was handy because I could fit in shifts around my work. Not everybody gets those kinds of jobs. More and more we are hearing of students having to undertake what is effectively full-time work, which cannot really be done if that person is trying to study. I do not have technical or scientific qualifications - it is a general arts degree - but I would not have been able to do that and work full-time. That is impossible but many students are forced to undertake it because the parents simply do not have the cash to be able to

keep them attending college.

Before the recent explosion in inflation, parents and students were struggling, and they will struggle even more now, with rent and transport costs. All of these costs are absolutely crippling parents. It should not be the case that a young person who is preparing for the leaving certificate examination or a mature person who is considering going back to college should have to worry about where the money is going to come from for third level. Students who are sitting the leaving certificate examination in a few days from now should not be thinking they would love to go to college but that they must not ask their parents for support because they just cannot afford it.

I welcome the Minister's indication that he will publish a cost of education paper. I urge him to listen to the voices of the Irish Second-Level Students Union, the Union of Students in Ireland and, indeed, the trade unions representing workers in the education sector. He must work with them to take what can be learned from the report, and he must implement it to ensure access to education is for everybody.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I am hugely concerned about the worrying shortage of staff within disability services, particularly services for children. The progressing disability services model saw the establishment of 91 children's disability network teams. However, there is a vacancy rate of 28%, on average, across all teams. This amounts to more than 700 vacancies, with some teams having a vacancy rate of 33%. There is a need, in particular, for occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and psychologists. When I look at the number of students who are undertaking courses in those areas, I am very worried. There are insufficient numbers to meet demand.

According to a recent workforce census of children's disability network teams carried out by the HSE, there is a shortage of 122 occupational therapists. However, according to figures supplied to me by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, there were only 126 students undertaking the relevant course in 2020, which was the most recent year for which figures were available. The situation with speech and language therapy is very similar. It has been identified that there are 117 vacancies within the teams, but only 119 students were undertaking the course in 2020. These figures relate only to the shortages within the 91 children's disability network teams. They do not take into account other areas of healthcare and education, which will be competing with one another to recruit these students when they graduate. Primary care will be looking to recruit students, as will the education sector as we see the roll-out, we hope, of the social inclusion model currently being piloted.

Does the Minister have plans to address these extreme staff shortages? I am sure he, like all of us, is hearing from constituents about the devastating effect the lack of services in the children's disability network teams is having on children with additional needs and their families. There must be a plan to increase drastically the numbers undertaking the relevant courses. Work needs to be done not only with those already in third level but also with those currently in second level education to encourage the take-up of these courses in universities.

According to a head teacher who has worked to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities, there were 15,846 students registered with disability support services in the 2019-20 academic year. This represented 6.3% of the total student population. That figure is very low compared with the percentage of people in the State with a disability, which is 13.5%. Ireland has one of the lowest employment rates in the European

Union, at 26.2%, for people with disabilities. If we genuinely want to address this, students must be encouraged to pursue further study. The current employment rate, however, does not offer great encouragement.

All reasonable accommodations must be put in place to assist students to participate fully in third level education. There must be flexibility around course times and how courses are delivered in terms of blended and online options. If a student requires additional time to complete a course, that should be facilitated. Lecture content and study materials should always be available in a format that is accessible to all students. Education, including at third level, must incorporate the universal design for learning principles to guide institutions in making education accessible for all and to ensure we have shared educational campuses. Training should be provided to all academic and higher education staff on their legal obligations to students with disabilities. Some students have been made to feel uncomfortable when highlighting their needs and rights in this area.

Advances in technology have had a huge impact on the lives of people with disabilities. As much as possible must be done to ensure students with disabilities in Ireland have access to the vast range of technological solutions that now exist to support them. They should not have to fight for every support they require. Provision for all students, irrespective of need, should be available. We know from numerous and varied research findings that people with a disability are more likely to struggle with financial hardship. Access to the required finances should never be a barrier to such a person accessing his or her right to an education. It is vital that the higher education access route, HEAR, and the disability access route to education, DARE, schemes are adequately funded to support students throughout their academic and social lives in college.

There remains a huge demand for publicly funded diagnostic services for students who cannot avail of disability supports without an official diagnosis but who cannot afford to access private diagnostic services. There must be increased supports for mental health resources in institutions for students who need that support because of disability. It is vital that students with disabilities and their representatives are involved at every step of these conversations.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: First, I am disappointed that this is the conversation we are having this afternoon. The Labour Party had asked that we discuss special education. Nobody in the Opposition asked for this debate. We will not have an opportunity for another two weeks to discuss the fact that 270 children do not have a school place for September. Having said that, the issue we are discussing today is an important one.

Having listened to the discussion on “Morning Ireland” earlier today, I raise the outrageous situation facing people who have come here from all over the world to learn English. Our reputation has been tarnished by those who would abuse these people in such a disgraceful fashion by putting them in substandard accommodation in makeshift nightclubs and on disused sites. The country’s reputation has taken something of a hammering in this regard. One young woman spoke on the radio about how she will tell everybody she knows in Brazil not to come to Ireland to learn English. It is important that the House deals robustly with this issue.

We all believe in the power of education and that it is the great leveller. I was a beneficiary of the free fees scheme, as it was known, in the mid-1990s. We no longer have anything like that system. Instead, we have gone backwards. The Minister and I have spoken before about his vision in this regard. He certainly has said all the right things and made all the right noises about bringing down costs for families when a child attends further or higher education. We

often refer to the Cassells report. There is a section within the report that advocates the introduction of a capital assets test. When the Minister and I were in government together not so long so, abortion was the only issue that got members of his party in more of a flap than the idea of the potential introduction of a capital assets test for access to the full suite of grants for third level education. We identified individuals with €250,000 in their bank accounts who were able to get the full grant provision for their children. There was a scenario whereby if people could employ the services of an accountant, they could manage to muscle their way into the grant system, which is supposed to facilitate those who most need support to go to college. Of course, the proposal was never adopted because of the heavy lobbying by those who are quite powerful in political circles in Ireland. What is the Minister's view on the introduction of a capital assets test, as advocated for in the Cassells report?

It is depressing to hear the Tánaiste speak about tax cuts being the priority for him when it comes to the budgetary cycle. Are we not learning anything about the capacity of the State to do more to bring down the cost of living outside of the tax code? There are basic provisions across Europe and even on this island that people take for granted will be provided free at the point of access. Yes, they pay for them through their taxation system but there is no direct cost. We have spoken about free GP care, free schoolbooks, free third level education and affordable childcare. However, when it comes to the Tánaiste's interaction with the budgetary cycle, he cannot divorce himself from talking about tax cuts. It is utterly depressing. Collectively, the political system - or, more accurately, the Government - has thrown away €500 million. We are all talking about the point on which the Minister opened the debate, which is access for people with autism to third level institutions. There are many issues that are causing massive hurt and pain for people around the country. All these significant issues are causing families distress, but the answer last October was to throw away €0.5 billion. The Tánaiste's idea is still to do something similar in this budgetary cycle, not understanding in any way the difference it would make to a family to have all these educational elements available for free or at least at a cost that would be much more affordable, as is the case across Europe.

It is often said that third level education is not everything, that we should not get so obsessed about it and that we should get rid of some of the stigmas attached to other forms of further and higher education. The Minister was correct when he said that. The people who always say this in forums like this or in the media, however, are people who have had a third level education. It is easy to say to a community that a third level education is not everything if one has been a beneficiary of it, passed through the system and has a lifestyle that benefited from that third level education.

I have several important points to put to the Minister. The recommendation in the Cassells report of a capital assets test is a hot political potato, but it is patently unfair that some people are getting grants who should not be. I refer also to the ambition to drive down the registration costs and the costs of attending college, which are forcing some families to make a choice between one of their children going to college or two of their children attending. Then there is the ambition we should have to return to where we were in the 1990s when I attended third level education. It should be free. We cannot accomplish that if the answer to every social ill from the leader of the Minister's party is a tax cut.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: A document on well-being measures is progressing through the Cabinet. It is based closely on the OECD Better Life Index. One of the factors measured is education. One of the other things measured in the OECD framework is the idea of different forms of capital and of human capital being one of them. Investing in education is investing in

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people and in society. I went to college at the same time as Deputies Ó Ríordáin and O'Reilly. I benefited from those structures as well. Much of the economic jump forward we experienced at that time, especially in the early 2000s, before it ran away from itself, was predicated on heavy investment in third level education and in the young people who came through that system at the time.

Like Deputy O'Reilly, I was in the first generation of my family to attend university. I was afforded the opportunity to do that because it was financially achievable for my family. We must maintain this ability, because the best possible investment we can make in our society is in education. While I might not share Deputy Ó Ríordáin's depression today or go so far in stating it, I agree with a central point of his regarding having an authentic, honest and genuine discussion concerning taxation and what taxation does. Nobody likes paying tax, but if we have an honest discussion about what it is our taxes pay for and go towards achieving in our society, and, strange as it might be to say it, realise that taxation can actually be a force for good in our society, then we might be able to have a more honest discussion about those things we decide to invest in.

This brings me to my first point about the future funding of third level education, which is what this debate is about. I welcome the €307 million investment in core funding. We have discussed this at the joint committee and the Minister appeared before us just last night in the context of this provision and the Ukrainian provision. I said then, and I repeat it, that we must be careful to disambiguate the two things we are talking about in respect of core funding and the affordability we should provide for in respect of students. All the measures the Minister lists in this context, including the SUSI grant review scheme, are welcome. An opportunity to access third level education will certainly be afforded to a wider range of students. I also welcome the Minister's suggestion that we might examine the income disregard.

Like Deputy O'Reilly, I worked my way through college. It was an important facet of how my family was able to afford third level education. If that cap has been in place since 2016, this is something we should be examining.

This sector has benefited from having a senior Cabinet Minister addressing it. There has been an injection of new energy. The Higher Education Authority Bill 2022 is a once-in-a-generation piece of legislation. It has been 50 years in the making and it is exceptionally valuable. The other thing the Minister has driven forward is the agenda concerning the technological universities. I have referred to my family. All four of the children in my family had to leave the south east to access a university education. That is no longer the case. There is now a university in the south east. The Minister will not be surprised to hear me repeat that we need to make that a university of scale and substance. Appointments have been made to the posts of president and chair of that institution. These appointments have set out the scale of ambition in this regard and it has been welcomed across the south east. We must, however, do this in the context of beart de réir ár mbriathar. I refer to having those quality appointments without following that up with the commensurate funding that will be required.

I mention the research capacity of technological universities as well. Along with the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smith, I met with people in the Walton Institute in Waterford. They are driving research capacity forward in the south east. It is extremely important. The staffing arrangements that apply to technological universities, however, are different from those that apply to regular universities and this makes it more difficult for people in these technological universities to engage in research. It is important that we consider this situation and ensure we

find a way to address it in future.

Returning briefly to the Higher Education Authority Bill 2022, we scrutinised it on Committee Stage. As was said, I think it is due to come back to the House on Report Stage later this month. If we are talking about the future funding of third level education, and I raised this issue on Committee Stage, it must be recognised that the State makes a significant contribution to the funding of our third level sector. In that context, I would like there to be transparency concerning where the other funding comes from for the sector. If we are investing this much money in education as a State, and it is proper that we do so - I believe we should go further in investing in education - then we have a right, as a State, to see where the other funding is coming from as well to ensure it is commensurate with the values of our State and that we are happy for those sources of funding to be accessed in providing for the third level education of our children in future.

Turning to the provision of third level education for Ukrainians arriving here, the Minister gave an impressive overview of the provisions that have been put in place in a short time for the relatively limited number of students who have been coming in. We identified at the joint committee approximately 3,000 students who might fall within the traditional age range for attending third level education. I think the figure for those now accessing third level education was about 600 people. It seems like we have good structures in place. The Minister spoke about how the Erasmus scheme might be used to help people access education. This is all welcome and all to the good. Another aspect, which the Minister referred to at the joint committee meeting yesterday, was that this is an opportunity for lessons to be learned. We are seeing many people coming into the State now who are accessing things like, for example, English as a second language, ESL, courses, and the education and training boards, ETBs, are becoming involved. We must hold on to what we learn from this experience to enable us to provide the same support to people who may be arriving here from Afghanistan, Syria or wherever. We should certainly be learning lessons from these endeavours.

The announcement just this morning of third level access support for students with autism and students with an intellectual disability is extremely welcome. The impact of these supports will be felt in many families. It will make a great difference. If we are serious about being an inclusive society, and Deputy Tully spoke about this aspect, then we need to provide pathways into third level education and onwards into the workforce for people with disabilities. Therefore, this funding is very welcome. That is more or less what I wanted to get through. It was important to have this debate. Substantial steps in the right direction are being taken. Having a senior Minister at the Cabinet table to drive this agenda forward has re-energised the sector. I hope to be able to work with the Minister at the education committee on the Higher Education Authority, HEA, Bill to make sure that we put forward the strongest possible legislation to safeguard the sector into the future.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This year the Minister published a report that declared he would be cutting the cost of student contributions. This was a huge relief to college students and also gave hope to younger students who had ruled out college because of the cost involved. People eagerly await details on the amount by which it will be cut and when this will happen, but we are still waiting.

On a future date, by an unspecified amount, college contributions will be cut. This is no good to students today. This is no good to students who have to consider paying for rent, transport or petrol, and all the costs involved in being a student. Students and parents need to be able

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to plan. We have a serious problem in the State with third level education. We are producing some of the finest minds, most innovative graduates in the world, who go on to be leaders on the international stage and yet our colleges and universities are chronically underfunded. The cost of attending third level education is a huge barrier.

When costs go up, diversity comes down. We lose out in terms of the potential of young people, particularly those who fall in the middle between those who qualify for a SUSI grant and those who can actually afford to pay. These people earn too much to get supports from the State, but not enough to afford to send their children to college. People who are trapped in the middle are being hit from every side. I am talking about the families of working parents who are struggling. They are earning too much to get supports to put their children through college but not enough to pay the bills.

Instead of vague promises about funding in the future, Sinn Féin would cut student fees every year - this year, next year and the year after. We would reform the SUSI grant and expand its limits. It is said that third level education is not for everyone, but everyone should have the opportunity to attend third level education. They should not be blocked by a lack of finances or because costs are too high. That is what I am asking the Minister to do. We need to change that. We need to work on breaking down barriers and increasing diversity because smart teams do amazing things, but truly diverse teams can do impossible things.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Higher education has been in austerity mode since Fine Gael and the Labour Party came into power in 2011. This was continued by the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Government that followed. We now have a situation where public funding per student is 37% lower than it was in 2018, which is a lot. Over a decade of underfunding has led to a very high academic staff to student ratio by international standards. There has been a loss of focus on research and development. Our colleges are in free fall in the international rankings. This funding crisis has had a severe impact on wider society. Sinn Féin recognises the need to increase core funding and SUSI supports, about which Deputy Gould has spoken.

In government, Sinn Féin would abolish student fees on a phased basis, while ensuring the right level of investment is made to make our third level institutions fit for purpose. The Government's budget of 2022 included an increase in the student grant maintenance payment of €200 per year, which was welcomed. However, it was the first increase in ten years and has already been gobbled up by the cost-of-living crisis increases. The Government must go further to support our students and their struggling families.

Despite recognition in the SUSI review that rent is the biggest driver in cost-of-living increases, the Government is doing very little to ensure that students have access to affordable accommodation. Sinn Féin proposed a three-year rent freeze and a refundable tax credit that would put a month's rent back into the pockets of the struggling renters.

One only has to read a newspaper to know that we are experiencing a severe skills shortage. Trying to get an appointment for a doctor or a dentist in Kildare or Laois is impossible. I have people coming to me who have to go to Carlow for treatment. On Tuesday, I spoke in the House about the challenges faced by our local bus service. One might wonder why but these people need to be trained. The staff shortages can be seen throughout the health services and they are a direct result of successive governments' indifferent attitude to education. We are in the peak of a housing crisis and need a massive increase in the building of public homes. The best time to invest in necessary skills was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.

I visited Maynooth University recently. Every time I visit, there seems to be another building project ongoing. It is no wonder that it is Ireland's fastest growing university. I know our technical universities are multi-campus operations and I would love to see a satellite campus of Maynooth University in Newbridge or the Curragh that would cater for the needs of people in Kildare, Laois and Offaly.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I commend the Minister on the announcement he made today. There was much merit in what he announced and, time allowing, I will come back to some aspects of it at the end of my contribution.

I listened to the Minister's speech earlier and the part that stuck out for me was the disadvantaged action plan. He mentioned the concept of bringing more students from disadvantaged areas into universities, supporting them all the way through, and seeing what happens to them afterwards. That is very important and may be the first time the "what happens afterwards" part is being addressed.

I wish to take a moment to address what happens before students from disadvantaged communities go to third level. I know there was an issue raised about the word "disadvantaged" in the HEA Bill and it was removed. I am not exactly sure where I stand on that, but students are not disadvantaged by nature. They are disadvantaged by their circumstances. We should acknowledge that those disadvantages act as an impediment. In saying that we will bring more students from disadvantaged and low-income communities into universities, that process cannot start in sixth year. Imagine the impediments that begin for a child from primary school and continue all the way through.

In secondary school, in order to ensure more students from DEIS schools or disadvantaged schools can go to university, we need to look at the emotional supports that are needed. Better access to emotional supports in schools is needed. I worked in the Trinity access programme in our school's outreach department and we had three different pillars that we used to engage with. The first part was giving career guidance information to students. We recognised the fact that in many schools career guidance did not kick in until fifth and sixth year because the career guidance teacher was often taken up with providing emotional support to students. By the time a student got to fifth year, it was the first time they were having discussions about universities and apprenticeships. We need to look at the thread that runs from primary school through to secondary school, where it only kicks in.

I am probably the third politician today to say that I was the first member of my family to go to college. We all like to say that but it is an issue that is relevant for the cohort of students we are trying to get into third level. Having access to information at the kitchen table or in the sitting room about what college a person went to is absolutely essential. One component we used to focus on was mentorship for students, provided by people who were in the workplace having graduated from college. We need to factor in how we bring people, who have worked in various sectors, back into their schools and communities to provide support to students who may be the first in their family to progress to third level.

The third area was developing 21st century teaching and learning practices within schools. The manner of assessment that we call the leaving certificate does not train anybody for college life. In DEIS and disadvantaged schools, and in fact all schools, we must ensure that teachers are trained in new technologies, students have access to laptops, they are trained for a 21st century teaching and learning module. That is absolutely essential.

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I am aware some of this is being factored into the leaving certificate. We must look at the other skills to develop leadership and confidence building, giving students not just the classroom rote learning experience but also encouraging them to get out into their communities, to volunteer and engage. Seeing that as part of their assessment is how we bring more students from disadvantaged areas into universities.

Research carried out by Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan, on what happens to students who come from disadvantaged communities through DEIS schools or the higher education access route, HEAR, found that students from low-income communities do moderately better than students who come in through traditional means. However, where that falls down is access to the workplace afterwards. That, again, comes down to these kinds of darker arts. It is the networks and people who work in these accountancies and tech companies being able to provide internship opportunities or the ability to link in with people who are there. If we are serious about supporting students from disadvantaged communities who get to go on to university in their careers after graduation, we need to figure out how to break down the cultural who-you-know networks that can provide what are almost slipstreams through. If we can combat that, we are onto something.

That leads me to my next point. Last week we discussed the area of apprenticeships. I am very conscious that the world of work of a student who is 18 or 19 and is about to sit the leaving certificate next week will be vastly different in 20 years' time because of, for example, the increase in automation and AI. I am curious as to how we are future-proofing college and apprenticeship courses. Inevitably, when changes in technology happen and we see increases in automation, it is usually the people from working-class communities who have these jobs and apprenticeships who are the first to be let go, lose their jobs and be replaced. I have seen that in my community in the north inner city around Sheriff Street where containerisation set a community back almost half a century. We see that when we go our local shopping centres. People who work on tills will be now replaced with machines. That will happen consistently. It is being rapidly increased due to the pandemic. How are we future-proofing courses to ensure that our students are ready not only for the current economy, but the one that will exist in 15 to 20 years? We need to be factoring that in now.

