



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 16 Meitheamh 2022

Thursday, 16 June 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Fiscal Policy

1. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will introduce an emergency budget with further targeted measures to support lower and middle-income families in response to the highest level of inflation recorded in 38 years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31502/22]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I wish to make a point of order before we begin. I do not lay fault at the feet of the Minister for Finance, but in my 12 years as Opposition spokesperson on finance I have not experienced a situation where the Minister for Finance has not been present. There are times when a Minister has to attend other international duties or events and we in the Opposition have always facilitated the change. I understand that that was requested in this case as well, but the Chief Whip needs to get his act together. The senior Ministers need to be here. That is no reflection on the Minister of State, but he does not have delegated responsibility on some of these issues and it cannot be the norm. I am very disappointed that the Government did not facilitate a swap for the Minister.

That said, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, is welcome. The first question relates to the need for an emergency budget to have targeted measures to support low and middle-income families. He will be aware that we are seeing the highest rates of inflation for 38 years and we need Government intervention. The idea of waiting until October and perhaps a social welfare Bill and a finance Bill at some later stage does not cut it with ordinary families and workers who are feeling severe pressure at this point in time. Will the Government bring forward an emergency budget with measures targeted at low and middle-income families?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming): I acknowledge the remarks the Deputy made about the Minister for Finance. He is chairing a Eurogroup meet-

ing today. I think everybody is aware that he had his mother's funeral on the last day, which was totally unforeseen. Everybody understood that, but I take the point he makes.

The Deputy will be aware that the Government has responded in a timely and forceful manner to limit the impact on households of international commodity price-driven inflation. Interventions designed to address the increase in the cost-of-living issue worth approximately €2.4 billion have been introduced to date, encompassing welfare increases, income tax reductions, VAT and excise reductions, lump-sum payments and other measures.

Many of the drivers of inflation at present are global in nature and Ireland as a whole will be worse off than it would otherwise have been because of these international price changes. I think that applies to every country. The Government cannot prevent this, but what it can do is minimise the fallout for those sectors and individuals least equipped to absorb these international shocks. In this context, the Government is acutely aware of the impacts of rising inflation across household groups and has introduced this range of measures to help alleviate the burden on those worst affected by the price increases. For instance, the tax and welfare changes introduced in budget 2022 and more recent measures to mitigate the increase in the cost of living were strongly progressive, with the gains from measures more keenly felt by those in the lower income groups.

The Deputy will appreciate that while the Government's response has been forceful, the people's and taxpayers' resources are not infinite. Ireland's public debt is among the highest in the world. In fact, Ireland's personal debt is one of the highest in the world as well, so when we combine both, the Irish people are one of the most indebted nations worldwide. Borrowing costs are rising and the European Central Bank is no longer backstopping the issuance of public debt. Furthermore, we must be careful to avoid a scenario in which fiscal policy inadvertently creates second-round effects, leads to an inflationary spiral and threatens the overall sustainability of the public finances. The Government's response continues to be to mitigate the fallout from price increases while recognising that a balanced approach is needed to ensure that we do not make the problem worse. While the various measures that we have introduced were not technically a series of emergency budgets, they were a series of urgent measures to deal with the situation up to now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That simply does not cut it. The mantra coming from the Government that we are going to do nothing until October's budget at the very earliest is something that it feels it should be proud of. The Government needs to listen to where ordinary people are at. Every single day they are feeling that squeeze. They are seeing it in food prices that have gone up by 5%. They are seeing it in energy costs that have gone up by 57%. The ESRI report today talks about average families looking at up to €40 per week.

The Minister of State referred to insulating or trying to protect those on low and middle incomes, but the reality is that it has not happened. The Minister of State should not just listen to me. If he listens to those on the front line, whether the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, One Family or Social Justice Ireland, they will all tell him that more needs to be done. We recognise that the Government cannot insulate everybody from the inflationary pressures that we are seeing and that are turbo-charged by the war in Ukraine, but it can do more. That is why the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Central Bank says there is space to do more at this point in time. Why is it that the Government refuses to deal with the serious pressing needs of so many households at this point, right here and right now?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I understand that. The inflation situation has been increasing. Aside from the budgetary effects that came in on 1 January, we did introduce measures very quickly and promptly after that in February. Everybody knows that included the €200, including VAT, energy credit to every electricity account holder in the country. Everybody should have received that by now. More importantly, there was a reduction in the public transport fare for people who cannot afford a car to travel to work and who rely on public transport. Then we had the additional €125 fuel allowance increase. That is also for working families in particular, as people with the medical card would have been exempt from the cost of the drug payment scheme, which has reduced from €120 a month to €100 a month and it is now on its way down to €80 a month. That is €40 a month that many households and working families are benefiting from. We announced temporary excise cuts as well. That has now been extended to mid-October, into the budget time. Further measures were announced in April and May, including the VAT on electricity.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I do not know if the Minister of State really believes what he says and that the Government has done enough. Let me put it like this: the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council told the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach that inflation has benefitted the tax revenues of the State. Inflation and growth have given a bonanza of €2 billion, yet since the start of the year what the Government has introduced has given €1 billion back, so there is space. That is what IFAC is telling the Minister. There is space to do more.

The Minister of State mentioned the €200 credit for every household and said that everybody should have got it. It was so poorly designed that we have situations where people living in Wexford, for example, social housing tenants, only received €25 because the credit was split between those who share meters. The Government has not provided the support and protection that is needed. The OECD called the Government out and said it provided limited protection to poorer households, so it is allowing them to wither on the vine. What is needed is an emergency budget, an increase in social welfare rates in response to inflation, an increase in the minimum wage, the introduction of cost-of-living cash payments to lower and middle-income households, the removal of excise on the cost of home heating oil, the slashing of childcare fees, to put a month's rent back into renters' pockets and ban rent increases. That is what is needed. Otherwise, what the Government is doing, in my view, is shameful.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will take up the last point in particular about putting the rent back in renters' pockets. If the Government had ever suggested anything like that, the Deputy and the party opposite would be the first to say this is a subsidy for landlords. That is exactly what would be said, and that is the way it would work out-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Not if the Government bans rent increases.

Deputy Sean Fleming: -----and when landlords know, there would be an increase.

In fairness, we can do a lot but we cannot do everything to mitigate it. The measures to date have been well over €2 billion. Recently, our concentration is also on employment and the hospitality sector. Many places cannot even open on Mondays and Tuesdays, such as restaurants and places serving food. One of the solutions was to reduce VAT to make it more economical for people to go to those places and to get employment back up. The best insulation we have against poverty is people getting back to work. We now have 2.5 million people in the workforce, which is a record high, even higher than it was pre-Covid. For those 2.5 million families,

that is the best insulation against poverty.