I also want to discuss the area of further education and training, FET, routes into university. A couple of months ago I raised the area of student nurses, for example, who do FET courses in nursing and cannot get places in the universities. Have there been any developments in terms of providing slipstreams for those students into university courses?

A cohort of students in the leaving certificate applied, LCA, does not have any traditional routes into universities at present. I would be eager to see a route for students who just simply learn differently in their schools and classrooms that allows them to go onto universities.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will start by taking this opportunity to acknowledge the unparalleled investment the Government has made in higher education throughout the country. The publication of the Government's landmark policy on funding higher education and reducing the cost of education for families has been welcomed by all since it was announced last month. I welcome that the Government has confirmed its commitment to address legacy issues in higher education, to increase investment and to reform the sector.

I am particularly pleased to see that the Government has decided that the income-contingent loans for fees will not form part of the future funding model and that it will reduce the cost of

education through changes to the student grant scheme and student contributions, which will be discussed in the coming budgets. This will make a huge difference for many students and their families. Costs should not be a barrier to education.

Recent proposals for the developed of a unified third level education system are also important, as is the work the Minister and his Department are doing in developing apprenticeships as part of the higher education system. The recent announcement of more than 10,500 free or heavily subsidised courses for unemployed, self-employed or returners to work under the human capital initiative are vital to ensure we are planning for the future skill needs of our economy, which, as we all know, is critical to delivering on our ambitions as a nation. Again, it removes the cost barrier for many wishing to take part in these courses and, of course, to upskill.

I also wish to commend the efforts being made to assist displaced Ukrainian students. That is very important. I met many students in Carlow and I want to welcome that.

Yesterday, it was announced that €3.7 million in funding is to be invested in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, projects aimed at improving public understanding of those areas. I note that the funding on will be focused on encouraging diversity and inclusion in STEM, while also targeting a wide-range of ages including young children, teens and adults. It would be great if similar funding could be invested in the arts, humanities and social science, which are also of importance and play a significant role in our economy and society. I am thinking of various higher education providers, such as Carlow College, St. Patrick's, where the focus is on arts, humanities and social science. These providers and their students need our ongoing support.

Now that I mention Carlow College, St. Patrick's – which I have mentioned to the Minister many times before – what is the current position on discussions between his Department and Carlow College regarding strategic positioning of the college in the higher education framework within the south-east region? I ask this being mindful of the national strategy for higher education to 2030 and the changing landscape of higher education, which includes consolidation of smaller institutes and economies of the same scale.

The Government is delivering. I really mean that. The Minister is making genuine steps to change our higher education. The creation of the South East Technological University, SETU, was a game changer. I am delighted that the south-east region now has its own technological university, TU. It has been so important for the region since the establishment of it on 1 May. I want to welcome it, again, for Carlow because, as the Minister knows, Carlow is my priority. Following recent attention on Carlow College that the Minister is well aware of, people in the area have contacted me asking when it will become part of the SETU. Momentum is building and it is important that we now expedite the process. There is great potential to create an opportunity to develop an enhanced faculty of the arts, humanities and social science and to enhance the number of subjects on offer in a facility with high-level educational expertise and to deliver greater institutional quality.

In addition to the educational, social and cultural benefits, we know the SETU is a key stakeholder in the economic growth of the region. Integration of the Carlow College campus into the SETU would demonstrate recognition of the objectives of Project Ireland 2040. The national planning framework states that by creating institutions of scale and strength, multi-campus technological universities will bring greater social and economic benefits to the regions through a strengthening role in research and innovation and by delivering on a broad range of

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high quality education and training in each of their campuses.

As we welcomed our American visitors earlier today, the Minister will be aware from his recent visit to Carlow College that it runs a very successful international study abroad programme. Over the years, it has developed many US partnerships. It is now working with SETU to build on those important partnerships. It is critical that discussions between the SETU and Carlow College, St. Patrick's are expedited with the support of the Minister's Department.

The Government is introducing the most radical changes to the leaving certificate examination in half a century and this is very welcome. We need greater collaboration and more unified regional systems to provide more choice, where all possible pathways are equally valued and learners can move and progress across further and higher education systems seamlessly. It is also important that our education system can meet the different needs of individual learners throughout their working and personal lives.

I would also like to welcome that under the new phase of the capital investment in the further and higher education sectors, some 45% of the total allocation of €430 million is being directed to further education and training. This investment will address the expansion of skill centres and apprenticeship programmes across the country, as well as the establishment of further education and training colleges of the future. The further education and training strategy will underpin the development of the new strategic performance agreements between SOLAS and each of the education and training boards, ETBs, the next three years - from 2022 to 2024. The provision in the budget for 2022 will support building the required capacity within the ETBs, which play an important and valuable role in the further and higher education sector nationwide. It is crucial that we support them.

As I finish, I would like to take the opportunity to return to the core issue of the cost of living and higher education. Can the Minister tell us more about plans for specific measures to reduce the cost of education through changes to the student grant scheme and the student contribution planned for the coming budget?

3 o'clock

As the Minister is aware, we need to address the increasing cost of third level education urgently. Students and their families need and deserve certainty as they plan ahead for their education.

I have been working with the Minister since he became Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and I can only compliment him on the work he has done and on this commitment to the this sector. But before I finish, can the Minister come back to me as quickly as he can about Carlow College, St. Patrick's and the meetings with the college? It is important that this college is integrated into the TU. It has one of the most beautiful buildings in what is known as the cultural quarter of Carlow town. It has much to offer. It is important that I mention Fr. Conn Ó Maoldhomhnaigh who has had several meetings with the Minister and with his Department and who is so dedicated, as are his staff in their commitment. They can offer much to the people of Carlow and to the south-east region, which will be very beneficial. Timing is of the essence.

Every Wednesday, when the Minister, Deputy Harris, is sitting over there in his seat, I will address him about Carlow College, St. Patrick's. The Minister knows for certain that this is a priority for me, for Fr. Conn Ó Maoldhomhnaigh and for the people of Carlow and I reiterate it

has so much to offer to the south east.

I thank the Minister again for always being so helpful and obliging whenever I have gone to him with issues that concern me. I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: I can see the Minister nodding vigorously so I assume this is on his bucket list.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Did the Deputy mention Carlow IT, by any chance?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Carlow IT is a university now. Carlow is a university town now and we are honoured and delighted to be recognised as such.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy for that important contribution.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I have an acute knowledge of the situation where many families are sending their children to college. At the moment I have two children in third level education and next year, we will have three of them there. It is one of the few disadvantages of having your children close together. Apart from that, it makes me conscious of the very high costs for the many families who are unable to get a grant. I am not complaining at all as we are well looked after and have a good salary in here but many families find it very difficult when they have children in college, particularly if they have more than one of them there at the same time, are not able to get a grant, and have to pay the fees.

Many families also come to us where their children have summer jobs and, because of that, they are put into a similar position. Those issues need to be addressed particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis which is gripping the whole country, as well as the high cost of rent. Many families I speak to from the west and from my constituency have children who want to go to college in Dublin because the course there suits and works best for them but simply cannot afford it because of the rent and the cost of student accommodation in Dublin. The same applies in Galway and in other cities where this cost is very high. This is an issue which will have a crippling effect on many people.

Many of the issues that were raised here today are valid and one which is core for me in the whole area of higher education is the impact it is having on our economy, on our services and on what we do into the future. It must be acknowledged that education is the greatest avenue out of poverty for people. If people can get into college and have that opportunity, they have a good chance of having a decent lifestyle afterwards. That opportunity has to be given to everyone, particularly people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I also believe, and it was mentioned by my colleague and others here, that this is the case in respect of the services that are provided by people. I believe Deputy Gannon mentioned the automation of many things in our society but one thing that cannot be automated is care for people. Many of our caring services are devoid of qualified staff, from nurses to doctors and right through the whole way across society. Occupational therapists and speech therapists were mentioned. We need to be training more and more people in those professions to ensure that we can account for ourselves as we look into the future.

I welcome the provisions mentioned by the Minister this morning and it is great to see that happening. Unfortunately, many of our services for people with disabilities in this country are lacking because we simply cannot get the staff. One of the reasons for this is because we are not

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training enough of them. That has to be acknowledged and dealt with as quickly as possible. I will leave it at that.

Deputy Martin Browne: I am nearly embarrassed to start talking now about Tipperary without mentioning Carlow.

For counties like Tipperary, there has been some positivity on the third level education front. This provides the opportunity to study closer to home, if that suits the course people have chosen or have been accepted for and is more than welcome. The fact, however, that the technological universities that I am talking about here have less funding allocated to them than the so-called traditional universities is a matter of shame and needs to be addressed.

It must also be remembered that it has never has been more difficult to make ends meet for those students who still have to travel for college. The rising cost of living has hit every sector of society. People on limited or fixed incomes are particularly affected and students can be counted among them.

While I will not ignore the budget commitment to increase grant maintenance payments and so on, the unfortunate point is that in real terms, the SUSI maintenance grant has declined by 25% over the past six years and we have to take the term “increase” with a pinch of salt.

Furthermore, it is looking as though inflation will have practically exhausted those additional payments by September. Despite this, Sinn Féin’s proposal to introduce a three-year rent freeze and to put a month’s rent back into the pockets of struggling student renters was rejected by this Government. The fact is that that system has been consigned to austerity since Fine Gael came to power. That it was supported by Fianna Fáil since 2016 has not helped matters.

However, despite opting for the reliance on student fees, public funding per student is 37% lower than in 2008. Imposing fees on students has not worked and the wonder is that Government parties had suggested that it would.

Like Fine Gael’s welcome U-turn on the student loans, it must rethink its current approach and take measures to provide, among other things, the capital needed for those institutions, such as investment in affordable student accommodation.

The fact that extended SUSI supports to part-time learners is being seen as a long-term objective is also frustrating, given the significant need we have for workers and the shortfalls we have seen across sectors, especially in the wide span of healthcare specialists. We need to see action on addressing this funding gap in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: On 18 June, the recently established Cost of Living Coalition will hold a national demonstration demanding a compressive package of measures to address the cost of living crisis. That coalition involves workers, pensioners, lone parents and people on low and middle incomes but perhaps the most surprising element of the groups that have affiliated to this coalition, and which is very enthusiastic about being mobilised for that protest, is students. The Union of Students in Ireland, USI, is affiliated as is University College Dublin, UCD. In talking to some of the students this morning, they said themselves that the response of young people and of students to the idea that there are going to be protests over the cost of living is quite phenomenal. This is not something one would have expected, to be honest.

When we had the big water protest a number of years ago, it was mostly older people and that was in effect about the cost of living also. There were not many young people on those protests but I suspect that, judging from the response we are getting from students, many young people will in fact be participating.

Why is that happening? Why are young people and students joining workers and pensioners to protest about the unbearable and worsening cost-of-living crisis? It is because they too are being very significantly impacted, in the first instance by the cost of accommodation, which is completely shocking.

Beth O'Reilly, the incoming USI president, has made the point that student accommodation is now as expensive or more expensive than accommodation generally in the private rental sector. That is something else, when one thinks about it. The whole point about student accommodation, surely, is that it should be cheaper to enable people to do their further and higher education and complete that education, because they do not have the sort of income and resources that workers might have, and because it is in society's interest that they are educated to the highest possible level. Nowhere is that more true and obvious than at the current point in time.

Our society has serious problems facing it because we have a lack of people who are educated and trained in a whole number of areas. This is the case in construction, health, education, mental health, ICT, and science. We need more people right across the board. Those shortages are called bottlenecks, in euphemistic economic terms, but that means we have not invested enough in training and educating our most important resource, our young people, to do those things which our society needs to function and grow. It is not just a moral imperative, as it most certainly and immediately is, to address student poverty, the stress, impact on mental health and the pressure that students face because they cannot find affordable accommodation or because they are paying extortionate amounts because they are lashed with fees and so on. But it is also an imperative on the whole of society to remove the obstacles to further and higher education. Accommodation is critical in that. It is entirely unacceptable that UCD, for example, is building student accommodation that will cost €1,400 a month. That is an outrage. This is a publicly-funded university. That is only one example. Look at all the purpose-built student accommodation where investors have moved in and are exploiting the housing and accommodation crisis and charging students extortionate money. They are making profits from the hardship and financial difficulty experienced by students and they are allowed to get away with it. That has to stop. We need more subsidised and directly provided student accommodation at prices that are genuinely affordable for students. We need to remove all barriers to access to further and higher education, whether exam barriers such as the leaving certificate or financial. They are a throwback to an elitist and unequal society where there was a notion that only rich people should access education. That is what it is a legacy of. It makes no sense in today's world to limit in anyway or obstruct access to higher and further education. It is totally counter-productive.

On many occasions I raised funding for educational and counselling psychologists. It is ridiculous. There are huge waiting lists for assessments and the provision of services for children with special needs and there are young people who want to qualify in these areas but are being obstructed in doing so because they have to pay €11,000 or €15,000 in fees to do postgraduate studies in educational and counselling psychology. It is madness. Graduate medicine entry students, who want to be doctors, have to pay €15,000. We have a shortage of doctors. It is crazy to obstruct them. It is crazy to have fees and to have exam barriers which make it more difficult for people to enter further and higher education. It imposes incredible stress and pressure on

our young people. The leaving certificate is putting many young people off education. It is actually inhibiting them from achieving their full creative potential. We need free education in the interest of students and of society. We need to solve the student accommodation crisis.

I do not have time to say anything about apprentices except that fees should go for them too. Apprentices should be given college places near where they live because the cost of them travelling is unbearable for many. We need to do that if we are to get the tradespeople we need to solve so many of the problems we are well aware of in our society.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am pleased to get an opportunity to speak on this. I will try to cover a lot of different topics. First, I welcome that finally the system, including the universities which have been pushing this hard, has been told that its option, the loan option, is not on the table. I remember during the 2000s, when I was in the Government. The summer is a good time to try to put a memo through. I remember one summer a memo was circulated but I was away. I sat down and sent back a very strong note saying that having read the documentation I was totally opposed to the loan option. It is hard enough for young people when they leave college to buy and insure a car and then get accommodation and then try to buy accommodation without being saddled with the cost of education on top of that. I welcome that decision.

I welcome that there will be more investment but we have to put it into context because the grant rates today are far below what they were. For example, the adjacent rate in 2022 will be €1,415 and a non-adjacent rate will be €3,225. In 2008 the adjacent rate was €1,370 which is ever so slightly less at €45, and the non-adjacent rate was €3,420 which is more. In fact we are standing still in the new rates compared to 2008 but there has been a lot of inflation since then and particularly in the last year. The special rate in 2022 will be €2,575 and a non-adjacent special rate will be €6,115. There is a similar pattern where in 2008 the adjacent rate was €2,680 which was greater than it will be next autumn and the non-adjacent rate was €6,690 which was €475 higher. We are only catching up. The idea that we are improving things is not true.

Then we go to the maddest decision which I could never understand. We are always boasting that “higher” higher education, that is postgraduate education, is so vital in this country. In 2021 the postgraduate rate was €3,500 which is a good increase on the €2,000. But in 2008 to 2010 it was €6,270 and quite rightly so. In the past a person would have gone to work after getting a degree and very few would have gone on to fourth level education but now it is very common. But people want to have an income by that stage. Many of them are doing free tutorials and so on. The decision that was taken back ten years ago was a bad one and one that was never future-proofed. The student contribution is now €3,000 where it was €900 in 2008. We need to look at this radically.

The same pattern is probably evident if we look at the grant ceilings for eligibility. They have not progressed according to inflation. I make a simple suggestion on that. When assessing parental income, particularly in the circumstances that people face now, mortgage or home rental costs should be deductible from the gross income, although a ceiling could be put on the disregard. There could be two families whose income looks the same, say €50,000 or €60,000, but one could have a very large mortgage and another none. There is a huge discrepancy between both.

One way of helping to solve the student accommodation crisis could be done by the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, with the stroke of a pen. That would be to put in place much better radial services out of all the university and third level towns. I will give an example of

a simple step. Until two years ago, no bus left Galway that went beyond Knocknacarra after 6 p.m. Unless student life has changed totally from the time I was in college, students did not want to go home every night at 6 p.m. They are entitled to a social life. Thankfully in that case we got three services up to 11 p.m. that are very well patronised. That makes it possible for students not to have to get accommodation in the city. Students can bunk-up the odd night they want to stay overnight but they do not need five-nights-a-week accommodation. If the bus or public transport services are not there they cannot do that. I bet if there was a survey of all the third level towns around the country, you would find a very bad, patchy pattern of public bus services out of those towns, particularly in the late evening. It would be a quick win. We are all the time talking about sustainable travel. Of course, it would be very important that the 50% reduction for students be maintained.

An issue that of grave concern to me is access to third level education. We talk about reforming the leaving certificate. That is not my concern; the CAO race is. One examination decides what course a student gets into and whether the student becomes a doctor, if that is what he or she chooses to be. That system mitigates against people who do not have the resources. I am not sure that is getting us the best people into professions. There should be general courses for the first year in medicine and the other subjects requiring high points and then the choosing should be done at that point. It would be much more equitable and give many more people access to such courses. We know that if one does a map of third level access, one will find all the so-called rapid areas we used to have as being very low access. One will find Travellers as having very low access. We need to tackle that issue.

Another issue that concerns me is the need to maintain standards. I accept that research standards are high in this country. I am not so convinced that we are not slipping down in the general courses at level 8. It is absolutely important that we maintain standards and that there is high, rigid auditing. Other countries had a big dumbing down which did not do them an awful lot. We boast about good education but complacency is always a devil in situations such as these.

On science investment, Science Foundation Ireland was set up to do blue-sky research. If we want to attract companies and high-level, high-end researchers to this country, we have to be willing to invest in the future. There was a big move in the early part of the last decade towards applied research, getting results and working in projects that would give commercial results. We need to look at that again and make sure that this country is doing top-level, blue-sky research. It is a long-term investment. There is no immediate return. Many of the things we have talked about in the past few years emanated from blue-sky research that, over time, became applied research. If one is not doing blue-sky research, one will not attract top-end people.

I am concerned about career guidance for young people. Unfortunately, academics seem to have a greater cachet than apprenticeships. This is a major issue. We are paying the price of giving that status. We need to do something about the status difference. I know that work is going on and that there is much more prominence now for apprenticeships, but we need to really focus our career guidance on the ability, interest and natural direction that a student would go and try to encourage them not to go for the status things. If one becomes an industrial electrician, one's skill level would match that of some people with a PhD in modern electronics. We need to sell these apprenticeships in such a way that people realise they are very valuable.

Is é an rud deiridh ná an cheist a d'ardaigh mé go minic cheana. Tá Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú) 2021 gafa tríd an Oireachtas agus tá sé ina dhlí anois. Tá sé ráite go mbeidh

20% den tseirbhís phoiblí earcaithe de dhaoine a mbeidh sé ar a gcumas oibriú trí Ghaeilge agus trí Bhéarla ach ní léir dom go bhfuil aon phlean ag an earnáil oideachais tríú leibhéal, ag an gcomhairle, ag an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas ná ag Roinn an Aire, faoin gcaoi a gcuirfear chuige le cinntiú go mbeidh na daoine ar fáil agus soláthar daoine ar fáil leis na seirbhísí seo a chur ar fáil. Is é seo cuid den rud a tharlaíonn sa Stát seo. Déantar cinneadh istigh anseo ach ní dhéanann an córas cur chuige comhtháite a chur le chéile le déanamh cinnte go ndéantar freastal ar mhianta an Oireachtais. Bheadh súil agam go dtabharfaí faoi sin láithreach mar níl sé ach seacht mbliana go leith go dtí go mbeimid ag 2030, an spriocdháta. Níl baol ar bith, i láthair na huaire, go sroichfidimid é mura ndéanaimid gníomh láithreach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Cuív as ucht na bhfocal stua-ma sin.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not know whether I should frame this as a complaint. The Minister was in Coláiste Chú Chulainn this week. My nieces, Makayla and Leah, whom I name to embarrass, now have more pictures with the Minister than they do with me. They were there to facilitate the graduation and I am told they presented the Minister with a tie.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a bit late for the students.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I see that. I was not able to make it to this obviously very important event, especially for those graduating. I will embarrass a number of people in my family now, but there is a logic to where I am going. My son, Conor, attends another Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, LMETB, school, Ó Fiaich College. I have to thank to it for the work it has done. Our Conor, a bit like myself, has taken a circuitous route in his schooling. However, he has seen my stepson, Aaron, do a post-leaving certificate course in Ó Fiaich College and go on to Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT. That is a route map. Those are the sort of route maps on which we very much need to work. It is incredibly important. I have spoken to the Minister before about possible projects such as the Redeemer centre, where people may feel more comfortable in starting certain modules before they go to Ó Fiaich College or other institutes. That is vital.

It would not be a conversation on third level education in Dundalk without mentioning TU status. We know the race that has been run previously. I know the Minister is supportive. We need to ensure that it happens. We know there have been many missteps but section 38 is there. There is a route map towards it. I have spoken recently to the Minister about a possible wobble around the criteria and the relationship with Dublin City University, DCU. We need to ensure that nothing hampers us on that road.

Workforce planning is vital work about which we have spoken previously. Many Members have spoken about the issues with regard to occupational therapists speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and the particular issue with regard to psychologists and ensuring that our disability networks and entire medical system have the staff required. There is a job of work that needs done at Government level, and it needs to be followed through at third level. We need to ensure that we can deliver on what is absolutely required.

I echo much of what has been said with regard to connectivity and early interventions that need done to deal with disadvantage. It is absolute necessity. We have failed many people. We need to reintroduce free third level education, as quickly as it can be done, but there are many people who fall off the education wagon long before that. It means we need to put a consider-

able sum of money into early community and family interventions.

If we are talking about the cost-of-living crisis, we have to deal with the cost of education. We have deal with the wider cost of accommodation, but what needs to happen relatively fast is in terms of the cheaper rate for public transport that has been introduced. We need notification of it for the likes of private operators, such as Matthews Coaches, which many people use for third level transport. Knowing that as early as possible prior to September and the new academic year is absolutely necessary.

We are back to normality. I have to make two events being held in Dundalk. One of them is taking place at Coláiste Ghlór na Mara, a satellite school that is being launched this evening. Alongside that, my youngest son, Toirleach, will be graduating from St. Joseph's National School. I have named everyone at this stage. We will also be going to an event this evening for Amy Broadhurst, who, like me, is a graduate of St. Joseph's National School. She is also now a world champion boxer.

An Ceann Comhairle: I suppose we had better have another Dundalk perspective from Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: It is important that DkIT becomes a TU. It has been left behind for far too long. The Minister said a couple of weeks ago, during his visit to Dundalk, that he feels that DkIT has a great future. Ireland's fifth TU, the Technological University of the South East, was established a few weeks ago. I congratulate Waterford Institute of Technology and Carlow Institute of Technology on coming together. On many occasions, the Minister has announced his frustration with the lack of progress on DkIT becoming a TU. It is important that we get the support of the Minister and of the higher education authorities. In recent years, the Minister and I have had many debates about the status of DkIT. In fairness, he has kept his promise about everything he has said so far. Good progress has been made.

Last October, DkIT affirmed its commitment to become a TU by establishing a new steering committee aimed at accelerating the institute towards TU status. The goal was to put a structure in place to develop a pathway for DkIT and to set a series of targets which would align with the national policy. Some of these included meeting the TU target of having 4% of postgraduate research students at levels 9 and 10 and ensuring that 45% of its academic staff possess a level 10 or equivalent professional qualification. Other targets included increasing the competitiveness and sustainability of the research agenda through dedicated support structures. Another is to enrich the learning experience through the implementation of digital teaching and learning infrastructure. A further target is to improve the further education to higher education progression for our region, thereby opening up higher education to a large proportion of our regional population. Only a few weeks ago, the chairman of the board of governors said that most of these have been put in place. Hopefully, we should be well on the way there by September.

A few weeks ago, I attended an award ceremony at DkIT. I was meeting students who had attended the college for the last number of years and also sporting people. It provided a fantastic opportunity to speak to the students, to talk about the facilities and the courses available. The main topic of these statements is investment in higher education and the cost for a family of a son or daughter attending college. As I said, a great investment has been made. Most who attend the college come from the local area. There are so many students taking courses in art, business, management, marketing, computers, creative art, media, early childhood, engineering, building, hospitality, tourism, music, drama, performance, nursing, midwifery, science,

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agriculture, animal health and sport. These are but a few. This is a fantastic opportunity for the people in the surrounding areas, including Louth, Meath, Monaghan, Cavan and Northern Ireland, and elsewhere too.

I am delighted that the Minister met the senior management, student union leaders and the Teachers Union of Ireland. When he came to Dundalk a couple of weeks ago, he sat down to speak with them and gave a lot of time to that. DkIT is the sole provider of higher education in the north east. More than 5,000 students attend it and there are more than 500 staff. Some 80% of the students who attend the college are the first generation of their families to attend. That is fantastic. We talk about job losses in Dundalk, such as at PayPal, but the college has done fantastically in helping to create jobs in the area. It has attracted many multinational companies and helped many SMEs, including me. Years ago, I set up my own wee business. DkIT is the life and soul of the north east. Every year, more than 600 international students come to the area. It is the most diverse and multicultural of all the institutes in the area.

I am proud to be a Dundalk man and to be involved with DkIT. I am trying to be as positive as I can. The only thing that really put me off is that, four years ago, DkIT was the leading force in the TU project. The Minister said earlier that it is no one's fault but DkIT's that it did not put in the application. We set up a steering committee. It is all looking very good. I am looking for the Minister and the HEA to keep to the commitment. As I said earlier, investment is required in order to get TU status. Some 80% of the students attending the institute are the first in their families to do so. They should not have to travel so far to university. We need a university in the area. I have full confidence that the Minister will work with it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: As a Deputy representing Limerick, I am proud of the universities there. The University of Limerick, UL, and Limerick Institute of Technology have brought many fine students to many companies in Ireland and around the world. Every university is in crisis due to the lack of accommodation for students. UL currently has 2,900 bed spaces on campus on a 350 acre site. There is ample capacity on the site for a possible four more villages. The campus accommodation is ideal because it is monitored 24 hours a day and there is security and support. However, there must be joined-up thinking in all Departments for universities such as UL to move forward. There must be a multi-agency approach to funding to tackle the issue, such as having additional modular accommodation, which is relatively less expensive. Putting the jigsaw together cannot be dropped at the door of just the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; the Departments of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Transport must come together and there must be full engagement with stakeholders.

Accommodation should not be a barrier in Limerick. It is fixable. There are currently 17,500 students in UL. That leaves a shortfall of accommodation for 14,600 students. If one takes out the students who have access to public transport, that leaves about 9,000 students who either have to drive or be dropped off at the campus. There has to be joined-up thinking. It cannot just be dropped at the Minister's door. It is an issue of transport and housing. All Departments need to work together to get a solution for the students in this country. I am the father of four boys. My third lad, Niall, has just graduated from Coláiste Chiaráin in Croom. I have one left who is 14 and the jury is still out on him. We have to make third level education achievable for those who want to get there, so that they can get the best possible education in future. I am thankful for all that education has provided for my family and look forward to what it can introduce in the future.

I welcome everything brings for those in second level who want to go on to apprenticeships. Third level education is not for everyone, but I welcome and embrace it for those who want to go to it. I applaud those in second level education who want to go to apprenticeships or different models. Everyone in this country is needed. We all have a place in this world. Once we all work together, I am happy with that.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I draw the Minister's attention to the higher education report which was produced in 2019. I know the Minister is familiar with it. It showed that 15% of the student body at second level is disadvantaged, while 10% of the student body at third level is also disadvantaged. It is certainly concerning and confirms what we all thought all along, that there are students from less affluent areas who do not make it to third level. In light of that, I want to ask the Minister to consider reinstating the educational disadvantage committee. That committee did fantastic work initiating the DEIS scheme. It did brilliant work and produced fantastic reports. It was set up at a very low cost and provided great value for money. Could that be considered? To address this issue of students not progressing to third level we need something like a disadvantage committee. It would be very worthwhile.

I also want to raise the whole area of special educational needs. Students need the supports at primary and second level to be enabled to proceed to third level and progress into that system. It is becoming an issue that we have so many barriers. In my constituency, there is no dedicated special educational needs organiser. It is causing great frustration among parents and schools. If these children are to be given a fair chance and an opportunity to reach their potential, as is laid out in the Education Act 1998, every child must be included and enabled. For that to happen, we must have the basic supports in place. A serious injustice is being done to children with special needs who are already at a disadvantage. I would love to see that addressed and to see collaboration between the Minister and the Minister for Education to ensure that the gaps are addressed, so that these children have the same opportunity as every child to progress through our education system right to the end.

I commend the great work that is being done in respect of apprenticeships. It is fantastic that we see more of a focus on apprenticeships. I said this at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recently. While it is brilliant that the places are being made available, we also have to ensure that the students make it through the apprenticeship right to the end. One apprentice spoke about the financial difficulty of trying to make it to the end at the recent committee meeting. It is an issue that needs to be addressed. They need to be given supports as well. Perhaps there could be some grant assistance or fund that could help them make it through to the end. It is one thing providing the places but another ensuring that the students get out the other end and that we have them to contribute to our society and economy, which is going to be very valuable in the future.

I recognise that great work has been done on the SUSI grant review. I want to impress on the Minister the issue of student earnings. The fact that they are capped at €4,500 is a disincentive to students and is affecting the hospitality sector, which cannot get students to take up work. I genuinely feel that it needs to be increased.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this today. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the establishment of the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, which comprises Letterkenny IT, including the Killybegs campus, Sligo IT and GMIT. I especially welcome the opportunities that this brings to the Donegal campuses. I attended the launch of the ATU in my home town of Killybegs recently. I am very excited about

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the potential of this campus. The catering college has been a huge feature in Killybegs for over 50 years now. Fishing is what Killybegs is known for, but the catering college has also been a central part of the town's development. It has been known to produce the best people for the tourism, hotel and restaurant industries. It has generated a lot of income to the town and attracts people nationally and internationally. Many of the students who come to Killybegs actually end up staying, working and starting families there. In that context, Deputies can understand the importance of the campus to the town and its development.

The opening of the college in 1969 created many opportunities for Killybegs and I am optimistic that the establishment of the ATU will continue to create such opportunities for the area. It should be an integral part of the ATU and its future development. I would hope that the ATU recognises the potential of the Killybegs campus and ensures that it is given the funding and focus necessary to make it a world class tourism facility. I would hope that the ATU also recognises Killybegs's capacity for development and growth. Killybegs has real potential to expand outward, and I would like to see this embraced and a commitment to this going forward. The Killybegs campus is an important resource and we should take advantage of this time of growth and change to reimagine the college's future.

One of the great things about the Killybegs campus is that it offers part time courses, as well as upskilling courses. However, as far as I know, although it might be changing, these types of courses are unfortunately not eligible for funding and I strongly believe that this is something that should be looked at further. I have long been calling for SUSI reform and I am glad that the Minister also sees this need for reform. I support his intention to make it easier for students to access SUSI grants and to extend the eligibility to allow part-time students to access supports. There is also a need to include upskilling courses. People should be given every opportunity to upskill and further their education. This would not only benefit the individual, their employer or their industry, but it would also benefit the whole of society. It would especially benefit towns like my own Killybegs which has great upskilling courses available, but does not have the demand due to lack of funding. It would be a shame for such courses to be discontinued due to us failing to see the value of them.

I would also like to support the Minister's reduction of the distance for the higher non-adjacent student grant from 45 km to 30 km. Things like this make such a difference, both for students from Killybegs and students in Killybegs. Students would be less likely to travel between Letterkenny and Killybegs if they were not eligible for the higher non-adjacent grant, especially due to the rising price of petrol. This change is a massive benefit to the ATU and I would hope that the Minister continues to ensure all supports necessary are in place for the establishment of the ATU. I would also hope that the ATU will ensure that campuses such as Killybegs are being prioritised and ensure that their full potential is realised and developed. That is vitally important.

The creation of the technological university is a positive thing and has worked very well. It has potential to work fantastically for the whole west coast, working together. I am thinking of the campuses in Galway, Connemara, Castlebar, Sligo, Killybegs and Letterkenny. It works well how it is spread out through them. The potential is there. Obviously, it is going to be difficult to develop and will cost a bit more because it is on various campuses but that should be seen as an asset rather than a problem. The danger as funding becomes tighter is that it would be seen as a problem and that funding would be withdrawn. I hope that will not happen in this case.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank everyone for coming to this debate on Carlow College. I jest, but only a bit. I know how important the issue of Carlow College is to the people of Carlow. I know important it is to Deputy Murnane O'Connor. I acknowledge the very regular contact the Deputy and I have on this matter. I hope we can make real progress. I, too, pay tribute to Father Con. He is a superb leader and a very decent individual working with a great management team in Carlow College, a college that has contributed a huge amount to Carlow and the south east. It has also provided access to third level education in Carlow to a group of people who, perhaps, at least back in the day would not have had that access otherwise. The Deputy knows the answer to the effect that where it fits in the technological university is a matter for the technological university. She, I and the Government want to ensure that enough time and space is provided for the technological university to be able to consider that and that, in the interim, we continue to support Carlow College. Legals are being considered on both sides. I share the Deputy's view that this is a matter that should be progressed expeditiously. I will keep in very close contact with her on the matter as I know she will with me.

On DkIT, I thank Deputies Ó Murchú and Fitzpatrick for raising the matter again. I wish to very clearly restate my absolute commitment to the north east having a technological university. This is something we are united on across all sides and parties of the House. Deputy Fitzpatrick talked about my frustration in the past regarding the north east not getting an application in. That is true but we have moved on from that now. This is about getting a solution. I am very pleased that for the very first time I am aware of, we now have the management team, staff representatives, student representatives and governing authority all having one shared vision that they want to be a part of a technological university for the north east. We have provided funding through the transformation fund. We have provided expert advice through Dr. Neavyn. I take the point Deputy Ó Murchú made on the metrics. We work very closely on this and we will keep in contact.

It was a pleasure to meet Deputy Ó Murchú's nieces. The school very kindly presented me with this tie, which I promised I would wear in the Dáil. We all had a laugh, on an occasion of celebration, about a member of the family of a Sinn Féin Deputy having to get a photograph with a Fine Gael Minister. It was a very pleasant night and it was very nice to meet the Deputy's family. I did not try to politically convert them and I do not believe I would have been successful anyway. However, it was lovely to be in the school. I pay tribute to the Príomhoide, Mr. Tomás Sharkey, who is well known to the Deputy. He is an excellent Principal and is held in very high regard by the community.

Deputy Pringle referred to Killybegs. I share his view. The strength of a technological university is its multi-campus approach. People should see that as a strength. While it is not a particular issue in the north west, some people talk about technological universities as if they were all about their town, particularly in larger towns. It is actually about a region. It is about the north west and working as a region. The Killybegs campus has a very important role to play in this regard. It actually came up in a conversation I had with the president of Atlantic Technological University, Professor Orla Flynn, last week. She was at Killybegs campus very recently. I intend to visit the campus, either during the summer, if that is appropriate for it, or just at the start of the new academic year. I will certainly let the Deputy know when I am going there. I share his view that it has potential and will require investment. We will work with the Deputy and other Donegal representatives on that. The Killybegs campus has an important role to play in the Atlantic Technological University.

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There are a couple of other issues to touch on. I accept that student accommodation represents a very significant issue. I also accept that if we can get it right, it will become a lever not only to make progress for students but also to help address the housing issue overall. If we can provide students, who are competing with a family to rent a three-bedroom terraced house, with student accommodation, there will be a double benefit. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and I have been discussing this. I am due to update the Cabinet committee on housing on some proposals and ideas we have on this at its next meeting. To be blunt, it will require the State to make a subvention. Much college-owned accommodation could be built if we get the model right.

In the short term, there is more student accommodation this year than there was last year. Nine hundred and seventy new units have been constructed in the past two years, and I think 929 more are under construction. We have changed the law to ensure students do not have to pay for many months of rent up front. We are now giving the technological universities the ability to access the borrowing framework to build. I am meeting presidents and chairpersons of universities and colleges this month to talk about further local solutions that can be effected in the interim.

I was taken by the comments of Deputies Ó Cuív and O'Donoghue on public transport. As I travel around the country, it comes up that better public transport in rural areas could lessen the need for student accommodation in that there are students who would not necessarily move out of their homes if they had public transport. I will take this up further with my colleague the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I thank the Minister for Transport for the measures he has introduced to reduce public transport fees, particularly the 50% reduction for those under 24, many of whom are students.

I was struck by the comments on apprenticeships and pathways. A couple of Deputies made a point in this regard that I know they did not mean, but I want to clarify the position because we must use language correctly in this House. An apprenticeship is a form of third-level education. It is not a question of third level or an apprenticeship; it is just a question of what form of third level. We have got to get that right. I make the mistake sometimes too. An apprenticeship is a third level education; it is just a different way of getting it. All of us beginning to speak like this helps with the status aspect to which Deputy Ó Cuív alluded.

It definitely has to be about pathways. One of the key requirements we have in the reform agenda, in return for sustainably funding higher education, is a unified third level education system. I refer to apprenticeships, further education and higher education all working more closely together.

Deputy Conway-Walsh and others raised the cost of education, as did many others. I am very clear and get that we have to do more. I am pleased that we are beginning to move in relation to improving student grants. I accept that there is more to do, as the student grant review states very clearly. The paper on the cost of education will afford an opportunity to all of us to put our cards on the table regarding what we believe are the next best moves to make in the budget. The timing of the changes and how we introduced them are matters to tease through as part of the Estimates process.

I want to comment on the issue of students studying the English language here and the way they were treated, as raised by Deputy Conway-Walsh. I want to be very careful about what I say because, despite my being protected by parliamentary privilege, I am conscious that the

report relates to an illicit arrangement. There are legal protections in place for all tenants, including students. There is also the Residential Tenancies Board. I am sure all of us hope that the full rigours of all these protections will be explored. My office will be in close contact, including this afternoon, with Ms Laura Harmon, who heads up the organisation representing international students here. We will do all we can to provide them with information and support. Deputy Conway-Walsh should note that we intend to move forward with the international education mark. I expect it to be in place by the beginning of 2023 and to have detailed information in the autumn of this year on how it will be rolled out. I am happy to provide the Deputy with a briefing on that.

The issue of visas for J1 students is not a matter for my Department but one that I will take on board. The point made in this regard was a fair one.

I take the point on wanting to increase SUSI thresholds. People are being assessed on last year's income level. It is retrospective for 12 months, so people are not feeling the full whack of the inflationary measures yet.

I will leave it at that. We now have the key ingredients in place. We are seeing the benefit of a full Department of State working on these policy issues. I pay tribute to the people working in our Department and agencies. They have worked extremely hard over the past two years, not just in dealing with Covid and its impact on education but also in trying to put in place some of the key blocks, including the Higher Education Authority Bill, which is currently going through this House, and the future funding plan, on which there has been ducking and diving for too long regarding how we properly fund higher education. That question has now been addressed and we have to get on with the implementation. Other elements include the SUSI review, the work on the cost of education and the new national access plan coming at the end of this month. There is a lot of work to be getting on with. I look forward to keeping in close contact with colleagues.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine as páirt a ghlacadh sna ráitis.

Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Pringle was in possession. I am pleased to say he has 17 minutes remaining.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to contribute again on this. I wish to follow on from what I was saying yesterday just before the debate was adjourned. I was referring to why this Bill is now so urgently required and the necessity that has been put on to rush all Stages. This needs to be considered much more closely. In this House, we should not just bend over and bow down to this. Deputy Connolly, who spoke yesterday, outlined very well the current situation and the note we were given on the case at the briefing held by the Minister. The note is worrying. It shows how officialdom and the Department consider this matter. In red letters across the top, it states Deputies are reminded that the subject of legal cases is not suitable for discussion on the floor of the Houses. If so, we should not be legislating in a rush like this to meet needs associated with legal cases. There was a dispute at

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the briefing on whether this was the reason for rushing the Bill. Apparently, some of the civil society bodies were ready to deal with this, and that is the way it should be dealt with.

We certainly need to consider that. I was going to argue that what has happened will not happen again but I do not believe it because, in reality, we seem to respond at a very late stage to anything that needs to happen rather than being proactive. This legislation was around since 2013 and the need to address the relevant matter arose in 2015. Here we are in 2022 and it is being addressed only now. That is a problem.

I thank the organisations that have done trojan work over the past three days to ensure this legislation would be properly scrutinised and that Deputies speaking on it would be properly informed of its implications. In particular, I thank the NUIG Centre for Disability Law and Policy, Mental Health Reform, Disabled Women Ireland and Nem Kearns for engaging so helpfully with my office regarding this. Their insight is invaluable. It is such a shame that the Government has not properly engaged with such groups and individuals to gain this insight. I have been truly shocked by the Government's complete lack of engagement.

4 o'clock

By not consulting with the disability community and disabled persons organisations, the Government has completely failed to meet obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. There was no public consultation on which amendments were required to the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 and the consultation on the heads of the Bill was rushed and inaccessible to many disabled people. I know the Department consulted disabled people on the original Bill in 2013 but this cannot be considered sufficient consultation for an amendment Bill nine years later. I believe this lack of a more recent consultation breaches the UNCRPD. I am also shocked at the lack of consultation with the Joint Committee on Disability Matters and the Sub-Committee on Mental Health, given neither committee was given the opportunity to scrutinise this Bill.

This is worrying for the Houses of the Oireachtas. People might find this strange but we are actually supposed to be separate from the Government, whereas, in practice, that is not what happens. The Houses of the Oireachtas have something to do here as well in light of how they are being treated by the Government in this situation. It happens regularly and I am not suggesting it is just on this particular legislation. There is an overall problem that the Government sees the Houses of the Oireachtas as a kind of vassal of the Government rather than as something independent of Government. That is something in the culture of Government that we have to address. I am not exactly sure how it will be done but it might be possible.

This legislation affects disabled people's rights and the Joint Committee on Disability Matters should have had oversight of its interaction with the State's obligations under the UNCRPD. The Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in its pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill, first and foremost said that it was not given enough time to properly scrutinise it and then recommended that both of these committees should be consulted to see how best to ensure accessible and inclusive processes of consultation as per our obligations under Article 4.3 of the UNCRPD. I have no doubt that if these committees were given adequate time to scrutinise the Bill, the many issues we are now coming across would have been better addressed.

Where this Bill falls short is the fact that it does not address major flaws in the original

Act, such as the failure to extend advance healthcare directives fully to those under the Mental Health Act. We need to ensure that legally binding advance healthcare directives for all will be provided and that no one will be treated differently because, otherwise, we are only serving to enshrine discrimination based on disability or perceived disability and we are not respecting the UNCRPD.

The amendment Bill has also not removed the functional test of mental capacity, which has been deemed a human rights violation by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We also need to address the fees charged for searching the register of decision-making agreements. It seems there could potentially be an astronomical cost to the HSE to get access to decision-making agreements and the same would be true for advocacy organisations. This is another area that we need to look at and address. Sadly, the HSE would use the issue of costs as a barrier to actually providing service or looking to help people.

A huge area of concern for me is the fact this amendment Bill does not take the opportunity to remove section 85(6) from the original Bill, which would remove the phrase “deleterious effect on the unborn”. This language is vague and unhelpful and undermines all refusals of care and treatment based on consent. It ultimately allows for pregnant people’s wishes to be ignored. This section was included in the original Bill to ensure the Act would meet the constitutional obligation to protect the right to life of the unborn. However, following the repeal of the eighth amendment, this section should now be deleted in its entirety. I know the Minister said he is looking at tabling an amendment to address this but I do not believe that is good enough. One would have to think that in the preparation of this legislation, that would have been seen and addressed, given a constitutional referendum took place in the last couple of years. We should not have to ask for this as it should have been considered in the first place. Women are sick of constantly having to ask for their rights to be realised and respected. Pregnant people should have the same right to refuse care as every other person. We need to end the continuous undermining of pregnant people’s decision-making in our laws now.

I also have concerns regarding the delegation of powers to the decision support service, DSS. This Bill will allow for the transfer of further powers to the DSS but there is no obligation on it to meaningfully consult with disabled people, older people and people with experience of mental health services in exercising these powers. The Bill would also allow the DSS to share information with other bodies and allow investigators under the DSS to access private data, such as medical and financial records, without an individual’s consent and without court oversight, which completely infringes on a disabled person’s right to privacy.

Another thing that this Bill allows is for cases to be heard in public without the consent of the person at the centre of the case, which again infringes on a disabled person’s right to privacy under Article 22 of the UNCRPD.

I welcome the end to wardship in Ireland. However, I would like to support the committee’s pre-legislative scrutiny recommendation to shorten the period provided for all wards to transition out of wardship. I would also like further clarification on exactly how this transition will happen.

I support the committee recommendation that provisions of the 2015 Act should be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds and that arrangements should be made for those in prison and other institutions to access the Bill’s provisions. As well as this, I believe the provision of legal aid should be extended to as many parts of the Act as possible.

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An area of this Bill that needs serious reconsideration is the decision to continue excluding many disabled people from jury service. This is incredibly discriminatory and it is very disappointing that the opportunity to amend this was not taken up.

It is also disappointing that the Bill does not contain an explicit prohibition on all physical and chemical restraint. I know many disabled persons' organisations have been in contact with the Minister in this regard.

I would be very grateful if the Minister could answer the following two questions which I have on these issues. First, the language in section 82 of the Act contains a typographical error and continues to maintain a discriminatory approach with respect to people with intellectual disabilities in particular serving as members of juries. Will the Minister commit to bringing forward an amendment on Committee Stage to rectify this situation, thereby ensuring that no disabled person would be automatically ineligible for jury service on the basis of an assessment of their capacity without first ensuring that support and reasonable accommodation, which could enable the person to serve as a juror, has been offered? Second, section 35 of the Bill amends section 44 of the 2015 Act by removing all references to restraint, but it needs to go further to ensure that no one is unlawfully restrained under this Act. Will the Minister commit to introducing explicit prohibition on restraint, for example, by including the line: "Nothing in this Act authorises any intervenor to consent to the use of physical or chemical restraint on a relevant person"?

There is no doubt that further clarification is needed in many areas of this Bill. I hope the Minister will clarify this in his response and I also hope that he takes into consideration the points I and my colleagues have made. Above all else, I ask the Minister to engage fully and properly with disabled persons' organisations and other organisations on the ground and that he would prioritise this over the rushing through of legislation. We are all aware that this legislation is being rushed through due to a recent constitutional challenge. I strongly condemn the rushing through of such important legislation just to protect against a judgment that has not yet been decided and might not be decided for a number of months.

Some of the disability groups were watching the debate yesterday and they have some questions that the Minister might address in his summing up or at a later stage. They ask which stakeholder groups the Minister will meet in regard to the Bill. They are particularly interested in knowing which disabled persons' organisations and other representative groups with lived experience will be included in these conversations. It has also been suggested that this Bill is necessary for Ireland to ratify the optional protocol and the Minister might confirm whether that is definitely the case. Will the Government commit to adding specific reference to the UNCRPD to this Bill? We have been assured that people falling within the scope of the Mental Health Act will have parity of rights when it comes to advance healthcare directives. Can the Minister confirm what this parity will look like? Will an amendment to this Act be introduced to ensure people with mental health conditions can implement advance healthcare directives under this Act or will the Mental Health Act have to be amended to allow for the advance healthcare directives?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Pringle has neatly avoided a Peppa Pig moment. Congratulations on that.

Before I call the Minister to respond, Deputy Pringle raises a valid point about the demarcation between the role of Government and the role of the Dáil and Parliament. It was my

understanding there was pretty extensive pre-legislative scrutiny on the heads of this Bill. If there was not, I suppose we cannot blame the Government for that and we would have to ask the relevant committee why it did not do its job, if that is the case. We must not undermine the process in which we are involved. The pre-legislative scrutiny and the debates on Second, Committee, Report and Final Stages are all important and allow us all, if the parliamentary process works properly, and I hope it does, to impress on the Minister, whoever the Minister might be, the merit of amendments and suggested changes. Most Ministers, including Deputy O’Gorman, have shown themselves willing to listen to Members over the period they have been in office. I am sure the Minister wishes to reply to the debate.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank all the Deputies, in particular those who made their significant contributions yesterday. I thank Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for leading off on Second Stage. During our discussions yesterday Deputies spoke to the problems of wardship, the extremely outdated nature of the system, the fact that it has been with us for more than 100 years. It is a system dating from the 1800s. Deputies spoke to the very real difficulties their constituents have experienced when they have been confined by the situation on wardship. Deputies Boyd Barrett, Ó Cuív and Healy-Rae all spoke about individual circumstances. There is that recognition across the House that wardship is a draconian institution which entirely robs people who have been assigned to wardship of any recognition of their individual capacity. They are denied any sort of personal agency. We looked for the figures from the Courts Service. Just over 2,100 people are in wardship at the moment, according to Courts Service figures. Somewhere between 200 and 300 are added each year.

Many Deputies spoke to the frustration at the fact that the replacement of wardship should have happened already. There is an Act allowing for the ending of wardship. We passed the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act in 2015 but it has not been commenced. We have a decision support service, DSS, ready to provide the graduated levels of supports for persons who have some impairment to their capacity to enable them as much as possible to make their decisions.

A Deputy spoke to concerns about the DSS but it might be useful to recall the guiding principles of the existing 2015 Act and what they say about central issues on capacity. What I am about to read out is not in operation right now. It has not been commenced. Section 8 is the section on the guiding principles. Section 8(2) states, “It shall be presumed that a relevant person... has capacity in respect of the matter concerned unless the contrary is shown in accordance with the provisions of this Act.” We are replacing wardship with a presumption of capacity if this is commenced. Section 8(3) states, “A relevant person who falls within *paragraph (a)* of the definition of “relevant person”... shall not be considered as unable to make a decision in respect of the matter concerned unless all practicable steps have been taken, without success, to help him or her to do so.”

The 2015 Act, which we are seeking to commence by passing this amending legislation, represents that complete reversal of the wardship presumption and the complete abolition of the concept of wardship. That is something I think we all agree is positive.

I will not be able to address every issue but I will do my best to address some of the issues raised yesterday. Deputies Ward, Connolly and Pringle raised the issue of the functional capacity test and the argument that it is not UNCRPD compliant. The Government’s position is that is not the case, that the functional capacity test is UNCRPD compliant. It requires a presump-

tion of capacity and it replaces that system of wardship that is not, as we all recognise, compliant with article 12 of the UNCRPD. However, the functional capacity test replaces that with a rights-based approach that meets people as they are at a specific point in time. It privileges, protects and enforces a requirement to identify, respect and act in accordance with a person's will and preference. We have achieved that through the functional capacity test.

A number of comments were made about the draft codes that have been put forward by the DSS. It is important to emphasise they are just that, they are just draft codes at the moment. They are out for consultation. They will not become official codes until they are given approval by myself, as Minister. That process of deciding what does or does not go into them is not finished at this stage.

A number of points were made about the capacity assessment. A Deputy said that large numbers of unqualified persons could conduct a capacity assessment. That is not correct. This Bill does not permit that. Only registered medical professionals or other classes of professionals that will be prescribed by regulation from the legislation can conduct a capacity assessment and only the court or where it is set out in the Act, the director of the DSS, can give legal effect to a decision support arrangement. However, where guidance can emerge from the DSS is on how other sectors of society might respond to a person whose capacity in respect of a decision in question in a specific circumstance. This should not be confused or conflated with a formal capacity test. It is a different thing. It is not a formal capacity test. It is important the DSS gives guidance on how other broader sectors of society should give meaningful effect to that principle of capacity. The guidelines are there to empower this principle of capacity, not to look to restrict this in any way.

Deputy Pringle raised the point of the implications of the referendum on the repeal of the eighth amendment. Deputies Connolly and Cairns raised that as well. To be clear, the issue in terms of advanced healthcare directives in pregnancy will be addressed on Committee Stage. I want to make it clear that is going to be done.

The issue of legal aid will be addressed on Committee Stage. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has brought forward a review of legal aid and the issue of including the provisions of this Act within that is specifically listed in that review. However, we will be putting that in place by way of a Committee Stage amendment. Hopefully, this will give clarity on that particular point.

A number of Deputies said this is being rushed. I accept that we have set a tight timeline for passing this legislation. However, we are not rushing it. We have not combined the taking of Stages. There will be a full Second, Committee, Report and Final Stages in each House. It will be done on the basis where meaningful amendments can be tabled during that period of time. There is a recess next week which gives significant time for amendments to be tabled on Committee Stage. I do not accept it is being rushed. I recognise it is a tight timeframe but I do not agree that it is being rushed. I have indicated that I will be using Committee Stage and I will be happy to engage with Deputies in terms of seeking to address some of the issues they have raised.

Whenever I have addressed a parliamentary question on bringing in this legislation to allow for the abolition of wardship, and I have answered a significant number of them, I have always indicated that we were looking to bring in this in June. I do not think it should be a shock to the system that this is coming at this point. I accept the point in terms of the publication of the Bill. I accept it was too tight. However, there was a detailed pre-legislative scrutiny process and we

have a recommendation. I recognise the committee worked to a swift timeframe on that also and I am grateful to it for doing that.

It is not incompatible that there are a number of reasons that we need to move swiftly. I made the point yesterday about State organisations, such as the HSE and the courts - I will come back to the courts in terms of the transition - and private organisations such as banks. Yesterday some Deputies asked why we were working to convenience the banks. Much of this is about the management of the ward's money or the money of people who, if we do not get this legislation passed, will become wards in the future. That is why it is important financial institutions are aware of, and are training their staff to be ready for, this change. That is an important thing and it will be one of the benefits of this. Rather than a ward's money being tucked away in an account in the High Court - we know there have been many problems with that in the past - people will have access to their bank accounts, using that graduated system of support that is provided for in this legislation. In terms of the transition, my understanding is that there will be a judicial panel established by the High Court to go through each of those 2,100 or so wardships to determine where they sit within the new system. That is being put in place by the court currently.

The Deputy made the point about looking at how the DSS will exercise its powers and consultations. I am happy to look at that on Committee Stage as well.

One of the most significant discussions that we had yesterday - I am sorry Deputy Ward is not here but he was here for almost the entire debate yesterday - was on the issue of the interaction of advanced healthcare directives and mental health and whether we address it in this legislation or in the significant and necessary reform of the Mental Health Act 2001 that is being worked on by the Department of Health. It is important to say that anybody who is receiving voluntary mental health treatment will be able to avail of advanced healthcare directives. Their ability to use an advanced healthcare directive in terms of the treatment they receive is provided for under this legislation.

The issue is involuntary treatment under Part 4 of the 2001 Act. The position, in terms of my Department's engagement with the Department of Health, is that the latter is looking to revise entirely the 2001 Act. There was a general scheme published in July 2021 and that is undergoing a pre-legislative scrutiny, PLS, process. There is also work continuing within the Department of Health to draft the legislation. That will entirely change the laws for the better in terms of mental health. The question is, how does what we are doing here plug into that. Deputy Ward suggests we put something into this Bill that covers this discrete area of mental health by amending the 2001 Act, but the 2001 Act is about to be entirely amended by what the Department of Health is doing. We will have to come back and retrospectively amend this Act anyway. There is also a question in terms of the expertise on this, particularly in terms of involuntary detention, and that the expertise lies with the Department of Health as the officials who look at the issue of mental health are in that Department. Deputy Ward has said he will bring forward amendments. I will look at those amendments. I will also continue to engage with the Department of Health to see how we address this. I cannot make any absolute commitments on this but we all share the view that the position of people who are in involuntary detention and their ability to use advanced healthcare directives needs to be addressed. There is agreement on that. There is only a question of whether that is best done in this legislation or in the reform of the Mental Health Act 2001, which is a priority for the Government. I will look at that on Committee Stage. I cannot make an absolute commitment as to what the outcome will be but I will look at that. I recognise it is an issue of concern to many.

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There is strong agreement in this House about the need to end the outdated system of wardship. I do not fully understand still, I will be honest, how the 2015 Act was never fully initiated and why it has taken this long but I do not want the next Oireachtas scratching their heads and asking why has wardship still not been abolished. We have the Decision Support Service, DSS. It is ready to undertake this important role. It is ready to support people's capacity. It is ready to support those who need the benefit of this legislation.

I look forward to engaging with Deputies and Senators at subsequent Stages. I believe that we can get a system that finally ends wardship and that creates a real structure for support for those who have some impairment to their capacity. That is something that we are all agreed on.

Question put and agreed to.

Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth pursuant to Standing Orders 95 Standing Orders 95(3)(a) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Thomas Gould - the need to expand the homeless housing assistance payment scheme statewide; (2) Deputy Michael Moynihan - the availability of home support for older people in Cork North-West; and (3) Deputy Chris Andrews - the growing concerns of victims of abuse within St. John Ambulance Ireland that the review by Dr. Shannon into historical child sexual abuse within the organisation will not be made public and shared with the survivors of abuse.

The matters raised by Deputies Gould, Michael Moynihan and Andrews have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Child Abuse

Deputy Chris Andrews: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak on this important matter. As the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, may recall, it is not the first time I have raised this particular issue and the concerns I have around St. John Ambulance Ireland in the

Dáil.

Most people will be familiar with the positive image this organisation aims to promote. When we see them at a wide range of sporting events, including GAA, soccer and rugby games in the RDS and at various community events, it is important to remember that the organisation gets funding from the State, albeit indirectly through the national governing bodies.

However, the dark and deeply disturbing actions of some of its personnel during the 1990s seldom gets the coverage it should. One journalist, Mr. Jack Power, has done a great deal of strong work in bringing this particular issue to the fore.

The child and adult sexual abuse carried out over a number of years by senior members of St. John Ambulance Ireland is deeply disturbing. I commend the bravery of three survivors, Mr. Mick Finnegan, Mr. Paul Mulholland and Mr. Martin Hoey, who have spoken out publicly of the horrific sexual abuse they experienced when they were members of the organisation. Mr. Finnegan was only a young cadet when the abuse started. Some of his testimony is harrowing. It is distressing.

Previously, in this Chamber I have raised my deep concern that the organisation is closing ranks to protect rapists and sexual abusers who may or may not still be active members of St. John Ambulance Ireland. Now, once again, I am here raising my deeply-held concerns that St. John Ambulance Ireland is, once again, closing ranks.

Survivors of that horrific abuse are deeply concerned that the review by Dr. Shannon will not be made public and will not be shared with survivors. If this is the case, it would be an absolute disgrace. It would be an insult to the bravery of the people and survivors who have come forward with their horrific abuse stories. It will be highlighted in Dr. Shannon's report and his review.

It is not easy for survivors to come forward and to have to give a detailed account of the horrors of sexual abuse. It takes great bravery and commitment and a sense of justice to step forward.

I ask the Minister directly to liaise with Dr. Shannon and with St. John Ambulance Ireland to ensure that the review is made available to the public, and particularly to the survivors of this sexual abuse. We need to see organisations such as St. John Ambulance Ireland using the review as a learning tool to ensure best practice when it comes to child protection.