Banking Sector

2. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance the steps that he and his Department are taking to provide further consumer choice to the Irish retail banking sector particularly with the exit of two banks (details supplied) from the domestic market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31004/22]

Deputy Matt Shanahan: My question relates to the steps the Minister of State and the Department are taking to provide further consumer choice in the Irish retail banking sector, especially with the exit of the two main banks.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue because it is one that affects hundreds of thousands of people, especially since Ulster Bank announced its withdrawal from the Irish market as part of the NatWest group, and KBC has announced likewise. The retail financial services sector is going through a major period of change. In the past year, we have seen a number of announcements from the main retail banks regarding their operations in the State, including reductions in the branch network throughout the country. While decisions relating to the business models of regulated firms are commercial matters for the boards of those organisations, the Department of Finance, the Minister and the Central Bank cannot interfere with those commercial decisions. We can, however, ask them to ensure a consumer-focused approach is their top priority when dealing with affected customers.

On the specific issue of the banks leaving the market, the Minister, officials and I met with a range of providers of retail banking services last month, particularly in respect of current accounts, including the remaining banks, An Post and credit unions, to discuss what they will do for impacted customers. The Irish retail banking system is concentrated by international standards but that does not necessarily mean competition does not exist between those particular players. The changes that have recently taken place in the Irish retail banking sector are a reflection of the wider challenges the banking sector is facing, not only in Ireland but abroad, and because of these changes the Minister has instructed the Department to undertake a broad-ranging review of the retail banking sector.

The issues raised by the Deputy will be considered by the review currently under way as part of this work in assessing the current landscape for the provision of retail banking services in Ireland and its likely evolution over the coming years. The team will also look at the size and structure of the sector in Ireland and similar-sized open economies in the EU and OECD. That report will be published later this year.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: As the Minister of State outlined, KBC and Ulster Bank are leaving the Irish market and because of that approximately 900,000 account holders need to find a new home. That process is ongoing, to a degree, but it is causing a lot of anxiety for people. Some of those customers have left the banks they are now going back to, possibly because of disputes over a number of years or when they were refused credit, and now find their choice has been reduced. The Minister of State spoke about the accommodative actions the existing banks are providing for new accounts but it is probably a fact now that Ireland's regulatory regime is not attractive to new entrants. Our major problem is the lack of choice in the banking sector.

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I ask the Minister of State to refer quickly to processes that might be undertaken to allow An Post and the credit unions to compete more favourably in the Irish banking market, particularly at the retail end.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I hear what the Deputy said about the regulations not being conducive but it is all about providing financial services. Every single financial service provided in Ireland does not have to be provided by a regulated body in Ireland. Such a body can be regulated in any EU country and provide services in Ireland. For example, and I do not want to overemphasise it, there are 1.6 million Revolut account cardholders in Ireland today. That is very significant. Notwithstanding the narrowing of the banking structure, changes are happening. There is an increasing range of banking and financial services available to customers who choose those products.

I will say to customers of the two institutions that are leaving to be proactive and start opening their accounts in their new financial institution as soon as possible. I encourage people to go to the credit unions and An Post. The latter opened 30,000 new current accounts in the first three months of this year. The credit unions are already *in situ* in some of those banks that are leaving, in particular, Ulster Bank. The local credit unions have stands there a couple of days a week. I met several credit unions whose staff have moved in so when people come to their bank, the local credit union has a stand in the premises and branches that are scheduled to close. I ask people to be proactive and not wait until the last minute.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The retail banking sector is very important but what most people are now concerned about is access to finance and access to credit, especially if they are in the construction and manufacturing sectors and, in particular, the agricultural sector at present. There are major headwinds in those areas in terms of where people can go to access finance. That is a big problem. I accept that Revolut is in the market here for retail services, but is there anything the Department can do to put pressure on the system or to bring in legislation to allow people to access funding from eurozone banking? At the end of the day, we are members of the EU and yet we are excluded from any accessing of European banks. It is very difficult, unless you are a large-scale conglomerate, to try to access funding for large-scale project work. Those that can are well able to do it but smaller manufacturers, and the farming sector in particular, now have very limited options to access funding.

Deputy Sean Fleming: On the farming sector, the Deputy mentioned credit unions. As he knows, they have a very good product called cultivate. Several credit unions in all the provinces provide that scheme, which provides 50,000 unsecured loans to farmers. It may not be a lot in the context of the scale of some farming activity, but it is quite significant for many farmers. That is an important source of new finance in that sector.

I also say to people that the Central Bank is most keen on, and the Minister and the Central Bank are both stating this, the importance of the closure of these institutions in Ireland being conducted on an orderly basis. Generally, people will have six months to close their accounts and open new accounts when they get the relevant letters. I ask people to be proactive and not wait until the last minute. The Deputy knows we cannot stop the banks leaving Ireland. We have AIB and Bank of Ireland and I definitely believe that with NatWest, which is also investing in Permanent TSB and taking a 20% stake in it, we will have three major banks operating in Ireland in the immediate future, one of which, Permanent TSB, has significant State investment.

Fuel Prices

3. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reduce the rates of excise duty applied to petrol and diesel to the lowest rates permissible under the Energy Tax Directive in response to the rising cost of fuel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31503/22]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In the past year, we have seen petrol and diesel prices skyrocket. People are seeing that very clearly. I am sure the Minister of State sees it himself as he passes the petrol pump stations. In my village, we see petrol prices of €2.25. We are told that diesel prices will rise very soon. We all wish that every household and community had excellent public transport but that is not the case. Will the Government take further measures to reduce the price of fuel at the pump by reducing the rate of excise charge, providing an immediate reduction in the price of petrol and diesel, given the astronomical prices people are faced with today?

Deputy Sean Fleming: Again, this is a very significant issue affecting many people. Ireland's taxation on fuel is governed by European Union law set out in various directives, commonly known as energy tax directives, ETDs, which the Deputy will be aware of. These directives prescribe minimum tax rates for fuel, which all member states must comply with. These directives' provisions on mineral oils are transposed into national law under the Finance Act 1999, as amended, and provide for the application of excise duty in the form of mineral oil tax, MOT, to specified mineral oils, such as petrol, diesel and kerosene, that are used as motor and heating fuels. The mineral oil tax is comprised of a carbon component and a non-carbon component. The carbon component is commonly referred to as a carbon tax and the non-carbon component is often referred to as excise, fuel tax or fuel duty.

In response to the current fuel crisis, the Minister for Finance introduced a significant reduction in the MOT rate applying to petrol on 10 March. Inclusive of VAT, the reduction is in the amount of approximately 20 cent per litre. I know 20 cent per litre seemed a very big reduction some time ago but when we see the price at the pumps is €2 plus, it is not as significant proportionally as it was. In addition to the rate change, the Minister has also brought forward legislation in the Finance Act to provide for a temporary reduction of 1 cent per litre, inclusive of VAT, to MOT on petrol. It is important to note the effective MOT rate on auto diesel must be considered in ensuring compliance with the ETD. The current MOT rate on auto diesel is €405.38 per 1,000 l, which is €75 above the ETD minimum.

The Minister has done a lot in this area. We could usefully refer to the report of the ESRI on this topic, which reads: "If the objective is to protect those most affected by rising energy prices, cutting indirect taxes ... is a poorly targeted response".

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Minister of State saying the Government is now acknowledging that what it has already done has been poorly targeted? A larger package - one where the vast majority of its measures are targeted - is needed. Other people are feeling the pinch, of course, which is why issues like excise also need to be considered.

Fair play to the Minister of State for mentioning that the minimum rate allowable under the directive is below the rate in Ireland at the moment. Let us be clear in that there are people who have to travel. Many are thinking twice before they get into the car, but they have to if they need to go to hospital or if they live in rural Ireland and need to go to work. Petrol now costs €2.25 per litre and diesel is increasing to the same level. It is predicted that diesel might even

hit €2.50 in the next while. The current excise rate on petrol stands at 47 cent, but the minimum rate allowable is 36 cent. The current rate on diesel is 41 cent per litre whereas the minimum under the directive is 33 cent. This means that, inclusive of VAT, the Minister for Finance could reduce the price at the pumps tonight by 13 cent for petrol and 9 cent for diesel. That would not be enough, though. The Government also needs to engage with the Commission to get further flexibility on excise or VAT rates.

We know that prices will continue increasing, so for the Minister of State to say the Government will do no more is not acceptable for many of those who cannot get by any further.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Our ability to reduce excise duty is impacted by various EU directives. I have covered the current MOT rates on petrol and auto diesel extensively. The MOT rates per thousand litres are €465 for petrol and €405.38 for auto diesel. Prior to March, the MOT rate on petrol was €636 per thousand litres, which was reduced by €170, representing a substantial cut of more than 26%.

The ESRI report is interesting. I accept there has to be a balance. We must help working people, but perhaps better-off people who have larger cars that are less fuel efficient will gain disproportionately compared with poorer people. The ESRI report reads: “Instead, increases to welfare payments, the fuel allowance, and even lump-sum payments like the household electricity credit are better targeted at those most affected by energy inflation.”

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I love how the Minister of State selectively quotes reports. Maybe he should quote the ESRI’s report where it states the Government has scope to do more. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, believes more targeted measures could be taken. The Central Bank also states that the Government has that scope.

The taxman has been benefiting from inflation in petrol and diesel prices. As prices have soared over past year, we have seen 12 cent more being accrued in VAT. The VAT take on petrol and diesel has increased by between 42% and 46%.

What I am discussing are temporary measures to give people a reprieve. They would form a small part of an overall targeted package, but they would have a broader application. The Minister of State has acknowledged there are limitations on what the Government can do. We also acknowledge that, but the House has the ability to reduce petrol and diesel prices tonight by 13 cent and 9 cent, respectively. That is a pressure we can remove from many families and workers. Will the Minister of State set out the rationale for why the Government will do not this? If it will not do that, will it take on board any of the other suggestions from the ESRI, IFAC or the Central Bank and introduce something instead of sitting on its hands while families are under massive pressure and more are slipping into poverty, including energy poverty?

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Deputy has again mentioned the ESRI report. I thank its authors – Ms Michelle Barrett, Dr. Niall Farrell and Dr. Barra Roantree – on their excellent report, which was funded by the Community Foundation for Ireland, whose chief executive wrote in the foreword, “Many of the 5,000 voluntary, community and charitable groups we work with will be looking at this report and no doubt will reflect on it as they make pre-Budget submissions to government.” Essentially, the report is a great bank of information published by the ESRI at the request of the Community Foundation for Ireland. It will facilitate proactive, detailed and more informed, fact-based and data-based pre-budget submissions, which will help the Government to take everything into account, as suggested by the chief executive in the report.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Has the Minister of State no shame? One in three households is in energy poverty.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Deputy knows there are different issues affecting VAT. He is aware excise is applied to a unit of fuel and remains the same regardless of the fuel's price. It is based on volume. Therefore, no extra revenue is raised from the excise duty if the price increases. VAT is different. People ask why excise duties cannot be reduced, but excise is based on volume, not price. However, I accept there have been extra VAT receipts, which have gone some of the way towards paying for some of the measures we have introduced recently.

Question No. 4 replied to with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Fuel Prices

5. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider reducing the rate of excise duty applicable to petrol and diesel to ensure that, as the price of fuel increases, Government income does not also increase at a cost to households, businesses, taxi drivers and hauliers in particular; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31304/22]

21. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost of reducing excise duty on petrol and diesel to date in 2022 that was originally introduced to help with the cost-of-living pressures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31017/22]

23. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will further review taxes on transportation fuel given the further price increases; the estimated income that has been raised from transport fuel taxes and excise to date in 2022; the way this compares with the same period in 2019, 2020 and 2021 and with the projected figures by his Department at budget time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31298/22]

44. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the additional measures he intends to introduce to support workers who are impacted by soaring motor fuel costs. [31308/22]

65. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if he has any plans for a further extension of the timeline for the reduction in excise duties on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30070/22]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question relates to the petrol and diesel crisis and the significant cost on households, businesses, taxi drivers and hauliers. Has the Minister for Finance considered reducing the rate of excise duty applicable to petrol and diesel in particular?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5, 21, 23, 44 and 65 together.

I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for raising this question. As the House will be aware, excise duty is applied to fuels on a volumetric basis in the case of non-carbon charges and on the basis of carbon dioxide omissions in the case of carbon tax. As such, the revenue raised from excise

duties does not increase in light of increased prices, as may be the case with the *ad valorem* application of taxation.