I certainly commend the Minister for the work he has done for and the support he has provided to survivors. It does not sit well with me to know that State funds, via national governing bodies, NGBs, of sporting organisations, are ending up in an organisation that has closed ranks in the face of a review into sex abuse and now, possibly, will prevent the publication of this report.

Week in, week out St. John Ambulance Ireland continues to provide a service for various sporting and national governing bodies and communities. We need to see the Government standing firm and ensuring that St. John Ambulance Ireland is not allowed to hide anything here.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputy. First, I want to recognise the Deputy's consistent advocacy

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on this issue. The Deputy and Senator Ruane in the Seanad have both been strongly vocal on this issue. I know reports of historical sexual abuse in St. John Ambulance Ireland have been highlighted over recent years. As the Deputy states, the case initially concerned three men who made allegations against one named adult. Two of these individuals were under 18 at the time of the abuse and all three people and the accused were volunteers with the St. John Ambulance organisation. A fourth man came forward in November 2020 and a fifth came forward in the latter part of 2021. Recent media reports state that at least two further people have come forward.

As I am sure the Deputy is aware, the Charities Regulator, under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development, is Ireland's statutory regulator for charitable organisations, including St. John Ambulance, so my Department does not have a role in the governance of that body. Of course, child sexual abuse is not consigned to the past and it is my role and that of my Department, in collaboration with Tusla, to protect children now.

I met the board of St. John Ambulance in late 2020. I understand the organisation has worked with Tusla to ensure compliance with obligations under Children First and has accepted the recommendations of Tusla to arrange an independent review of the issues raised. Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, senior counsel, an internationally recognised expert in child protection, was subsequently commissioned by the board of St. John Ambulance in March 2021 to conduct the independent review into the handling of historical child sexual abuse within St. John Ambulance. The findings will be presented to the board of St. John Ambulance in the first instance but it is my expectation that St. John Ambulance will ensure publication of the report. The terms of reference of the review, as fully agreed by Dr. Shannon, set out that he will examine how St. John Ambulance handled past allegations of child sexual abuse relating to the individual in question and any other allegations made. The review is also tasked with examining the current standard of child safeguarding at the organisation.

Like the Deputy, I have met one of the individuals who has come forward. I commend that person and all others who have often at immense personal cost come forward to take cases and, in particular, shared their experiences publicly. I strongly encourage anybody who has knowledge of these matters to come forward and speak with Dr. Shannon.

Dr. Shannon has provided a dedicated website to support his review that can be accessed at <https://stjohnambulancereview.ie/>. The site enables people to make direct contact with Dr. Shannon and more details of the review are available on the site. It is important that we give Dr. Shannon the opportunity to progress his work independently and form his conclusions. I look forward to seeing the findings. Everybody recognises the major depth of expertise that Dr. Shannon brings to this matter. Again, I urge anyone with relevant information to contact Dr. Shannon and bring this information to light.

To answer the Deputy's specific question, I have no direct power of compulsion in terms of the publication of the report. I state unequivocally, however, that I want to see the report published at the end of the process.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I acknowledge and appreciate that the Minister has been very engaged with the process and has met survivors. They have all spoken very highly of the Minister's role in this. I accept that he does not have a direct role in the report and its publication but when does the Minister think the Shannon report will be published? It is essential that it be made public and that survivors have access to the report. If, for some reason, it is not made

public, will the Minister commit to having his own investigation carried out and a report compiled? It is important that the State would show there is no place where sex abusers can hide and there would not be another carpet under which abuse could be brushed. When does the Minister expect the Shannon report to be published? If it is not put into the public domain, will he commit to carrying out his own investigation and issuing report?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I cannot answer the first question. Dr. Shannon is an extremely thorough individual, as demonstrated by the reports he has done in the past and the quality of the work. It is important that we give him time to do this work. He made it very clear that he wants to engage with victims face to face. He did not want to do this through Zoom or online but in person. That is why it took some time at the start and why the interviews did not take place as soon as the review was initiated. He also wanted to get a very clear understanding of the operating conditions of the review and wanted those to be very clear with St. John Ambulance.

I am reluctant to pressure Dr. Shannon on when the report will be published. He must be given the time to do this properly. I am confident, in looking at his track record, that it will be done properly. We should give him the time to continue to work. I know he is very good in getting back to survivors and updating them, to the best of his ability.

If we have had a report undertaken over a period, I would be reluctant to commit to initiating another report. We need this report published. What I will commit to is doing everything in my power - it is not a legal power - to ensure that at the end of this process, the report can be published. It will not be published immediately and the organisation needs time to look at it and respond. Nonetheless, it is my view that the report must be published at the end of this process. I will do whatever I can to achieve that.

Home Help Service

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise the matter of home help services. In my region of Cork and Kerry, we have had a major issue with getting home help for people. This has manifested itself in a number of ways for people coming out of acute hospitals and going home. They are not able to return home unless some form of home care is provided for them for a number of hours. Going back three, four or five years ago, we may have raised the question of home help but the problem then was that there was no funding for it. There has been a large increase in funding but it has not led to an increase in the amount of home help hours available for patients and families.

Policies have changed over years to provide people with support and facilities within communities so they can live for the longest possible period in their homes. Every family benefits enormously from home help services and my family is no different; the practitioners of home help involved with my family’s care are second to none. They have been absolutely excellent. Every family is seeking home care, but some people have been waiting a long number of weeks, leading to a delay in discharge from an acute hospital, which causes more problems for the health services. Any cost-benefit analysis of the home care packages or home help services indicates it is extremely good value for money. It is a win-win for everybody.

How are we getting from a position where funding is available to ensuring there is a service on the ground? That is about delivery of service, and it is very important we get to the bottom

of that. I have spoken on a daily and weekly basis with the people who provide home care assistance, and they do excellent work. Some have told me they are contracted for 15 or 16 hours and would gladly take more but they are not getting them. What is causing the blockage in the system? If new staff cannot be recruited to provide the care, why does the Government not look at the home care assistance that is already in place to see whether additional hours can be accommodated? Some of the providers have told me they would be delighted to provide more hours. In some instances, where families are trying to expedite the process, they are looking to people locally who are already working as home care assistants and might be able to provide the service. However, they are being told that although the local providers would love to take on the additional work, they are given only a certain number of hours and do not have the capacity to offer any more.

The HSE needs to look at what the stumbling blocks are in terms of delivering this service, which is vitally important and gives huge value for money. Keeping people in their own homes is the most important issue and it can be done by managing the home care assistance scheme in an imaginative way and ensuring there is delivery for people locally.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, to which I am responding on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. The Government is committed to the development of improved community-based services, shifting care to the home and offering greater choice for older people. In budget 2021, the Minister of State secured additional funding of €150 million to progress the development of a reformed model of service delivery to underpin the statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services and to provide 5 million additional hours of home support. The funding secured in budget 2021 to provide those additional 5 million hours has been maintained for 2022. In 2021, some 20.4 million hours were provided to more than 55,000 people. This is an increase of some 2.9 million hours, or 17%, compared with 2020.

Significant inroads have been achieved in reducing waiting lists for funding approval for new or additional services, from more than 7,800 in January 2020 to 286 in March 2022. This has been achieved through a combination of validation of the waiting list and availability of additional funds to deal with those waiting for care. However, there can be a lag between funding approval and the delivery of home support hours. Certain geographical areas have experienced increased pressures due to staff availability. At the end of March, there were 5,458 people assessed and waiting for a carer to become available. In January 2020, there were approximately 1,300 people in this category. Despite the increase, it is important to note that the total number of people waiting for home support across both categories has reduced from over 9,000 at the start of 2020 to 5,744 at the end of March. At the end of April, 1,553 people in north Cork were receiving home support. During the first four months of this year, almost 130,000 hours of home support were delivered in the area.

The HSE is acutely aware that there are staff resource issues across both direct and indirect provision of home support in north Cork and other areas. Provisional data show that at the end of April, there were 113 people waiting for a carer to provide a new or additional service. At that time, nobody was waiting for funding approval. The HSE continues to advertise on an ongoing basis throughout the region for healthcare support assistants and to recruit as many suitable candidates as possible. Due to the nature of the role, this recruitment is normally conducted at a very localised level. The HSE recently completed a substantial recruitment campaign for healthcare support assistants and successful candidates are currently completing final clearances prior to being assigned to their locations. A total of 13 of these new staff are due

to take up positions in the north Cork area this month and will be allocated to clients currently wait-listed for home support. In addition, approved private home support providers continue to recruit home support workers.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is very aware of the strategic workforce challenges in the home support and nursing homes sector. She has established a cross-departmental strategic workforce advisory group to examine issues such as recruitment, retention, training, and the career development of front-line carers in home support and nursing homes into the future in order that solutions can be identified and implemented. It is also expected that pay and conditions for workers will be examined. The group, which is currently engaging with key sectoral stakeholders, is committed to providing the Minister of State with a set of recommendations by September.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I would like to bring a particular case to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, the Department of Health and the HSE. I know of a situation where a member of a family became seriously ill in February this year. The family looked for care to be provided two or three nights a week. Three nights were allocated because family members were travelling long distances from where they were living to provide the care, day and night, for the person who is ill. The family got a commitment in writing from the HSE to the provision of care three nights per week, but that approval was subsequently withdrawn. It is completely unacceptable that this should happen to families that are trying to make the right decisions for their loved ones. A little bit of help from the State can go a long way for people in this situation.

Public health nurses right across the region have contacted me to say how frustrating it is for them to do an assessment and make a recommendation for home help hours for patients who they clearly see need that service, only for the application to go back into the system and the outcome to be that no service is provided. The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, indicated that a cross-departmental working group has been established to examine this issue. Data should be available from within the service as to whether all staff are satisfied with the hours they are getting and whether there is any extra capacity. The first thing on everybody’s mind must be to try to keep people in their homes for as long as possible. That is best for everyone.

The reality is that the service locally is grinding to a halt. The Minister indicated that the working group will bring forward recommendations by September, but that is some three months away and we will be facing into winter by then. There should be an urgency applied to this matter. The problems in the service have been ticking along for some time. As I said, in the case of the family to which I referred, the provision of three nights was approved in February before being withdrawn completely at the end of March without ever having been provided. This is totally unacceptable. We need to see a real urgency to address this issue because it will become a major problem over the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I completely understand the frustration felt by the public health nurses to whom the Deputy spoke, the frustration and anger, probably, of the family he referred to for whom support was withdrawn, and his own frustration and anger in dealing with these situations. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, sees the urgency of the situation. She met the chief officer of community healthcare organisation, CHO, 9 last week to discuss the issue of home care provision. There is a renewed focus on the advertising of care roles on local radio and social media. It is important to note that funding is not an issue here. The funding is provided; the difficulty is with the process of getting people into those roles.

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The number of home support hours in communities is increasing, in line with the enhanced investment the Minister of State has secured. Delivering this enhanced capacity requires substantial recruitment, which has been affected by the strategic workforce challenges in the home support sector. Efforts are ongoing to meet the continuing increased demand. As I said, the Minister of State has established an advisory group, which is looking to identify and remove the specific obstacles to recruitment in order that we can use the money that has been secured to deliver extra staff and additional hours of care to families. In addition, work to progress the development of the new statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services is continuing within the broader context of Sláintecare reform. This work encompasses the development of the regulatory framework for the new scheme, examination of the options for the financing model for the scheme and the development of a reformed model for service delivery.

I will, of course, raise the Deputy's specific concerns with the Minister of State. I thank him for highlighting them in the House today.

Homeless Persons Supports

Deputy Thomas Gould: The homeless housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme is available only in Dublin but, unfortunately, the homeless crisis is not a Dublin-only issue. Rents have been skyrocketing and are now completely out of control across every county in the State. I am dealing with numerous families who are facing eviction. More than 30 of them are facing that prospect between now and October. I am dealing with one situation involving a lady in her 60s who has received a notice to quit. She has been on the Cork City Council, CCC, housing list for 11 years. Even at this stage, if she could find a property that would accept HAP, she cannot afford to pay the balance. This is the real issue facing people in every city and county. I have another case of a lady, a single parent with one child, who went back to college to become a nurse. Her work is part-time. For this lady to get a property, she will either have to give up college or go back home and live with her family in conditions of severe overcrowding. These are the consequences sky-rocketing rents are having on people on HAP outside of Dublin.

April saw the number of people living in emergency accommodation go above 10,000 for the first time in two years. The most extraordinary figure, however, is that 474 children were living in homeless accommodation in April 2021. In April 2022, some 735 children were living in homeless accommodation. This is an increase in the number of children living in emergency accommodation of 261 in one year. Additionally, between March 2022 and April 2022, the figure in this regard went from 702 to 735, which is an increase of 33 children in one month alone.

There are no properties for a one-child family with a €900 HAP limit, the current limit, in Cork. Homeless HAP will not fix the housing crisis, but it might give these families a chance of a short-term solution. To be honest, I do not believe in HAP. It is a bad support and it is not social housing. It was brought in by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and it is the only support available for many people because of their failures in housing. Any progress made during the pandemic is being eroded. What we are seeing now is a dramatic increase in evictions or notices to quit. Peter McVerry this week said this housing crisis is the worst in 40 years. He said people "are despairing and depressed" and have no hope.

Will the Minister and his Government review the emergency HAP provision for those living outside Dublin? I ask this because we have seen dramatic increases in rents. People are

unable to pay the resulting difference. Regarding the first lady I spoke about, she is in her 60s and could never have foreseen herself becoming homeless. Yet she is now facing this prospect. Another case I worked on recently was that of a girl in her early 20s who is a graduate of University College Cork, UCC. She is considering following up on her degree by doing her masters in the autumn. She is working full-time, but had to go into homeless emergency accommodation because her landlord was selling the property. Thankfully, Edel House is providing that young girl with assistance and support. I thank the people involved with that organisation for the brilliant work they do. How, though, can a young lady with a degree and a full-time job end up homeless in this State?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The housing assistance payment, HAP, is a flexible and immediate housing support available to all eligible households throughout the State. At the end of quarter four of 2021, more than 100,000 HAP tenancies had been set up since the scheme commenced, of which more than 61,900 households were actively receiving HAP support.

Under HAP, tenants source their own accommodation in the private-rented market. However, additional supports are available under HAP for homeless households or households at risk of homelessness. While eligible households or individuals may source accommodation for themselves under the homeless HAP scheme, a dedicated resource, the place finder service, has been established nationwide to provide assistance. The place finder service can assist households in emergency accommodation or at risk of homelessness primarily by providing access to deposits and advance rental payments. The operation of the homeless services, including the place finder service, is a matter for each local authority.

The place finder positions are funded by my Department. On foot of a circular, housing 4/2018, the Department has issued approval for 23 place finder positions in local authorities. However, place finder positions were already in place in the four Dublin local authorities prior to the circular being issued. In 2021, there were five HAP place finders in the four Dublin local authorities, in addition to their existing homeless services. Several local authorities indicated they did not wish to seek additional resources to establish a place finder service as they were satisfied with their existing homeless services.

Each local authority has statutory discretion to agree to a HAP payment of up to 20% above the prescribed maximum rent limit to secure appropriate accommodation for a household that requires it, or up to 50% in the case of homeless households in the Dublin region. It is a matter for the local authority to determine, on a case-by-case basis, whether, and to what extent, the application of the flexibility is warranted, although it should be noted that local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that tenancies are sustainable. From available data, at the end of the fourth quarter of 2021, some 57% of the total number of households being supported by HAP were benefiting from the additional flexibility, at an average rate of discretion of 24.2% above the relevant limit.

The programme for Government commits to ensuring that HAP levels are adequate to support vulnerable households, while the supply of social housing increases. Under Housing for All, the Department was tasked with undertaking an analytical exercise to examine whether an increase in the level of 20% discretion available to local authorities under HAP is required to maintain adequate levels of HAP support. The Housing Agency undertook this exercise on behalf of the Department and submitted the review to the Department. The review is undergoing analysis in our Department and this will conclude shortly. This is something the Department

is considering.

I note the Deputy's comments concerning the spiralling rents. There are also many issues with landlords leaving the market. This is placing an added burden on homeless services and local authorities. Our Department is committed to ensuring we have a full range of services and supports in place for families at risk of homelessness. Homeless HAP has provided a good basis for trying to support families and individuals in these circumstances. The longer-term picture here concerns the supply of social housing, which we are delivering at scale. It will, however, take some time to get to the point where this provision will make a marked impact on the homeless situation, which we acknowledge is difficult now.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The question I asked has not been answered. I refer to an increase in the homeless HAP for living outside the Dublin area. As the Minister of State said, it is possible to avail of a rate 20% above the maximum rate outside the Dublin area, but discretion in this regard is set at 50% inside the Dublin area. I ask that the level of discretion be set at 50% across the State. I think that would be fair. We have seen dramatic increases in rent in every county. What we have now are people struggling. I am talking about people who are entitled to a payment but for whom that payment is not enough to allow them to secure a roof over their head.

I spoke earlier about the number of children in emergency accommodation. Outside Dublin, 735 children will be going to bed tonight in unsuitable and unstable accommodation. Most children are looking forward to the summer and to holidays, summer camps and getting to the beach. The worry for these 735 children is whether they will have a roof over their heads. This is the situation these families are facing. Homelessness in families outside Dublin is increasing. It is a significant increase. From March to April this year, we saw the number of families affected increase from 337 to 352. People are desperate and they need support. Great mistakes were made in Dublin years ago when the homelessness figures skyrocketed. This same problem is now happening outside Dublin. I do not know if the Minister, the Minister of State and the Department understand the number of people now facing homelessness this summer. It took the Government years to act when this kind of problem hit Dublin. This type of tsunami is coming to the rest of the State. The Government must act now.

We have a situation in Cork and other cities where the numbers in homeless accommodation are increasing rapidly. There is also the element of hidden homelessness. It has been estimated by St. Vincent de Paul that 30,000 people are in hidden homelessness. This is on top of the 10,000 people we know of.

5 o'clock

That amounts to 40,000 people, one third or 13,000 of whom are children.

A recent report from the Simon Community, *Locked Out of the Market*, found that there were only 80 properties available under HAP. This is a drastic reduction of 92% on the figure of 906 properties that were available in June 2021. We are in dire straits. The Peter McVerry Trust and other organisations are saying we need to act now.

Deputy Malcolm Noonan: The Housing for All plan sets out the Government's commitment to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 per year over the next decade, including an average of 10,000 new build social homes, which we are on track to deliver. As I said, that is where part of the solution lies, but not the entire solution. It is our ambition to

reduce dependency on HAP by increasing social housing provision. Notwithstanding that, as I said in my initial response, it is critical that an analytical review be undertaken on increasing the 20% discretionary limit that local authorities have under HAP. On the increase in the discretionary limit of 20%, the Deputy suggested it be raised to 50% as per the Dublin local authorities. The Housing Agency has completed that piece of work and the Department is undertaking its analysis. We should be able to conclude the findings of that process shortly.

I accept the points made by the Deputy. It is an incredibly and increasingly challenging situation across the country, in which all services are stretched. The Department is committed to resolving these issues. The Minister has consistently stated in the House that he is committed to addressing the issue of homelessness. The Government is committed to eliminating homelessness by 2030. These reviews will take place and if discretion is there on the 20% limit for local authorities, it will certainly help to alleviate the situation for the families involved in the cases the Deputy mentioned.

Urban Regeneration Report: Motion

Deputy Steven Matthews: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage entitled “Urban Regeneration”, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 24th May, 2022.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, for sharing his time with me on this very important report. I thank the Oireachtas for granting us the opportunity to debate this report on urban regeneration, which was a collaborative cross-party report by all members of the Oireachtas housing committee.

We approached this review with an understanding and acknowledgement of the opportunity that vacant and derelict buildings across this country could provide in terms of housing. We met over four sessions, during which we brought in people with extensive experience. We heard expert advice from a range of participants and expert witnesses, including from researchers from the National Economic and Social Council, NESC; academics from University College Dublin, UCD, and Technological University Dublin; architects from UCD and practising architects; civil society groups and active transport groups; local government management personnel; and senior officials from Departments. A range of experts assisted us in looking at all the different facets of urban regeneration. We believe that vacant and derelict buildings across the country, in every town, village and city, can add to the housing supply which we so badly need. Many towns have kilometres of vacant second-storey and third-storey floors, which would be ideal as smaller homes and one-bedroom and two-bedroom units, for which we know there is a great demand.