The Government is aware of the impact of rising fuel prices on households and businesses. These trends are driven by global factors, the single largest of which is what I call the Putin war in Ukraine, which affects everything underpinning our discussion today. Without that war, we would not be having this discussion. Yes, prices were increasing due to Covid. There were supply chain issues across the world's economy as well as pent-up savings, with people wanting to spend more. This has led to inflationary pressures. After two years of lower activity during Covid, there has been a surge in activity, which is increasing inflation.

The key issue people are concerned about is the Putin war. Most of the scenarios being produced by the ESRI and everyone else are based on what is happening in Ukraine and how it affects fuel. While we do not directly import fuel from Russia, other EU countries do. If they stop doing so, it will have a significant impact on the markets where we purchase fuel and limit other countries in where they source their fuel, adding to our inflationary pressures.

A key driver in the inflation in wholesale energy prices has been Ireland's rebound, which has been quick and strong as a small, open economy. More recently, the Putin war has been a significant factor.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I understand the Minister of State's point, but that does not solve the problem for those involved in farming, transport or haulage or for the ordinary worker who has to get to work and cannot rely on public transport because there is none in the area or it is not feasible. Their costs are going up. It is reckoned that, if inflation continues as it has been, prices will increase by between €750 and €1,000 per year. The Minister of State is correct about prices fluctuating, but they do not fluctuate to that degree. The Ukraine crisis is being used as an excuse to explain away the current rise, but the increases in petrol and diesel prices far predated the war in Ukraine.

People take temporary measures in an emergency, and this is an emergency. We took temporary measures for the past year or two during the pandemic. What emergency measures are going to be taken to ensure the increase in the cost of fuel is not passed on to those who cannot afford it?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I apologise for missing the start of the question. The specific question to the Minister of State is on soaring fuel prices and the impact they are having on workers and families. The Government introduced minimal reductions in excise measures in March and it has done nothing since in respect of the huge cost and burden of fuel prices on workers and families. We are four weeks away from recess and if the Government does not introduce a measure within those four weeks, we will be looking at the end of September or October. I dread to think what fuel prices will be at that stage. The implications of further increases in fuel prices for so many workers and families do not bear thinking about because they are already stretched to the limit. There is also an additional burden that the increase in fuel prices brings because everything is transported and when those transport costs increase so does the price of everything else, including foodstuffs. Will the Minister of State introduce measures that will help ease that burden before the summer recess?

Deputy Sean Fleming: On fuel excise, a package of measures, to the value of €320 million, was introduced on 10 March. I know the Deputy said that was little or nothing but €320 million

is a substantial figure and that was only done quite recently. That reduced the VAT, inclusive of excise duty on petrol and diesel, by 20 cent and 15 cent per litre, respectively. These reductions mitigate the cost of a fill of a 60-litre tank by €12 for petrol and €9 for diesel. We know that as we head back into the next winter season, when it comes to the cost of home heating oil, those areas will become more important. There is not quite the same call on those resources during the summer.

However, I have made the following point already and the Deputy will also have heard about the ESRI report this morning. That contains food for thought for the Government for the forthcoming budget and preparation for same. I respect what the ESRI says even if I do not always agree with it. I often agree with what it says and the ESRI has talked about the measures we have introduced, including the precise ones the Deputy is proposing. I am not taking the following quote selectively; rather it is a big quote in bold print in its press statement:

If the objective is to protect those most affected by rising energy prices, cutting indirect taxes on energy – like VAT, fuel duty, or the carbon tax – is a poorly targeted response.

That is the case because it has run the figures and it says that wealthier and better off people on higher incomes are benefiting disproportionately and in a positive way from its point of view, rather than the people who need it more. The ESRI goes on to state in its press release:

Instead, increases to welfare payments, the fuel allowance, and even lump-sum payments like the household electricity credit are better targeted at those most affected by energy inflation

That is because energy inflation affects people on lower incomes more than people on higher incomes. Everyone got the €200 but proportionately, the value of that €200 was far more for a lower income household than for a more wealthy one. The ESRI is saying that some of these measures are more targeted because they help people on lower incomes to a much greater extent. Some parties in the House oppose this completely and think the solution to everything is solely in petrol and diesel. These other measures we have taken to reduce the cost on households and the cost of public transport also contribute and have to be taken into consideration.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I do not know whether the Government understands how stretched businesses are and how the first reaction for any business if it has an increased output is to pass that increase on to the customer. That includes the less well-off and those who are dependent on local shops and on getting to school. There has to be some measure to try to discourage businesses, hauliers, taxi drivers and any type of transport business in this country from passing on to the customer the increases they are being forced to pay because of the price of fuel. One of the ways we can do that is through taxation, rebates, reducing the excise duty and measures such as that. At this stage there has been a huge jump since March and March is what the Minister of State quoted. There has been an increase of 20 cent per litre since March. Not a thing has been done and it is likely to continue in the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Let us be clear that Sinn Féin has put forward a package of measures that are required to ease the burden of the cost-of-living crisis that so many are facing, including specific directed measures that would ensure social welfare recipients and people on lower incomes receive targeted supports. We also need to recognise the lived realities of hundreds of thousands of families. I will never forget the telephone conversation I had with a person who told me that on their way home from work they have to hold their breath while looking at the

petrol gauge and cannot begin to think about how they will drive to work the next day, without even considering whether they will purchase a lunch for themselves as that is not an option. I asked the Minister of State a specific question. Will he introduce measures to support people in that position between now and the summer? He did not respond to that question so I will ask him again. Will the Government do a single thing to help those specific people between now and the summer recess? If it does not, those people will be waiting at least six months before this Government intervenes.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Deputy's question is specific about the reduction in excise duties for petrol, diesel and marked gas oil. I know he said he has concerns about other issues and people on lower incomes and social welfare payments who might not be affected to the same extent as people trying to get to and from work. The question he asked was specifically on that issue and I have been confining my remarks to the specific question that was raised and, in particular, to what the ESRI said about that this morning, which I have quoted. The ESRI has talked about these issues. The European tax directive minimum rate for petrol is 35.9 cent per litre. Prior to the 9 March reduction it was 63.67 cent per litre and we reduced that to 46.59 cent per litre, a 21% VAT inclusive reduction. For diesel use as a propellant, the minimum rate is €330 per 1,000 litres, VAT inclusive, which equates to 33 cent per litre. Prior to the 9 March reduction it was 53.5 cent per litre so there have been significant reductions in that.

On the questions on this matter, I am advised by the Revenue that the costs of reducing excise duty on petrol and diesel are estimated at €27 million and €69 million, respectively, including VAT, for the period from 10 March to the end of April. We introduced those measures and they are continuing today, next week, the following week and right up to budget day.

Tax Collection

6. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he has studied a recent paper on wealth taxes and the problems with previous attempts by European Union states to introduce wealth taxes (details supplied); the plans he has in this regard for the coming period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31246/22]

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to follow on the discussion that has been going on. The question I am about to ask is quite significant because we are constantly being told that there are not enough resources to do all we have to do to deal with the various crises. Has the Minister of State looked at the recent Oxfam report that dealt with wealth taxes and the problems with previous attempts across the EU to introduce same? Does he have any plans in this regard in the coming period?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for bringing this recently published paper on wealth taxation by Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman to the attention of the Department of Finance. The paper is being reviewed but, in summary, it describes the historical experience of wealth taxation in Europe and draws lessons from this. It concludes that the wealth tax base was narrow in European countries due to large exemptions, tax avoidance and evasion. The paper explains why such exemptions were granted and how the authors contend they undermined European wealth taxes. The paper examines the issue from an EU-wide lens, with some discussion of specific countries, but it does not refer to Ireland. It is important that we mention the context that it is a European report that does not specifically refer to Ireland. I acknowledge that the Deputy has highlighted that and the paper is being examined.

While the Government understands the background to calls for a specific wealth tax in Ireland, it is important for people listening to note that contrary to the general impression given by some of those calling for such a tax, it is not the case that a wealth tax does not exist in Ireland. Ireland's wealth is taxed and taxes on wealth are in place. These wealth taxes include capital gains tax, which is significant, and most people who buy or sell houses or property will be aware of that. It also includes capital acquisitions tax and the local property tax and between them, according to Revenue's annual report for 2021, those taxes raised €2.77 billion net last year. The biggest wealth in Ireland is the value of people's households. We have a wealth tax on that, notwithstanding some parties of the left opposing that. Any revenue raised from a new wealth tax may not, therefore, be additional to the existing forms of wealth tax, as revenues from the latter could be affected by the introduction of new taxes.

On the broader issue of inequality, it is important to note that the taxation system in Ireland is deemed generally progressive by most independent observers.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I do not want to go down a rabbit hole of arguing with the Minister of State about the significance of the property tax. He says people's homes are the biggest form of wealth but for many it is a struggle to keep the roof over their head, pay the mortgage, etc. Putting the property tax on those who can ill-afford it is obscene. However, that is not what I am here to argue.

The Minister of State is evading my question on tax on wealth in this country because it is not directly in the Oxfam report. However, using the method that report applies, the first thing it points out is that the wealth of the top tier of society has increased hugely in Ireland. Nine billionaires have seen their wealth increase by €18 billion since the start of the pandemic to an obscene figure of €50 billion. We know we do not get back what we should in tax from that. The method Oxfam advocates allows for an exemption of up to €4 million, which I think is way too high but I use that figure to show how modest the report is. If we take that exemption rate, after that we could introduce a serious wealth tax that would bring in the money we need to deal with the various crises we face.

Deputy Sean Fleming: It is expected the top 1% of taxpayers, who are those with an annual income in excess of €200,000, will have paid 25% of total income tax and USC last year. That is a very large proportion of our total income tax. In comparison, it is estimated that 75% of taxpayers, those with an income of less than €50,000, will have paid 18% of the total income tax last year. They are the most recent figures I have available.

The Deputy will be aware a Commission on Taxation and Welfare was established in June 2021 and is currently carrying out its work. Wealth taxes, along with any other form of taxation, could fall within this review but the commission is undertaking an independent review. It would not be appropriate for the Minister or me on his behalf to speculate about the specifics of the working contents of that report, which will be published as soon as practicable. We cannot suggest to the commission what it should do. Taxpayers in Ireland in the €100,000 bracket generally pay 40% of their income in income tax. We have a more redistributive tax system than most countries.

Deputy Bríd Smith: If the Minister of State reads the Oxfam report when he gets a chance, he will see it is looking at extreme wealth and how it has doubled, tripled and, in the US, increased tenfold in recent years. In the 1980s, we were told there was no money, we were bust and needed to tighten our belts. We know since there was plenty of it but it was held in Ans-

bascher accounts, offshore tax havens and brass plate companies. We have seen the studies from the Paradise Papers and the Panama Papers so we know there were and are ways for the extremely wealthy not to tell the truth about their wealth. We have quite a lot of millionaires and nine billionaires in this country. For a small island, that is staggering.

The paper suggests many ways tax could be taken from the wealthy. Not to have them self-reporting would be a start, but rather to have somebody delve into their wealth; as well as not giving them this obscure way of hiding their wealth but forcing them to show it. Many wealthy companies and people say they cannot afford the tax because it is all in shares. They also suggest the Government take the tax in kind and take shares. We have worked out that could yield €4 billion, which would do a lot to provide free public transport, double the number of buses on the road and give free childcare to every family. A lot could be done with that to address the multiple crises we face.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I understand there is a small handful of wealthy people. I do not know any of them or where they live. I have not encountered them but I take the Deputy's point. If they are tax resident in Ireland, they are covered for all taxation therein. A small proportion of taxpayers, some 1%, pay 25% of all income tax. We have a similar pattern in corporation tax, where a small handful of major companies pay the vast bulk of it. To that extent, we collect tax, whether wealth or income tax, from the very profitable, wealthy organisations.

I gave an example of how tax is progressive in Ireland and what we have done on wealth tax. The top three forms of wealth in Ireland are as follows: people's houses, with the value of houses being the most significant part of wealth. The second most significant is farmland. Land is valuable but is a working asset for the next generation. The third most significant is people's pension funds, about which I would be concerned if we started taxing. People invest to make sure when they retire they are not dependent on the State and have a pension fund built up over the years, some of it in shares. I would be horrified if we were to start attacking pension funds, thinking we were getting solely at the wealthy. Most people need those funds and have put into it on the basis that they will be able to draw them down.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is disingenuous of the Minister of State to keep referring to people's homes, farms and pensions. We are talking about an obscene level of wealth that is not properly taxed, as pointed out by the Oxfam report. The wealthiest in the globe have seen their wealth jump by €4.35 trillion during the pandemic. The report states that, globally, billionaires have had a terrific pandemic. With the investment in all the industries leading from that, we would have been able to see-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Emer Higgins): Thank you, Deputy. That is your question finished.