Bringing old and empty buildings back to life would bring life and vibrancy back into our towns. It would bring footfall onto the streets. We have seen throughout Ireland, over the decades when building continuously sprawled out, that the attention was taken away from town centres. Our planning system was looking outwards the entire time. Development was spread over greenfield site after greenfield site, with three-bedroom semi-detached properties. It confined people to long commutes. It was unsustainable development by any definition.

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If we want to stop the hollowing out of our towns, especially rural towns, it is my view and the view of the committee that we need to start looking inwards again. We need to consider how we regenerate and bring life back to our towns and bring footfall onto our streets. Doing this would keep local shops open. It would support local businesses. We have seen in recent years how local businesses have struggled. It would bring more customers back into towns. It would generate more business. When one shop opens, because of the increase in footfall, another shop opens. People see that businesses can succeed. It would bring that vibrancy back to our towns, the way they used to be. When one looks at old pictures of Irish towns from years ago, one sees that there was life and vitality in them.

We have seen from digitisation, working from home, and the rural broadband roll-out that it is possible for some workers to have the flexibility to live in rural and commuter towns. It reduces the commute into the city, which helps with climate action by reducing transport emissions. It reduces the time people are stuck in traffic. In my constituency, people can be stuck in long commutes along the N11 the whole time, which is a terrible waste of people's time in the morning. They should be able to work from home in rural towns and villages throughout Wicklow. Not only would it help the climate by reducing transport emissions, but also because there is an amount of embodied carbon in every one of those buildings throughout our towns and villages. That concrete has already been poured. Those buildings are in existence. If we could concentrate on refurbishing them and retaining that carbon rather than demolishing them or continuously building new properties and pouring new concrete, it would make perfect sense in terms of keeping that carbon locked in.

When the population of a town centre increases, it also makes the provision of services more viable. When there is dispersed settlement and towns have small populations, it is hard to provide public transport services. It is just not viable and it is hard to provide many of the other public services that go with it. When there are economies of scale and town population sizes are brought back to what they should be, it makes it more viable to provide bus services, community services and public services, such as libraries and entertainment - everything that goes with living in a town. It is not just about having a house. It is about actually living in the town. It is about community. It is about a breathing, living, happy place to be.

The type of work involved in refurbishing and renovating these buildings would suit smaller builders as well. Energy retrofits of all houses and commercial buildings will take place across the entire country. With the refurbishment of vacant buildings, it means that the work would exist locally or regionally. It would cut down on the need to travel for many people in construction. Not only would it support those local builders, but it would also support the local supply chain and the ancillary businesses that go with it.

Providing homes in our towns from the vacant and empty stock makes sense from a social, economic and environmental perspective. That is the very definition of sustainable development. Our committee deliberations recognised that it is not enough to fill an entire town with people. It is not enough to populate every second and third floor in every vacant building. It would create a very busy place but not necessarily a nice place to live. We recognise quite clearly that the population growth must be matched with other actions. In that way, the development of buildings or lands would encourage people to live in the town. It must be matched with nice public spaces to sit and meet and to enjoy the town for socialising.

We also need to concentrate on transport within towns. We must create safe pedestrian routes for people to walk, as well as safe cycling routes to school. Not so long ago, 20 or 30

years ago, many children cycled and walked to school. That number has completely flipped because we concentrated on car dominance and allocated so much of the space in our towns to driving through them. The objective in vehicle transport should be to allow people to get to the town but not necessarily give them the full dominance to go through the town. That should be reserved for people and children walking and cycling, for pedestrians around our town.

The report contains 39 recommendations and each one could help us to regenerate our towns and homes. I look forward to the opportunity to consider and discuss the report today. I wish to highlight a number of the recommendations. I know many people have had the chance to read the report. It is not a very long report, only 30-odd pages, and it is very well put together. Some of the recommendations stand out as key. For example, recommendation No. 1 is that a “single national platform be created to integrate, compile and effectively organise existing and future data on vacancy and dereliction into a national data set, to be made to be made publicly accessible through the use of GIS and other spatial visualisation technologies.”

Another recommendation is that the Department conduct an audit of all local authorities and other related agencies, including the GeoDirectory, to capture what data sets they have with regard to land management, vacancy, dereliction and housing more specifically. The committee made that recommendation because it became very clear during our meetings that there are data being collected by a whole series of agencies, civil society groups and Government agencies, but we do not pull them all together into one place. We need to pull those data together, which is what the committee recommended.

The committee suggested the Department agree with local authorities that a percentage of new and social affordable housing output should come from vacant and derelict properties. It is important that we set that target for our local authorities. That includes the repair and lease scheme, where we copy those local authorities that are successful and doing it well and try to replicate that through our other local authorities. The process is in place. We have to look at why some local authorities, such as Waterford City and County Council, Louth County Council and Limerick City and Council, are hitting good targets, while a number of other have not produced any additional housing through repair and lease. We need to concentrate on what works and fix those areas that are not working. When we know where the vacancy is, we have to look at how we will bring it back into use.

The committee recommends the establishment of a one-stop regulatory approvals process. We need to improve the regulatory process to make it simpler and easier for somebody to refurbish a house. We need to address the complexity of some building regulations and ensure standards are not reduced but the process is simplified. In addition, we want there to be robust oversight, certification and inspection of building works. There should be no self-certification. The report makes a number of other recommendations, which I look forward to discussing later. I thank members of the committee for their time in compiling this report.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and thank the committee Chair and members for their consideration of this very important report to inform Government policy.

The topic of urban regeneration is central to solving many of the challenges that face our country. Urban decay, retail vacancy and depopulation are unwelcome symptoms of the challenges we continue to face in our towns and cities. The Minister for Housing, Local Govern-

ment and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, and I will continue to study the recommendations of this report and will comprehensively respond to them in the near future. The recommendations generally span many of the themes the Government is addressing. In that respect, and before I respond to the full report, I welcome this opportunity to advise Deputies on what the Government is doing and what can be done on these themes.

The Government launched the town centre first policy in February last. The policy is very much aimed at progressing the challenges in urban areas and towns around the country, in particular tackling the issues of vacancy, local transport, quality public spaces, housing and economic development that are very important in delivering regeneration in its broadest sense. The provisions of the town centre first policy are an important step forward in highlighting the importance of urban regeneration and the need to properly develop and invest in our urban areas. Town centre first provides a range of tangible staffing, funding and other resource supports to those seeking to progress and deliver regeneration initiatives. These measures are aimed at both local and national level to ensure co-ordination and delivery of the benefits to the citizen wherever they can be experienced. I note as well that town centre first is a collaborative, bottom-up approach aimed at animating communities towards heritage-led regeneration.

Addressing vacancy and maximising the use of existing housing stock is a primary objective of this Government, as demonstrated by one of our four pathways dedicated solely to this area in the new Housing for All strategy. Housing for All outlines a suite of measures aimed at addressing vacancy in a co-ordinated and robust manner. These include a local authority-led programme to help local authorities buy or compulsory purchase 2,500 vacant homes in their areas, which can be sold on the open market, ensuring these homes do not lie vacant; reform of the fair deal scheme to remove disincentives to selling or renting unused homes; and the Croí Cónaithe towns initiative, which will be delivered by local authorities for the provision of serviced sites for housing to attract people to build their own homes and to support the refurbishment of vacant properties, enabling people to live in small towns and villages in a sustainable way. These measures are added to the possible vacant property tax being considered by the Department of Finance, in addition to the residential zoned land tax, which was included in the Finance Act 2021 to incentivise the activation of residential development land, including vacant or idle mixed-use land in settlements, as a replacement for the vacant site levy.

In terms of vacancy and dereliction data measurement, which is outlined in the report, I appreciate the significance given by the committee's recommendations to the accuracy and completeness of data on this important issue. The committee was briefed on the range of available national data sources and also some of the current limitations to this information. Data on vacancy emerging from Census 2022 will need to be carefully examined in this regard. However, there is no doubt a serious and widespread vacancy issue exists across the country and further investigation is required to better understand the nature and extent of the problem in order to most effectively deploy funding and resources to tackle it.

My Department is developing a survey methodology for locating vacant housing at local level, in conjunction with the Housing Agency, the Central Statistics Office, CSO, and the local government sector to more accurately determine the levels of vacancy. I note there are other methodologies out there, such as the collaborative town centre health check, which gets to the heart of some of the vacancy issues across the country.

While the committee's recommendations on repair and leasing are being examined, it is important to point out that the existing scheme has already been augmented since that scheme was

established. The 2022 allocation of €12 million for the repair and leasing scheme will support bringing more than 120 properties back into use and the ongoing work of the local authority vacant homes units. The repair and leasing scheme is a crucial initiative in tackling vacancy under Housing for All because in addition to providing social housing, it also has additional benefits in terms of regeneration, employment and investment in local areas. It assists private property owners, local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, in utilising existing vacant housing unit stock throughout the country for social housing. The scheme provides upfront funding for any works necessary to bring properties up to the required standard and in return, the property owner agrees to lease the dwelling to the local authority to be used for social housing for a period of between five and 25 years.

Recent changes in the scheme to assist in delivery include the November 2020 increase in the maximum cost of repairs allowable under the scheme from €40,000 to €60,000, including VAT. Local authorities have reported increased interest in the scheme and it is expected that this will be seen in delivery of units in the coming years. Where a property owner is bringing more than one dwelling in a single development into the scheme, the funds available, for example, €60,000 including VAT per dwelling, may be apportioned between a number of dwellings once total funding for all dwellings does not exceed €60,000 per dwelling, subject to a maximum spending limit. Housing for All committed to supporting local authorities to drive an expanded uptake of the scheme.

Deputies will note that the primary objective of the vacant site levy is to act as a mechanism to incentivise the development of vacant and underutilised sites in urban areas for both the provision of housing and the development and renewal of land, thereby facilitating the most efficient use of such land and sites, enabling them to be brought into beneficial use, rather than allowing them to remain dormant and undeveloped.

The vacant site levy provisions under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 provide that the levy will apply to vacant sites exceeding 0.05 ha on residential or regeneration land, as designated in local development plans that meet the relevant criteria. The levy can be applied to vacant sites regardless of ownership, either public or private. In this context, local authorities and public bodies are liable for the charge if the criteria for a vacant site are met.

The Derelict Sites Act 1990 imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure the land does not become or continue to be a derelict site. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure any land within their functional area does not become or continue to be a derelict site. Again, noting the theme of enforcement in the recommendations, it is important to recognise that the Department intends to engage with local authorities in order to ensure more proactive and effective enforcement of the provisions of the legislation. At the moment, it is considered that the Act is not being implemented as effectively as it could be, nor is it achieving its full potential. The Department also intends to review the Act with a view to improving the effectiveness as it has been in place since 1990.

On resourcing, the recommendations also refer to the importance of qualified and resourced departments and sections in our local authorities as well as within the Department to support urban regeneration objectives. I met recently with the Association of Architectural Conservation Officers. Again, we have a huge inconsistency across the country where many local authorities do not even have an architectural conservation officer, ACO, in place. The Department is committed to carrying out a review with the County and City Management Association, CCMA, to

try to address those deficits. ACOs play a critical role in trying to unlock the potential of, in particular, heritage buildings across the country. Recent resourcing initiatives to support objectives in addressing vacancy includes the local authorities' vacant homes action plans, all of which have been developed to identify the scale of vacant homes in their administrative areas and to set ambitious but realistic targets of the number of vacant homes that can ultimately be brought back into use, whether for private sale or rent or for social housing purposes.

My Department is also ensuring each local authority is provided with a vacant homes officer operating on a full-time basis. This resource will create a central point of contact for those interested in bringing existing buildings into residential use and assisting owners in addressing regulatory requirements related to this process. This will work to identify and develop local initiatives to tackle vacancy in concert with the wider local authority and others.

The urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, was launched in 2018 to deliver more compact and sustainable development in support of the objectives of the national planning framework and the national development plan. The fund provides part-funding for projects that will enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed-use development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and large towns while also ensuring more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people choose to work and live.

The significant URDF pipeline of projects is focused on integrated strategic development areas, combining a number of elements and schemes that support wider climate action objectives and liveability factors within our cities and towns. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 constraints, restrictions and consequential economic impacts, the programme of URDF supported transformational regeneration and rejuvenation projects will take on an increased importance in its potential in the medium to longer term to provide a catalyst for economic and social renewal. While programmes such as the URDF and the sister rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, operated by the Department of Rural and Community Development, are primarily intended to support wider town regeneration, these programmes also facilitate optimal use and reuse of existing properties and contribute to the creation of conditions conducive to housing developments in towns.

Combined, this investment is making a substantial difference to the liveability of these areas. Further calls for funding under the URDF will separately address the needs of cities and towns, and aligned with the approach under the RRDF, which deals with towns below a population of 10,000, specific criteria will be included to encourage the activation of vacant properties within the overall vision for towns and to bring stock back into productive use.

I look forward to the discourse and debate. This is an area of great importance for Government. We know that we have a great challenge ahead of us but the suite of Government policies and plans I have outlined go some way towards addressing these challenges. I welcome this report. The Minister of State, Deputy Burke, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I will give it active consideration and will see how it dovetails with the projects and plans that are already in place.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Cormac Devlin): Deputy Ó Broin is sharing time with Deputy Gould.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Chairman of our committee, Deputy Matthews, not only

for chairing the sessions that led to this report but also because it was, in fact, his proposition to the committee to do a dedicated series of public hearings and to produce this report, not only because it is an important matter for him but also because he knew it was also an issue of significant concern to ourselves.

I also acknowledge that it was a very collegiate series of engagements where there was a great deal of cross-party and cross-Government and Opposition support for the recommendations that are in front of us here today. That speaks to the importance of this issue both as a constituency issue for many of us in our electoral areas in respect of the centrality of tackling vacancy to deal with the housing crisis and with the regeneration of our villages, towns and city centres, and crucially, as outlined by Deputy Matthews, in playing a very important part in addressing the carbon footprint of residential development, particularly in the context of the upcoming sectoral emissions targets that will apply as much to the embodied carbon of the built environment as anything else.

Before I comment on the report in front of us, it is important we reflect a little bit upon where we have come from in the past five years because the previous Government's housing plan, Rebuilding Ireland, had an entire section, one of its five pillars, dedicated to tackling the scourge of vacancy. Deputy Coveney, who was the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, went much further than that and produced an entire document and strategy with a very long list of proposals and measures to tackle the issue of vacancy. Yet here we are, five years on with a change of Government and all the targets that were in that section of Rebuilding Ireland, together with those in Deputy Coveney's vacant homes strategy, have been missed. The level of vacancy in our cities, towns and villages is the same as it was back in 2016, whether one looks at the census, GeoDirectory or any other measure. The three key funding streams that were introduced by the previous Government - repair and lease, buy and renew, and the rolling €80 million Housing Agency fund - all missed their targets by a colossal amount. We have had a tiny amount of vacancy brought back into use through those schemes, despite the very ambitious claims made by the Government at the time.

The reason I say this is not to dwell on the past, but if we want to ensure we do not repeat those mistakes, we have to understand what the problems were. Repair and lease was a very badly designed scheme. It did not address the varying costs of vacancy in different cities. It worked in Waterford because property prices were much lower and refurbishment levels were also lower but it was never a viable option in Dublin. Buy and renew was the same. It worked very successfully in Louth, albeit from a low base, but in the large urban centres of Cork, Dublin and elsewhere, again the allocations of funding were insufficient. The Housing Agency rolling fund of €80 million was too slow and bureaucratic and did not meet any of its targets.

Crucially, despite the fact the principles underlying all three schemes were positive, there was no stick to go with the carrot. Former Deputy Eoghan Murphy, as people will remember, when he was appointed as Minister by the then Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, was given three tasks, one of which was to explore the introduction of a vacant property tax. The Government commissioned an expensive consultant to produce a report for the Department of Finance. No housing policy expertise was brought to bear in that report, the report recommended not to proceed with the tax and the idea was quietly dropped. The lesson from that is that you cannot work with the carrot alone. There must be a penalty for people who wilfully sit on vacant properties. I have said over and over again that wilfully sitting on a vacant property for no good reason at the height of housing crisis is akin to hoarding food in a famine. It should not be allowed and there should be a heavy penalty. The sooner that happens, the better.

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I have some concerns about the current Government's housing plan and I hope the Government and the lead Minister reflects carefully on these cross-party recommendations because, notwithstanding the list of measures the Minister of State has just outlined, the actual target for returning vacant units back into active residential use in the Government's housing plan are incredibly modest, especially when you think that the most reliable dataset that we have of the current level of vacancy, limited and all that it is, is GeoDirectory, which estimates there are approximately 90,000 vacant properties throughout the State. Yet, between Croí Cónaithe towns, the full details of which we still do not know, and the use of local authority compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, we might be looking at perhaps 5,000 units being brought back into active use from vacancy and dereliction from now until 2025, which is far too small a proportion.

It is deeply disappointing the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is repeating the same misrepresentation of what are called voids as Eoghan Murphy did. There are virtually no voids left in the local authority housing stock. Anyone who knows their own local authority will know that. The so-called voids programme the Minister constantly refers to is actually a top-up fund for casual relets. When someone moves out of an existing council property, and because of the age of the property it costs more than the standard amount to refurbish, the Department provides an additional sum of money to ensure there is no delay in the casual reletting of that property. Presenting these properties as voids, however, is almost like saying mysteriously, every year, there are several thousand long-term vacant social housing units being brought back into stock. This is not true. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, was as critical of Eoghan Murphy as I am of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, now when Eoghan Murphy used this same misrepresentation. I urge the Minister to be more honest with people about that particular measure.

With respect to the recommendations here, I would like to pick out the few I believe are most important. The very fact there is a range of recommendations means there is equal weighting from committee members, but I would like to state the number of actions which are absolutely key. One of the things that worries me about the current Government's housing plan, and indeed with the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan's recitation of some of the measures, is that if there are too many measures, we do not focus on the very important ones and not as much gets done. If there are a smaller number of higher priority actions, a greater level of vacancy can be addressed.

The first issue is the data and, in fairness, both Deputy Matthews and the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, mentioned this. We have to do what Scotland has done. We had very good testimony from expert academics from UCD as to the success of Scotland's methodology for counting vacancy, for separating out the different kinds of vacancy, and filtering that information down to the relevant local agency or authority so it knows not just the total number of vacant properties but also where they are, what they are and which ones can be actively brought into use. That we are five or six years from Rebuilding Ireland and are still asking for that data is a shame. The Government should undertake the exercise as a matter of urgency. In her presentation to the committee, Ms Orla Murphy set out very clearly what it should look like. That is starting point number one.

Second, it makes no sense for the State to invest, albeit too modestly, in my view, in social and affordable housing and not have specific targets for the delivery of social and affordable housing from vacant and derelict stock. If we are going to deliver 9,000 or 10,000 social homes a year and 2,000 to 4,000 affordable homes as per the Government's housing plan, then a percentage should be from vacant sites. It would differ from local authority to local authority because of the nature of their stock but overall it should be 20% to 25% of all new public house

building. Local authorities respond to strict targets and we have to integrate that into our public house building programme as a matter of urgency.

Third is the vacant property tax. There was a very interesting exchange during the launch of this report when the media picked up on what it believed was mixed messages from the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Taoiseach over whether we would see a vacant property tax in the budget in October. In fairness to Deputy McAuliffe, he reiterated his strong support for a vacant property tax. I do not doubt his sincerity at all. However, the great concern for many of us is that information put in the public domain from the Department of Finance suggests that Deputy McAuliffe's strong support for this very sensible idea is not necessarily shared with the same enthusiasm by the Minister for Finance or his officials. We will not know until budget day but I urge the Deputies opposite to use as much influence as they can to ensure that vital tool is in the toolkit come budget day in October. If we do not have a vacant property tax, without a stick to ensure that those who are wilfully sitting and, in many cases, speculatively on vacant properties for no good reason are punished for doing so, many of the other measures here will fall exactly the same way that the measures in the previous Government's plan, which is well-intentioned and successful at the edges but will not make a profound difference.