Deputy Bríd Smith: The clock says I have 30 seconds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Emer Higgins): That is for the next question. We have gone into Deputy Calleary's time.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Okay. I am sorry about that.

Insurance Industry

7. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Finance the measures that he is taking to increase competition in the Irish insurance market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30073/22]

Deputy Dara Calleary: Much reform has been made on the jurisprudence side of insurance costs and legal costs, yet business insurance costs continue to rise. What action is the Government taking to address this issue and to follow up whether the reduction in legal costs and awards are being passed on in the form of reduced insurance premiums? What further actions are planned?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for highlighting the issue of the insurance market in Ireland. It is a key priority for this Government and, as he will be aware, we have established a Cabinet subgroup on insurance reform, chaired by the Tánaiste. Several Departments sit on the quarterly group meeting. The Department of Finance has a key role because insurance is a regulated industry. It comes directly under the purview of that Department because the Central Bank regulates that industry.

There are three major forms of insurance in Ireland. The motor insurance market is the biggest section with approximately 2.5 million vehicles on the roads. There have been significant price reductions consistently in recent times in that sector. Every day somebody says they made a phone call when they got their premium and got a reduction. The next biggest market is home insurance. Practically every house, but not every house, in Ireland has home insurance. It is a big market and the Central Bank is introducing measures on 1 July. We have legislation to ensure that happens, which went through the Dáil in the past couple of weeks and is now going through the Seanad. That will come in and should bring about a reduction in house insurance.

The Deputy rightly pointed out that business insurance is the most difficult issue because every business is different. Cars and motorists are a fairly homogenous group. We have done much in that area in terms of competition. Until recently, there were issues relating to childcare. One company that covers that entire sector is offering an attractive package and reducing its premiums. They want competition in the sector, which will happen now it is deemed to be profitable and there is a consistency of approach. Play Activity and Leisure Ireland, PALI, a play activity centre group, is the new broker that has come, with a major new international insurance company, into the market in recent weeks and taken over the entire sector. There will always be individual sectors and a number of improvements, which I will elaborate on, are being worked on.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Minister of State. I was contacted recently by a company in my constituency in the broader hospitality industry. It was closed for much of 2020 and 2021 as a consequence of Covid, yet has had a 300% increase in insurance costs since 2019. There has also been a considerable increase in its excess. This is in spite of the changes to judicial guidelines which, as the Minister of State rightly said, have had a big impact on motor insurance premiums. One would assume they should also have had an impact on business insurance premiums, particularly in that space. Considering the degree to which the hospitality industry was shut down and the associated low level of claims made, there should surely be reductions in that area as well. What work is under way within the Department to monitor the cost of premiums as opposed to waiting on informal feedback? There should be some system of monitoring premium costs in order that an eye is constantly being kept on whether the reduc-

tions arising from the Government's work are being passed on to the customer.

With regard to competition, I welcome the arrival of a new company in this space but the difficulty is that history shows us that a company lands, takes all the business and then, when it pulls out, we are left scrambling again. How are we going to avoid that?

Deputy Sean Fleming: There are a couple of things I want to say on that. I acknowledge the case of that business. I am happy to talk to the Deputy about that company next week. If it is closed, it is closed, but if there is anything we can do through the industry, rather than through the Department of Finance, such as putting it in touch with people who may be able to help, we will be happy to help in that way or in any other way we can.

At government level, legislation to strengthen the role of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, is currently in the system and legislation on the duty of care has recently been approved by Cabinet. Businesses have said that this is the single most important aspect from their point of view. Up to now, if somebody had a slip or trip in a shop, restaurant, pub or garage, the person who owned the property was nearly always on the hook for everything regardless of whether the person was negligent in respect of where he or she was walking. That legislation will come through the Oireachtas this year. There was a very positive test case in this High Court a few weeks ago that upheld the personal injury guidelines. The legal profession earns €130 million from the insurance sector and, therefore, it has a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*. This case may be appealed. Even though we have done our bit, we might have to wait for some of these guidelines to be fully confirmed through the courts before price reductions are seen. I meet the chief executives of the top major companies here on an ongoing basis to ensure these reductions will come through. They have assured us that, once the guidelines have been confirmed by the courts, price reductions will come through. The Oireachtas has done its bit but we are waiting for the courts to give final approval to what has been put in place, which we hope they will.

Deputy Dara Calleary: While we wait on the courts, premiums are going up. Public liability premiums increased by 16%, according to research from the Alliance for Insurance Reform. Many businesses cannot wait given the other cost pressures they are under. Again, I ask the Minister of State whether there will be price monitoring under the new system. Can we give a role to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission with regard to price monitoring so that people can see that premiums are coming down? I know premiums are different for every business and reflect specific business conditions but guidance should be made publicly available and there should be some system of monitoring the insurance industry to ensure it is passing on the benefits of the work done in respect of insurance reform and legal reform. Otherwise, businesses will continue to have to pay substantial increases and that is before inflationary increases are considered. There is no sense in having done all of this unless we actually get prices down. What is the timeline on the PIAB legislation?

Deputy Sean Fleming: We expect the PIAB and duty of care legislation to pass through the Oireachtas this year, although it will be after the summer. With regard to the issue the Deputy is referring to, which is the publication of independent information as to what is actually happening, we can have a very useful discussion next week. Next week, the Central Bank will publish its second ever report on employer and public liability insurance costs, claims and premiums. When we are back here in the middle of the week, we will have a report from the Central Bank, which is in a better position to do this work than the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission because it has access to the microinformation and deals with all of the major in-

insurance companies. I have no idea whether it will be good or bad news but we will have the information next week. That will be very helpful and will provide the objective information the Deputy is looking for.

Departmental Reviews

8. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 37 of 28 April 2022, the status of the review of the help-to-buy scheme; the person or body carrying out the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30711/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I have a very specific question about the help-to-buy scheme. I have been following up on this since the review was announced. What is the status of the review? Which body or person is carrying it out? When will it be completed?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As she has said, she has consistently raised this matter with the Minister for Finance. The help-to-buy incentive is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with the deposit they need to buy or build a new home or apartment. The Deputy knows this but I am saying it for those listening. There are many different schemes so I wanted to put on record which one we are talking about. The incentive gives a refund of income tax and deposit interest retention tax paid to the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation. The Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the scheme. As the Deputy will be aware, as part of budget 2022, the Minister for Finance announced that a formal review of the scheme will take place this year. The contract for the review has been awarded to Mazars following a competitive tender process. That is new information that we did not have the last time we spoke. This selection from a number of bidders was made in accordance with the relevant public sector procurement guidelines for procurements costing in the range of €25,000 to €144,000. The most economically advantageous tender was selected, which was from Mazars. I am informed that work on the review is under way and in keeping with the terms of reference provided in the request for tenders. The terms of reference are as follows:

To examine all aspects of the Help-to-Buy scheme [...]

In doing so, the review should explore the cost effectiveness of the scheme to-date, including the issue of deadweight. It should also examine the impact of the scheme on house prices since inception.

The findings should present an assessment on a national basis while highlighting any regional aspects.

Having regard to the Government's Housing for All strategy, and in particular to other initiatives included in Housing for All that have the same broad policy objectives as currently apply for the scheme, to examine whether there is a continued role for Help-to-Buy and, if so, to present options on how such role might best be fulfilled in the most efficient and cost-effective manner in the medium to long term [...]

As part of the overall context, the review should draw on experience internationally and offer views in this regard as appropriate.

The study should be completed by c.o.b. Friday, 24 June 2022.

16 June 2022

Since we last spoke, Mazars has been appointed. There is a deadline. As soon as the report is provided, the Minister will be able to consider it with a view to publication in due course. That is the timeline.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: When precisely was Mazars appointed? Will the report be produced by the closing date of 24 June? It seems an extraordinarily tight timeline. It has already taken this long since the review was announced in October 2021. I welcome the positive news but I want clarification on that point. I also want to know the cost of it. The range under the procurement guidelines is €25,000 to €144,000. The background is very important. This was introduced in the budget in 2016 for 2017, as the Minister of State well knows. It was predicted to cost €40 million per year. Between January to November 2021 alone, it had cost €167 million, more than four times that figure. I understand it has now cost more than €500 million. We do not know if it represents value for money. We have had various reports and comments. In October 2021, Professor Kieran McQuinn of the ESRI said the scheme was adding to demand pressures. We know from the Parliamentary Budget Office that 41% of applicants had no need for deposit assistance.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will clarify because it may be a little bit confusing. The Deputy may understand it but not everyone watching will. The selection from a number of bidders was in accordance with the relevant public procurement guidelines for procurements costing in the range of €25,000 to €144,000. It was expected that the tender would fall within that range. It is not necessarily the price. We have not given the price. I do not have the price here today. Mazars was only recently appointed. The tender process closed on 28 April. I think I saw in my notes that Mazars was appointed on or around 28 April but I ask that the Deputy not to hold me to that because I am speaking from my recollection on that particular issue. I take on board her view. Historically, the Government and the taxpayer have always supported a form of home ownership over the decades. It is part of the Irish psyche. This is another element that reinforces that.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I would appreciate clarification on when specifically Mazars was appointed. Will it be able to comply with the deadline of 24 June, which is tomorrow week? On the actual cost, I understand the range but would like to know the specific cost for the duration of the contract. Will it be published? With regard to the Minister of State's comment on the Irish psyche and home ownership, I do not believe this is a way to help people to own homes.

10 o'clock

I believe that it is an inflationary procedure which adds to the prices. We know that over 40% of buyers did not need help with a deposit for houses priced at up to €600,000. That is not a way to increase affordability or to help people gain ownership. I hold a completely different view on the scheme, which I will not go into in the few seconds remaining. It is already on the record. I am fully in favour of public housing and ownership of housing, but not in the manner in which it is being done currently. It is being done piecemeal, like a jigsaw, which is adding to the cost all the time. The review of the scheme is supposed to be a fundamental one. How much is it costing? Will it be completed by Friday, 24 June, and published immediately?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy for the additional questions. I do not have some of the information to hand. I will ask officials to forward to the Deputy as much information as possible on her questions in the coming days. I am not sure whether information on the cost of

the review can be provided. I do not know the answer to that.

There is a broader issue. I am generally in favour of the scheme, whereas the Deputy is not. However, that is a broader issue and does not concern the specifics of the scheme. I benefited from getting income tax relief on the interest on my mortgage. It is gone now. I think it was part of the Irish psyche to get some help when buying a house. That is gone. This is a different scheme. Some people, including me, think it is a good idea, while others have reservations about it. However, that is a larger debate for another day.

Credit Unions

9. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on his engagement with credit unions and representative bodies to date in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29754/22]

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Minister of State has been doing a lot of work and has engaged extensively with various elements of the credit union movement since his appointment. I want to get a sense of where we are at with the plan to support our credit unions in their ambition to grow and become a much bigger part of banking solutions, particularly community banking solutions.

Deputy Sean Fleming: To date in 2022, I have had 13 meetings with various credit union stakeholders, including the representative bodies, the Credit Union Advisory Committee, CUAC, and individual credit unions. I have also spoken at the AGMs of the Irish League of Credit Unions, the Credit Union Development Association, CUDA, and the Credit Union Managers Association, CUMA, as well as at the National Supervisors Forum summer forum just last weekend. I have met various credit union representative bodies which broadly supported the proposals emanating from the programme for Government review of policy framework. The review has been completed and legislative proposals will be brought to Cabinet shortly.

Significant work has been carried out in this area in the past 18 months. All the representative bodies attended a meeting in the Department that I chaired on 10 March 2022 and agreement was reached on 12 of the 14 proposals. The legislative proposals are scheduled to go to Cabinet in the next week or two, when we will have more information on them. I stress that we are not dealing with or infringing on the role of the Central Bank in terms of regulatory requirements. Those are for the Central Bank as regulator. The Department of Finance, politicians and the Government should not be involved in regulation, as I am sure the Deputy appreciates. We will have further information on the proposals as soon as they go to Cabinet.

There is general support for this area. The programme for Government has four measures on credit unions, all of which are important. The most important is the aim to grow the credit union movement. I have never engaged with credit unions without making a specific point, which I will repeat now. They must grow their lending books. I am aware that some people will talk about Central Bank restrictions. Those restrictions mainly deal with credit unions' deposit rates and how much they have to hold in reserve. The biggest issue facing the credit union movement is that a generation or two ago, credit unions were lending out 60% of their assets in loans. The majority of their members were saving and taking out loans. Recently, I have met with credit unions that are only lending to 15% of their members. The average loan-to-asset ratio in the credit unions is 26% or 27%. That is not sustainable. It has to be 36%, 46%

or 56%. They lend money at a rate of 6% or 7%, on average. That is how they will become more sustainable in the future. They need to lend more money via credit, rather than serving as institutions for saving.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I acknowledge the Minister of State's engagement with the credit union movement. We cannot just dismiss the role of the Central Bank by saying this is a matter for the Central Bank. There is no doubt that the Central Bank's attitude and its regulation act as a brake on credit unions playing a bigger role in communities, in particular, in banking. That is historical. We need to reflect on how we can get the credit union movement to grow to the strengths it has in 2022, as opposed to ten years ago. Perhaps we have to review the regulations to allow credit unions to grow.