The housing crisis is getting worse. Homelessness has breached 10,000 adults and children officially according to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We could be looking at nearly 11,000 adults and children in emergency accommodation in a matter of months if the current rates continue to accelerate. In Dublin, there are approximately 1,000 homeless families but 20,000 vacant homes. You do not have to be a genius to do the maths. If we want to end homelessness, provide good-quality social and affordable housing, revitalise our city, town and village centres and tackle the pressing issue of zero-carbon built environments, this is the key. This is what we must do first. Let us all work together to make sure in the months and years ahead that the recommendations in the report are realised and that we dramatically reduce vacancy and give families and single people the homes they desperately need and rightly deserve.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I agree with my colleague, Deputy Ó Broin. I welcome the report. I thank the chair and the committee. Sometimes we disagree and argue but in putting this housing and urban regeneration report together, people worked well because we need to come up with solutions, which the report outlines. There was extensive consultation with various groups that dedicate their time and energy to tackling dereliction and improving our towns, villages and cities. I thank all those who engaged in the process. I pay particular thanks to Dr. Frank O'Connor and Ms Jude Sherry from Anois. Myself and Deputy Ó Broin were in Cork city recently where we did a dereliction tour. It is a horrible thing to say but that is what we did. It was unbelievably shocking and heartbreaking to see the amount of dereliction and vacancy in my own city. But when I come up to Dublin and I travel along, the quays the same dereliction exists. If you go anywhere in the west, whether the little villages or big cities, you will see it. Historic, cultural and significant buildings are being left to rot in the centre of cities and towns. That is why the recommendations in this report need to be acted on. It is astounding that the joint committee can put together a report like this when surely the Department and previous Ministers knew this and failed to act. In my own county, we could clear the housing crisis and end homelessness if we tackled dereliction and vacancy. Some 9,990 properties are vacant in Cork alone according to GeoDirectory. Let us imagine what we could do but the Government has to have the will. As Deputy Ó Broin said, there must be a carrot and a stick. It is 32 years since the derelict site register came in. At the time the Minister for housing, Deputy Pádraig

Flynn said that dereliction had, unfortunately, become a growing problem in many towns and cities in Ireland and it was also taking away the attractiveness for inhabitants, tourists and potential industries.

So where are we now? We are in the exact same position. There are sites on the derelict site register that have been there for 32 years. These are buildings that could be homes for families and could be used to house new businesses but instead they are left to rack and ruin and the people who are hoarding these properties are let get away scot-free. We think that is fundamentally wrong.

However, no measure of dereliction in villages, towns or cities exists. We do not have the data, as this report recognises. At the end of 2020, according to the derelict sites register there were 1,548 derelict sites in the State. I believe there are that many in Cork city and county alone. That shows just how out-of-touch the register is. I ask that the Minister take on board the reports recommendations. He should use the considerable resources available to him to catalogue the data on vacant sites that we need. The Derelict Sites Act has failed. It has not tackled dereliction. In 1995, five years after the Act came in, the then Minister of State, Deputy Noel Ahern, said it was vital because developers were giving the finger to the corporations, as they were then. What is the difference now? A collection rate of 7% of the derelict sites register was applied in 2020. That compares with a 89% collection of council rates. How can we collect 7% of one levy and 89% of another? This is a no-brainer. At the end of the month the updated derelict sites levy collection data will be available. We all know that this data will not be up to date and that it will not be properly enforced. There is more than €12 million in untapped revenue that local authorities could generate, which could help turn these vacant properties and sites into homes. A lot of work has gone into this report. It needs to be delivered on now.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has also raised some very challenging questions for local authorities.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome the opportunity to respond to the report of the joint committee on urban regeneration. I commend Deputy Matthews and his colleagues on the really important work the committee has done. I offer the Labour Party's support for its recommendations, which chime very much with calls made by our spokesperson on housing, Senator Moynihan. They are sensible recommendations. Everyone across the country acknowledges the need to regenerate urban centres by bringing derelict or vacant properties back into use including, and especially, for social and affordable housing. It is such a crucial point. The stark and dramatic figures on homelessness, with more than 10,000 people in emergency accommodation last week, nearly 3,000 of whom are children, illustrate the extent to which we need to ensure effective measures are put in place to bring vacant properties back into use. That is not the only way to tackle the homelessness and housing crises but it is a big part of it. That is acknowledged in this important report. Indeed, it was acknowledged earlier this week by the Raise the Roof campaign relaunch. I was glad to attend that along with many other colleagues and to hear Peter McVerry say that supply is a considerable issue. It is the big issue to address the housing crisis but it is also about affordable supply. Looking at how we can bring vacant and derelict properties back into use is one way to tackle the supply issue. The recommendations on the vacant homes tax and on changing the derelict sites levy to a derelict sites tax are sensible and effective.

Alongside that, there are crucial recommendations on improving our data. As others have said, a considerable issue and obstacle to bringing derelict properties back into usage is the fact

that we lack an online, publicly accessible and up-to-date register of properties at which we can look. In my own area of Dublin Bay South, a very high proportion of our households, 44%, are private rental accommodation. There is considerable housing need and significant issues about affordability of rents in this constituency and yet, I see vacant and derelict properties on every street down which I walk or cycle. They could be brought back into use through a combination of the carrot and big stick. We have all been talking about that and it is acknowledged in this report.

I will also refer to the role of local authorities. The report acknowledges that it is not just about bringing measures into place. It is also about ensuring effective enforcement. My Labour Party colleagues who work as city and county councillors regularly convey to me their frustration at the way at which they are stymied by bureaucratic obstacles that prevent quick conversion of vacant and derelict sites. Senator Moynihan made this point in committee.

While local authorities are often scapegoated, we need to ensure there is adequate resourcing in place. We have called for the establishment of dedicated teams in local authorities, tasked with identifying vacant and derelict sites and bringing them back to active use. We have submitted a number of questions to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and to local authorities, which tell us that many local authorities employ, at most, one full-time vacant sites officer. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, has just referred to funding being made available to ensure there is better staffing in local authorities. However, current staffing levels are clearly not adequate even to ensure enforcement of existing measures on vacant and derelict sites.

In response to a freedom of information request submitted by Senator Moynihan, it was revealed that even where local authorities have, through their existing staffing resources, identified vacant or derelict sites, they are facing enormous challenges in enforcing taxes and fines against owners and do not have enough guidance in respect of how to approach this problem. The co-ordinated approach advocated by this report is very much welcome.

We have also proposed that the Government would provide local authorities with emergency compulsory purchase order powers. That would be the ultimate big-stick approach. Again, however, local authorities would have to be sufficiently resourced to be able to exercise those powers effectively.

Those are the stick side of the measures. However, there is also the carrot side, which is the encouragement and support of property owners who have allowed sites to fall into dereliction, to bring them back into use. In Amsterdam, there is an interesting example of a policy whereby landowners are required to register property and, if the property has fallen into vacancy, they are encouraged to bring it back into use. Authorities work with users to help them make use of spaces and ensure there is sufficient support to do so. The owners go to the local authorities to look for meanwhile use of their site and there is incentive for landowners to reduce costs. It is seen as a cost to leave a site vacant. That is where we need to get to. Through a combination of incentives and taxes, we need to get to a point where it is too costly for an owner to leave a site, home, house or apartment empty or derelict and where local authorities and the Government are incentivising bringing sites back into use.

Urban regeneration is not just about social and affordable housing, although that has to be a key focus. That is acknowledged in the report. Urban regeneration policies are also about ensuring vibrant, active and positive communities for us all. This goes beyond simply bringing

vacant properties back into usage. It means ensuring maintenance of face-to-face services and community centres. I will host a public meeting in Rathmines next week because we have seen the closure of the citizens information centre there. Even in busy urban centres, we are seeing a closure of face-to-face settings and community amenities such as post offices.

It is even more the case in rural areas. I was in County Westmeath on Monday, in a wonderful community hall in Rochfortbridge. I heard about real concerns about rural degeneration there with the closure of post offices, banks, Garda stations and many of the other settings and community facilities where people would have had the face-to-face contact that is essential for a vibrant public realm and space.

The report acknowledges that this goes beyond housing. This is about creating better and more sustainable public spaces. Very welcome is the acknowledgement of the need to combine planning and urban regeneration policies with active transport and travel policies to plan for public transport, cycling and walking infrastructure to facilitate the development of meaningful and sustainable communities. I commend Deputy Matthews and those involved in this report. I hope the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is listening to this and that we will see these important recommendations swiftly brought into effect.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I like Deputy Bacik's phrase that this goes beyond housing, because too much of the debate on vacancy and dereliction focuses on our immediate need in terms of supply. I heard Deputy Gould suggest that we could tackle the entire housing crisis if we tackled dereliction alone. Of course we know that is not true. We need significant numbers of new builds and we need new supply. That is not to say we do not need to tackle dereliction but, like everything in the housing crisis, it will not be solved by one measure or a simplistic slogan.

There are many reasons for vacancy and dereliction, which can be divided into a number of different areas. The Drake Inn is a famous derelict site in Finglas. The old sack factory sits in Santry. Anybody who drives through Phibsborough will see the old mill. These are known sites which, in many cases, have been vacant or derelict for decades. In a similar way, we have some homes in housing estates that also have been unoccupied and derelict for decades. It is always for a multiple of reasons. It can often be due to a person's capacity or ability to tackle the problem. It may be the person's financial capacity or other challenges in his or her life. Alternatively, it may be because of complex legal titles on a large site or complex legal ownership issues.

In all of this, we have to adopt active land management. Local authorities need to roll up their sleeves, identify sites, owners and solutions and deliver results for their communities. Regardless of what we do in terms of legislation in this House, it will only be solved by our local authorities on the ground. Any of the big sites I talked about in the centre of our villages will increase supply but, more than that, they will tackle what is eating away at our villages and towns.

I welcomed Housing for All last year because specific and definite measures are now available, both to owners and local authorities, to tackle vacancy and dereliction. Let me take as an example the site I mentioned earlier of the old pub at the centre of Finglas village known as The Drake Inn. That site has been derelict for some time. Housing for All has a number of measures that allows its owner to activate the site. First, we have made changes in terms of planning, to make it easier for that person to build on the old pub on a small scale. Second, the Croí Cónaithe cities scheme will allow the owner of that property, in an open-book process,

to apply for below-cost, owner-occupied apartments. We have talked a lot about apartments only being available to rent. Croí Cónaithe cities, which many Members have criticised in this House, prioritise owner-occupied, below-the-cost-of-construction homes. It is available for the owner or developer of that site to apply to the Croí Cónaithe scheme, with the Government subventing it in order to make it viable. It is not that we want to give developers €100,000. We want to make sure that those homes are built. At present, it is not viable to build on that empty site, which is why it has been empty for 30 years.

In terms of the capacity of a person, there may be issues going on in his or her life. The person may have other challenges and may not be able to develop the site. The local authority has to be able to step in. We want to have an easier, more streamlined compulsory purchase process, because local authorities are too afraid to issue compulsory purchase orders, CPOs. Every Member of this House knows about a complicated site on which a council has spent too much money, yet that example is thrown at us repeatedly when we ask why councils will not develop other sites. We need a simplified process. In the context of Housing for All, I welcomed the Housing Agency providing a more streamlined pathway for CPOs and allowing local authorities to use CPO powers. The Housing Agency is meeting banks and An Post to talk about properties. We have tools that will help owners and developers, which I have outlined, and we also have tools to allow local authorities to develop.

There is no excuse for any local authority not to build public housing. There is so much money on the table. The Government has made all of the money that is needed available. There are many different options, including building cost-rental, affordable purchase or council housing. They can do that all on the sites I mentioned in our towns and villages that have been lying idle. They need to use CPOs and apply to the Department, but all the tools are available. One wonders what would happen if they spent a lot of money buying and developing a site and proved to be either below or above the viable cost. However, the cost of it lying idle is far greater to a community. Like a cancer, dereliction eats away at neighbouring buildings. We all know that; we do not need this report to tell us. The tools are there in Housing for All. Some have yet to be rolled out but, by and large, the financing and tools are all there for local authorities to avail of. I encourage them to avail of the tools. We should shame them if they do not do so.

I thank the committee Chair, Deputy Matthews, for initiating this report and for the skill with which he chaired meetings, with a large number of outside bodies coming in. The members of the committee tried to engage with them, and then there was the complex process of putting the report together. Deputies Gould and Ó Broin are correct that this was a very collegiate report. There is much that we can agree on. The issue of data is crucial. The Government stated last year that it was going to identify the data relating to this issue because people hold different views about how many vacant units there are. Even if there are only ten vacant units, I am of the view that a vacant homes tax is needed to deal with them. Of course, there are not ten; there are far more than that. There are anything between 90,000 and 134,000 homes that are vacant. The Government committed to collect the relevant data last year.

We need a vacant homes tax. I know it will not be a silver bullet. The Taoiseach recently stated that it might not result in the number of units people thought it might. As I said at the press conference about this report and as I informed the Taoiseach, we have to take the same approach to housing as we did to Covid. We need a whole-of-government response. A vacant home tax is one of those tools. It is only one, but it is important. I would be incredibly disappointed if this Government, having committed last year to putting in place a process for identifying the data, did not follow through and put in place a vacant homes tax. I say on the record

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of this House that if it is not included in the budget next year, Deputy Ó Broin will throw it back at me. I would welcome him doing so, because I am saying to my own Government that we need a vacant homes tax.

I welcome the report. I also welcome how it will address all of the issues to which I refer. I welcome the collegial way in which we put it together. Like so much of our housing policy, I look forward to it being implemented by fantastic local authority members across the country. We had a meeting of Fianna Fáil local authority members from the councils in Meath, Cavan, Kildare and several other counties recently. The issue of dereliction and vacancy was raised at that meeting. It is a challenge for local authorities and their members.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for sharing time. I thank the members of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, particularly the Chair, Deputy Matthews, for and commend them on their work. The 39 recommendations are interesting, to say the least. They cover quite a wide range of issues relating to urban regeneration, specifically dereliction and vacant properties. As my colleague, Deputy McAuliffe, rightly stated, we are all aware of derelict sites that have been plaguing areas across the country for many years. Many of us have been local authority members. The Derelict Sites Act is often mentioned in replies from local authorities as being the instrument they can use. There are alleged pitfalls after that. One local authority I would like to commend on the work it has done is Monaghan County Council. It has used the Derelict Sites Act several times in town centres to issue CPOs in respect of land, sites and buildings. This is not necessarily about housing specifically. It can be about land or buildings zoned for commercial use. It can also be about individual properties. It can be complex or there can be financial concerns or issues within families or various entities, but ultimately, the site being vacant or derelict causes a problem.

I agree with the committee's recommendation to establish a national register that is publicly available. We need to get to the bottom of it and to know how many sites there are. We need to segregate those that are derelict from those that are vacant. In Dún Laoghaire, there is a site that we have been in relentless contact with the local authority about. A colleague of mine on the council there, Justin Moylan, has taken up the mantle. Only after several representations about the matter did the council push the landowner to do something. It has plagued the locality for a long time.

CPOs are the last resort. It should be a matter of using the carrot and the stick and encouraging landowners to utilise sites to the best of their ability. Ultimately, if regeneration of a site is required, so be it. However, landowners must maintain their sites. The committee has done an exceptional job at coming up with these recommendations. I hope the Department will be able to take action in respect of many of them. Housing for All allows for that. I thank the committee again for its contribution.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I thank and commend the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage for its work on this report. Regeneration is particularly important in the south inner city, in particular the constituency of Dublin Bay South. When we talk about regeneration and derelict sites, we have to consider that Dublin City Council has residents living in overcrowded conditions every day on what can only be described as derelict sites. The Government has given approval to stage 1 of the project relating to Pearse House. Pearse House will undergo redevelopment and regeneration. I was on Ross Road recently, not too far from here. I saw a plaque on the wall relating to a development that occurred around 2000. It was a quote that came from community consultation and stated that the renovation was completed in

September 2000. If a place is not maintained, however, it will fall into disrepair, and over time, the people living there will become demoralised and the place will go back to the way it was before. That was on the wall of a regenerated development on Ross Road. It is ironic that it was erected by Dublin City Council, because it seems it does not listen to its own advice.

People are demoralised. Some are even broken. They are furious and they will not take this anymore. Expecting people to live in Pearse House, Canon Mooney Gardens or Leo Fitzgerald House is completely unacceptable. They are modern day tenements. People talk about the architecture of the buildings designed by Herbert Simms. There is no doubt that they are beautiful buildings, but they are not suitable for the families living in them. Certain individuals are more concerned about the architecture than other people's living conditions. Dublin City Council has neglected inner-city communities for too long. They will not take it anymore. When one walks around Rathmines, Pearse House, Mercer House and other flat complexes, one sees the neglect.

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There are shocking conditions internally and externally. There is wiring, damp and rats. Illegal dumping is allowed to go unchallenged and unchecked. No families should be allowed to live in conditions Dublin City Council is overseeing. I was in Markievicz House, not too far from here, in the centre of Dublin city meeting residents with my colleague, Councillor Daniel Céitinn. One resident told us how faeces and urine were coming up through her sink so she had to go out and unblock the drain. As a result of her unblocking the drain it did not come up into her flat but it came out onto the public area. Urine and faeces were literally running along the footpath 20 ft. from a playground.

It is absolutely mad that Dublin City Council and the Government are not showing any sense of urgency around the regeneration of flat complexes. Canon Mooney Gardens in Ringsend was due for regeneration ten years ago but the Government and council ran out of money and it was dropped from the list for regeneration. Now they cannot get the regeneration and redevelopment they desperately need. They are just being fobbed off day in, day out with crumbs from the table, a flowerpot here and there, as if that is going to make any difference to the quality of their lives. It is completely mad. I was in a meeting with Dublin City Council and residents from St. Andrew's Court about four years ago. A design team has been appointed but it has not met with residents yet. I accept we have gone through Covid but the pace of redevelopment of St. Andrew's Court is glacial. Pearse House is supposed to be going through redevelopment. If I go down there and tell residents about the regeneration, half of them will not believe me and half will be extremely sceptical. They just do not believe it is going to happen. There is no real communication. Dublin City Council estate managers work with what they have and do a good job in what they have to work with. There is not enough resources being put in to communicate with residents, explaining the process and how they are going to see their community transformed. Residents in Pearse House and right across the inner city cannot be allowed live in these conditions any more. It just cannot be acceptable in 2022 to allow families be reared in overcrowded, dirty, unsafe conditions.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I welcome the report and commend my Green Party colleague, Deputy Matthews, who put extraordinary energy and passion into the report. He was ably assisted by his colleagues on the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I welcome the presence of the Minister of State to hear the debate. I recall a conversation with him about two years ago when we were in the programme for Government talks. He might recall that we had a row. We were trying to get the idea of town centres first into the programme

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for Government. We had a row about whether this was rural or urban regeneration. The truth is that both of us were wrong and both of us were right. Urban and rural regeneration are inexplicably linked. The urban-rural divide is an utterly unhelpful construct that has served neither urban nor rural Ireland. They need each other. We need strong, urban areas that serve our rural areas and vice versa.

Having said all that, we absolutely need to be sensible about how we manage our urban and rural areas. I want to talk about my home city of Limerick and tell a story of Limerick from the last 50 years. It is probably the story of many of our towns and cities. Limerick was a small, compact medieval and Georgian city. Then in the mid-20th century, with the advent of the motor car and the decisions around transport infrastructure and traffic management, we saw the suburbanisation of my home city. Large suburbs such as Castletroy and Annacotty, Dooradoyle, Raheen and Westbury were built at the very edge of the old, historic Limerick city, far enough out that people needed to drive in. They could not walk or cycle and certainly when we did not plan for walking and cycling infrastructure, it made that a difficult way to get back into the city. Uniquely in Limerick, or perhaps also arguable in Waterford - Deputy Ó Cathasaigh might agree - the local authority boundary issue contributed to the suburbanisation of the city.

This proliferation of development at the very edges of our rural areas correlates with the dereliction and decline of our urban areas. The point I am making is that urban sprawl and urban dereliction are two sides of the same coin. They go hand in hand. In Limerick, all is not lost. In parallel with suburbanisation and dereliction it was actively recognised and there were efforts over the last 40 or 50 years, despite the general tide of edge of city development, to stem that tide. I think my colleagues will agree that, despite the bad decisions that have been made, Limerick remains a beautiful city and I think we can improve on it.

The Minister of State came to Limerick last Friday. We in Limerick were very happy that he came. He walked around the city and learned about Limerick and its history. It was a fun day. We climbed the tower of St. Mary's Cathedral. It was the first time in my life I had ever been up there and it will probably be the last. They reserve that privilege for Ministers and their hangers on, as I was last Friday. The Minister of State listened to stakeholders, to An Taisce Limerick, the Thomond Archaeological and Historical Society and to Limerick Civic Trust.

I think we would be dishonest if we said we did not have concerns for Limerick. The challenges that Limerick city centre has are related to the decisions we have made, particularly around transport and traffic management. The dereliction and the treat to the historic medieval and Georgian fabric of Limerick city is linked to those decisions. It is also linked to the boundary issue, as I said, and to the priority the local authority gives to this built fabric. It is linked to the resources the local authority allocates and the approach of the architectural conservation officers, although we have an excellent architectural conservation officer in Limerick. This is connected to vacancy in our cities. Limerick is just like any other urban area in Ireland. We can see the same thing in Dublin, Waterford, Cork, Galway, any of the big towns or any of the villages. The story is not dissimilar.

I want to talk about the national planning framework. It is a really good step in the right direction. The Minister, Deputy Coveney, introduced the national planning framework in 2018. However, I think it misses a few tricks. It refers to compact growth, which is really important, but under the targets for compact growth 50% of the development is to be on greenfield sites. That is a real threat to our urban areas and what we could see if we do not refine and revise the national planning framework in the coming years. We could see further greenfield develop-

ment, suburbanisation and therefore the decline of both rural and urban Ireland. That is not what any of us wants.

When we are talking about getting people back living in our villages, towns and cities, it is one thing to talk about the number of occupants per square kilometre. We have to talk beyond the numbers and talk about amenities and services and about what is there for the people who are going to live in the centres of our towns, cities and villages. It is critical that everybody in this country would have access to nature, whether it is on their doorstep, very nearby or within walking or cycling distance. This is how we need to think about urban regeneration across Ireland.

Decisions we make on road space have a direct effect on the vitality of our urban centres. If the street outside your building is hostile, full of cars and noisy and has bad air quality and fast traffic that poses a risk to life and limb, why would you want to live there? Most people would not. What we see, therefore, is a vicious cycle whereby we make decisions that inevitably lead to a lowering of the attractiveness of buildings, including historic ones, in all our towns, villages and cities. We have to turn this around and make brave decisions on traffic management in every urban area because there is a direct correlation between urban decline and how we use space. We need to make it less hostile for people. We need to focus on landscaping and wide footpaths and enable people to walk and cycle around. We need safe, segregated cycle networks so everybody from the age of five and upwards can walk and cycle around his or her village, town or city.

There are several recommendations. Colleagues across the House have gone into the detail of the report. I welcome so much of it. With regard to the vacant homes tax, I certainly support and endorse Deputy McAuliffe's comments. The derelict sites legislation has been in place since 1990. It is really only recently that local authorities have started to take it seriously. My local authority, in Limerick, has done so. It is the leading local authority with respect to compulsorily purchasing homes across the city and county. It is having an effect on improving the vitality of our towns and villages and the city itself.

I welcome the recommendation that stresses the importance of interdisciplinary teams in our local authorities. These are critical if we are to make the right decisions.

An interesting recommendation, No. 3 on page 32, relates to how our use of space and decisions on traffic and transport can have a very serious impact on urban areas. It states: "That the Department engage with the Department of Transport to examine the feasibility of regulating advertisements in the private motor industry." That is a very interesting recommendation and I certainly endorse it.

Many of those of us on this side of the House who are Green Party members were in Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, at the weekend. It was a fine day and I cycled up from Limerick city. I have been to Cloughjordan many times. It is a beautiful, old town — medieval in many ways — and it is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. It is where Town Centre First has been applied in the past decade or so. Some farsighted people decided that they should settle in the town and this has really led to its regeneration. It is a beautiful town, the exemplar that we should be following. It was an absolutely appropriate place for the Green Party to host its 40th birthday celebration last weekend. If we can apply the thinking that has been applied in Cloughjordan in the past ten or 15 years across all of urban and rural Ireland, we will create a better country.

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Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I am sharing my time with Deputy Ó Cathasaigh. I congratulate my colleagues on their work at the housing committee on this report and their commitment to tackling the issue of vacancy. In particular, I thank my Green Party colleague and chairman of the committee, Deputy Matthews.

The discourse of the housing committee in this report has surfaced honest dialogue and debate and, thankfully, cross-party agreement. Our vacancy levels are incomprehensible, especially in a chronic housing crisis. It is time for a robust policy to be introduced and for a commitment by the Department to implement the 39 recommendations of the report. As Dr. Frank O'Connor said, and as quoted in the report: "The State is not upholding its side of this foundational social contract by allowing extreme levels of vacancy and dereliction to persist. This is a dereliction of duty."

The Green Party has long campaigned for robust policies on the issues associated with vacancy, most recently through the Town Centre First policy and its measures. I am very grateful to Miriam Delaney, Orla Murphy and Philip Crowe, among other academics. They have spent much of their academic careers studying and analysing our towns and villages, seeking solutions to the question of how to bring people back to the heart of these cultural centres. Town Centre First aims to streamline the process of refurbishing derelict properties, particularly those over shops and standalone vacant units, which have the potential to revive our towns and villages and attract employment while creating healthier and safer communities. The concepts of the 15-minute city and ten-minute town come to mind when thinking about the potential future of our urban communities.

The Green Party's Bill on vacancy, tabled by Deputy Matthews, has a strong proposal on how we should implement the vacant-site tax, which is based on the Vancouver model. In Vancouver, the tax gained \$86.6 million in net revenue, which the authorities reinvested in affordable housing programmes in the city, seeing a 26% reduction in the number of vacant homes.

In the context of sustainability and reducing carbon dioxide emissions, the built heritage of our towns, cities and villages provides an opportunity to reuse our existing building stock, thereby reducing the amount of embodied carbon, and assist in meeting our climate change targets.

Our town centres, where one third of the Irish population live, have been carved out and hollowed. People do not live in them in the main. A new paradigm is required to bring communities back to our cultural quarters, where vacancy is utilised for living, working and social gatherings.

On foot of this report, I urge the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a commitment such that we will no longer be concerned about vacancy levels, ranked tenth highest in the world in terms of the proportion of homes that are vacant and looking at boarded-up homes in our urban centres. A robust vacancy tax will assist in alleviating the housing crisis by bringing more homes back into use.

The refurbishment of existing buildings in urban centres does not entail an easy or fast procurement process. The structures are complicated, sometimes with ancient histories that need to be carefully protected. However, I believe our towns and villages deserve investment and, dare I say, tender loving care, which will only benefit all our society, visitors and future generations.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank Deputy Duffy for agreeing to share time with me.

I will start with a nod to Waterford because it is mentioned throughout the report. The report is excellent and should be important if its recommendations are implemented. I hope it will become important.

Waterford is rightly mentioned in that it has led the way under the repair-and-lease scheme. This features mainly in our urban centres, precisely to whose heart there is a need to bring people. Waterford has also led the way with high-quality public-realm projects. It has invested heavily in these in Waterford city and Dungarvan and Tramore town centres. I must give the nod to the integrated homelessness service on Parnell Street, Waterford, which has helped to mitigate at least some of the issues related to homelessness. These issues are being experienced across the country.

I agree with Deputy Leddin that there is a false dichotomy between urban and rural. Waterford provides us with a microcosm of the whole country. We have Ireland's oldest urban centre in Waterford city. We also have settlements such as Tramore and Dungarvan, which are greater than 10,000 and are mid-sized towns, and then smaller communities such as Cappoquin, Lismore and Ballymacarbry. All of these urban centres stand to be improved and to benefit from serious investment and a serious tackling of vacancy and dereliction.

I will be slightly partisan and I hope I will be forgiven for it. Notwithstanding the presence of the Ceann Comhairle and Deputy Ó Broin, we see the Green Party over-represented in the Chamber this evening. There is a sense that the Green Party is talking to itself a little bit here.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We are listening intently.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Funnily enough, this is what it sounds like when the Green Party talk among themselves. We bring a different lens to issues of this kind. We have made a significant contribution in this Government to reimagining how we approach the issue of housing. We take an ecological approach or a systems-based approach where we see these things as they knit themselves together. I hope we are bringing an element of policy coherence when we discuss housing. It is not just housing alone, and it is also the Town Centre First policy, the Our Rural Future policy, Connecting Ireland, where we begin to bring public transport between those communities, and the active travel funding that helps people to move around those urban centres. All of those knit together.

Homes are a physical expression of our social fabric and they are a relatively permanent expression of that. The decisions that we make in our built environment have long-lasting consequences. In the past few decades, we have allowed ourselves to become atomised. I have to wonder if that is an expression of the economic system and the extreme individualism that we see in neocapitalism. As Deputy McAuliffe said, not all housing is created equal. Dispersed housing patterns result in fragmented communities and that locks in transport emissions. It is very interesting that there is a specific chapter in this report on transport-oriented development, which is very progressive. Dispersed housing patterns undermine local services such as public transport and the face-to-face interaction that Deputy Bacik mentioned, such as in the local shop, the local school and the local pub. It makes services such as utilities, wastewater and local road infrastructure so much more challenging to provide. It pressurises our land use patterns and makes it difficult for us to improve forestry, agriculture and renewables. It makes all of those decisions so much more difficult to implement.

The opposite is also true. Good quality urban regeneration is going to do the opposite. It is going to knit communities together, sustain the local shop, the local school, the local pub and so on, and make it hugely easier for the Government to provide high-quality public services and high-quality public transport, for example.

In addition, dealing with vacancy and dereliction can address all of these issues but also take account in a meaningful way of embodied energy, embodied carbon and the embodied heritage skills and materials that are often built into these properties. Deputy Duffy referred to that and I know the Minister of State is very strong on the idea of heritage skills being used to regenerate our vacant and derelict properties.

Deputy Ó Broin referenced the idea of both stick and carrot. I broadly agree with that in respect of taxation, although we would be at variance in our approach to local property tax. The Deputy is dead set against it but I have a concern that we do not do a good job in this country of taxing wealth.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is true.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: If we leave property out of that equation, it leaves a huge lacuna. Nonetheless, I am not convinced that the local property tax as currently constituted does all of the jobs that we need it to do. The taxes that are proposed in this report - the derelict sites tax and the vacant properties tax - are perhaps supplemental but I am not sure it is the direction we should actually be going. We have long been arguing for a site valuation tax, which would be a much more complete and powerful tool in taxing wealth, but also for activating sites and properties in our urban centres. A site valuation tax acknowledges that proportion of a site's value that actually derives from the State's investment in the services that surround that property, and it is definitely a direction in which we would like to go.

Every one of us is looking for the same thing. We are looking for thriving cities and towns that are sustainable in terms of population, sustainable in terms of social interactions and social life and, most importantly from my perspective, sustainable in terms of community. We want measures that can tackle the homelessness and the housing crises that are affecting our communities. Within this very insightful report, we have a lot of recommendations that can put us on a pathway to deliver on these related goals if we take it seriously by targeting urban renewal. I agree with Deputy Gould that any report is only as good as its implementation but I have heard no voice pulling against this report in the Chamber this evening. Let us drive on. There are excellent recommendations here. Let us put them in place and let us make sure this is not a report that sits on a shelf gathering dust.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank all Members for their contributions and, equally, I am grateful for the contribution made by the committee members, which was very collaborative. There was a lot of support for the measures we have recommended. We have heard so much talk about dereliction and vacancy but without the figures, we do not know how much of it exists. The figure ranges from 180,000 down to 90,000 units. We have many people out there gathering data for the census, the CSO and the local authorities. The Heritage Council has brilliantly interacted with the committee and described the collaborative town centre health check proposals that it is going through. It is critical that we pull all of that information together now that we have it.

The old saying is that if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it. That exists with

vacancy and derelict homes. We strongly recommend improved data collection. We strongly recommend a dedicated unit within the Department to pull all of this together and to manage it. There are people working on it in the Department but I do not believe there is a dedicated unit working on it. That would be one of the strong recommendations that we make and that I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan, to bring back to discuss with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the other Minister of State, Deputy Burke. Local authorities should also ensure they have vacant homes officers. I know the funding has been put in place so it is important we ensure the chief executives staff the local authorities with those vacant homes officers.

The assessments carried out by Dublin City Council are striking. We think there is a figure of, say, 137,000 units. The council did an assessment and it came back with a figure of 213 units. When it went through them, it then whittled it down to just 16 long-term vacant units. When we compare that to the CSO figure of 30,000 vacant units, it shows there is massive disparity and there is a lot of confusion. Another report was carried out by University College Cork that suggested that if we addressed all of the upper-floor vacancies in towns and villages, we could increase the population by 280% within our town centres. While that is probably too much to increase the population by, it demonstrates the potential. Moreover, Dublin City Council planners estimated there is enough space between the canals in Dublin to accommodate 4,000 apartments. It is critical that we pull all of this together so we know what we are going to do with it. It is important that we copy the repair and lease scheme that is working in the good councils.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin referred to why it worked in Waterford, which was because the building costs are slightly lower there and Dublin is more expensive, but that is always going to be the case in a capital city where there is always that demand. That is not the reason in other local authorities. Some local authorities are just not paying any attention to it. We need to generate public interest in it as well. We need to advertise it, incentivise it and go out there and look for the properties, as other Deputies have mentioned. I believe that would work.

On the Croí Cónaithe fund and the CPO of the 2,600 units that are in Housing for All, I believe that will have a snowball effect. I believe that as more and more come on stream, businesses will open successfully, footfall increases and other businesses open. When we add all of the supports that are out there and the Housing for All incentives, and people start to see it as a vibrant possibility to live in the town centre, it will have a snowball effect. I believe this will become apparent.

I agree with Deputy Ó Broin that we need to target social and affordable units for vacancies and to set those targets. On the vacant homes tax, I have never heard every party agree that we should implement a tax. It is important we do it. There need to be reasonable exemptions to it. A vacant holiday home is a reasonable exemption. A home where somebody is in long-term care or a vacant primary residence of a person working abroad are reasonable exemptions. A building going through substantial renovation work that is vacant for a period of time is reasonable. In the Vancouver model, 26% of vacant houses were brought back into stock. Even if we took the lowest figure of vacancy we have and brought 26% of that back into stock, that would be a substantial contribution to our housing stock.

Deputy Gould mentioned heritage buildings. This is a fantastic opportunity. Heritage buildings of architectural beauty are falling into disrepair. This is an opportunity not just to have people living in those buildings but to bring life back to the buildings. There is nothing worse than seeing an architectural gem just rotting away, damp and falling apart. By bringing life into

it you bring life back into that building.

Deputy Bacik mentioned the regulatory process. I recently introduced a Private Members' Bill that suggests we streamline that process to make it simpler to refurbish and reuse buildings. It is a deterrent at the moment. We need to bring in a regulatory process that encourages people to develop, refurbish and reuse and does not stymie development by being so cumbersome and onerous that someone attempting to do it is so unsure they are going to get through the process, it is not worth it. Deputy Bacik also mentioned the post offices. I am delighted that this week the Government announced a long-term multi-annual support package for our post offices to ensure they remain vibrant and offer that central focal point for our town centres. These are places that people revolve around. We cannot afford to lose them from our streets. We cannot afford to lose our local shops. Bringing life and living back in supports the post office and the local shops.

Deputy McAuliffe is quite right. This is not a simple process. If it was that simple we would have done it years ago. There are many reasons houses and buildings are vacant. There is no single, simple solution that fits all. We need to apply a bit of stick as well. The dereliction tax and the vacancy tax are how we should do that. We introduce it, we announce that we are going to do it, and we give people time to move, sell, restore, refurbish or whatever they need to do. That is the way we will approach it.

Deputy Leddin is quite correct. We lost the focus on our towns. Our planning policy got into a car about 30 or 40 years ago, drove to the suburbs and just kept driving. We need to turn that policy around and bring it back into the town centres. County architects have always been on my wish list for employees we would have at local authority level. Our local authorities have come in for a bit of a hammering during this debate, with criticism that they are not doing enough. Our local authorities do a huge amount of work. We need to make sure they are resourced to do the work we want them to do, including this extra work, and acknowledge the good work they are doing in terms of planning and the pressure they are under.

Deputy Duffy is an experienced architect. He knows it is not a simple process to refurbish a second and third floor. We need to do it and provide that housing. There is a collective and collaborative will in the House to do it. Many of these recommendations will fit very closely with Government policies such as town centres first, Our Rural Future and Housing for All. As others have said, it is time to implement and take action on it.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I thank all contributors to the debate. It has been hugely useful from our perspective and I will give a commitment on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and Minister of State, Deputy Burke, that we will take on board the recommendations and work with the committee. We will work across the Houses of the Oireachtas to try to implement them. As I said, there is a significant crossover between what Government is doing. It may not always be perfect but we learn as we go along with much of our work.

Listening to the contributions, there were a couple of things that have not been referenced. We are not alone in grappling with this issue. It is a global problem. In Europe it is a huge problem because we are seeing huge parts of northern Italy and parts of Germany with significant depopulation of urban centres where the replacement rate of population is not happening. It is causing cities to go into further decline. We have a lot to learn from our European neighbours. We should reach out and do that. I was involved in European projects in the past around urban

development and we have an awful lot to learn from other European experiences about how they do urban regeneration, in particular heritage-led regeneration. That is key to this.

The animation and activation of communities to be involved and be active participants in this needs to be central to it. We are all discussing largely what the Government is doing but local authorities are central to this. As outlined in the report, it is critically important that local authorities have the adequate suite of skills and resources to lead on this, be it architectural conservation officers and architects across a number of disciplines. Public participation and people's involvement in having a say in how their urban centres evolve and develop is also important, as are the champions of our town centres, our independent retailers and those who are brave enough to take a decision to live in town centres and espouse how valuable it can be. That is really important.

Something that has not been referenced is our new national policy on architecture. It has to be architect led and architecture led. This document is another one of a guiding suite of documents the Government has produced that interlock all the objectives we are trying to achieve. The role of architecture in place-making, public participation and leading out quality urban spaces simply cannot be underestimated. It is vitally important.

A book that inspired me, with which Deputy Ó Broin may be familiar, is Paddy Shaffrey's *The Irish Town: an Approach to Survival*. This, to me, was the Bible for urban regeneration. It was written in 1975. It could very easily be the town centres first policy. In it, Paddy Shaffrey outlines the manner and the way in which we need to look towards our built heritage as a way of engaging communities to be part of the story of the future of our towns. I urge Members, although there are probably not many copies available, to look at this phenomenal publication. It is visionary, given that it was written in 1975. It offers the opportunity to look back on what our towns were like in the past. They were stunning places and unique in the European context. That is what we need to look towards into the future.

I welcome this report and the interaction of the Members, which as Deputy Ó Broin said was a very collegiate and valuable piece of work that the Government will adhere to and take seriously. I thank everyone for this debate. It has been really useful.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.38 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 14 Meitheamh 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.38 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 June 2022.