On the figures cited by the Minister of State, there are many credit unions that would like to lend, but cannot do so because they are not getting sanctioned for products or they are getting a large kickback. Credit unions are ideally placed to deal with the current cost-of-living crisis. As interest rates on home loans begin to rise, they are ideally placed to assist in the area of community banking, if they are given the flexibility to do so, by offering a home loan product that will reflect the area in which they operate.

I welcome that the Minister of State plans to bring proposals to Cabinet in the coming weeks. Will there be legislative leads out of those proposals? What does the Minister of State envisage will be the timeline for implementing those proposals?

Deputy Sean Fleming: The proposals being brought to Cabinet are specifically for legislation. They concern the 12 topics on which we want to legislate and there is agreement on those. After the proposals have been brought to Cabinet, I hope they will go for pre-legislative scrutiny as quickly as possible. On the timeline for getting the legislation through the Dáil in the second half of this year, the pre-legislative scrutiny process could take a day, a week or four or five months. That is outside my control. I know the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach has a very heavy workload. I ask the committee to prioritise pre-legislative scrutiny of the proposed legislation as soon as possible, so that we can get it through the Houses and enacted. The legislation will contain an element on a service level agreement between the Central Bank and the credit union movement, which does not exist currently. When a credit union contacts the Central Bank about a particular project or a new product it wants to offer, a timeline will be set out in the service level agreement. Currently, the process is open-ended. Many practical measures are being introduced in the legislation. I take on board the Deputy's point on the role of the Central Bank. It applies to banking as well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome movement on this matter. If the legislation is passed, how will it change the operation of the individual credit unions? Will it unleash them or give them the chance to be more responsive than they can be currently? As the Minister of State noted earlier, banks are withdrawing their physical services from communities, leaving many people who depend on branch banking exposed. The credit unions are perfectly placed to step in and provide physical banking services. Will there be provision in the legislation to assist them in doing that, particularly in communities where there might be a need for support to assist them in maintaining a physical presence, including through the provision of financial support similar to that being offered to post offices, in order that we have a certain viable level of physical financial transaction services in communities around the country?

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Deputy raised a number of points, which merit a more detailed

discussion on another occasion, given the time constraints today. The levies the credit unions pay have been cut by 55% since this Government came into office, resulting in a very substantial saving of around €6 million. Three different credit union proposals have been approved by the Central Bank for lending to approved housing bodies, AHBs. It is now up to the credit unions and the AHBs to work out the commercial arrangements for that. The option to submit such proposals is open to every credit union in Ireland, if it chooses to avail of it. It is now up to the credit unions and AHBs to finalise the arrangements. The biggest thing the legislation will encourage is collaboration among the credit unions. No individual credit union can take on the big job of mortgage approvals. Back-office support and collaboration among credit unions are required. The service providers that supply the credit unions with current accounts or debit cards are being given statutory recognition in the legislation, which they do not have at the moment, to work on a collaborative basis at the request of individual credit unions. Most credit unions cannot take on the full range of services individually. Initiatives such as Cultivate, involving credit unions coming together voluntarily to offer new products, are the future of the movement.

Departmental Policies

10. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if further measures are being considered to help with the cost of living given the decrease in consumer spending in the first quarter of 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31335/22]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance if he will introduce an emergency budget and targeted measures to support struggling households following a research paper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30059/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There has been a significant amount of to and fro today arising from the fact that a huge number of people are now in serious financial difficulty due to rising costs. I accept the Government cannot do everything but we need to see it doing more. We want to see an emergency budget, but I will not get into that now. We could talk about the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report and the views of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, and the Central Bank. What promises will be made with a view to mitigating the difficulties people are experiencing?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 27 together.

I thank the Deputies for their questions. The decline in consumer spending in the first quarter of this year was mainly due to the mobility restrictions introduced because of the omicron wave of the pandemic. The Deputy referred to recent engagement with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in his question. On the question of the cost of living, the Government has acted swiftly and frequently to address this issue, including through budget 2022 measures and more recent measures, adding up to €2.4 billion, which have been introduced to ease the burden on households, including with measures targeted at those in need.

In October, as part of the budget, the Government provided more than €1 billion in direct relief, incorporating a reduction in personal income tax and a social welfare package. Inflationary pressures intensified because of pent-up demand in the economy after the pandemic-related restrictions. There were also restrictions on getting products into the country due to various backlogs in production lines and those problems are still there and have added to inflation. The

Putin war has also exacerbated the situation, primarily in its effect on the price of fuel, which affects people coming to and going from work, home-heating costs and the cost of running a business. That has exacerbated the situation.

The Government acted again in February with a package of €505 million to deal directly with the issue of rising energy prices. This included a €200 credit towards the cost of energy bills for every household in the country, a lump sum payment in respect of the fuel allowance and a cut to public transport fares.

The Deputy mentioned the ESRI report. It stated that the types of measures we introduced, such as the lump sum payments to help with household energy bills, were better targeted than an across-the-board fuel increase from which everybody, including wealthy people, would benefit. As the report stated, even though the same amount of €200 was given to each household, we know that lower income families have higher energy costs proportionally relative to their incomes. Therefore, the lump sum payment was proportionally more beneficial to those people. Those were the words of the ESRI this morning.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know the situation we are in. We are not taking away from what has been done by the Government to date but the fact is we are in a crisis and a disaster, to use terminology that is interchangeable now. We need to see action. It is no more than what any of us hear when we go around canvassing. No one is very interested in what has been done because they are more interested in what is going to be done. Given the circumstances people are in, we need action.

What we want to see is what is proposed in many of these reports. We need supports to be targeted at those who need it most. That is going to be difficult. We all know that a considerable amount of people have no choice about their use of fuel because they have to travel. We all know what we need to do with regard to wind energy, electric cars, infrastructure and public transport. We need to facilitate people who do not have those alternatives now. What are we going to do? We are heading towards the Dáil recess and unless we take action soon, none of this will be dealt with before September, October or later. That will be critical.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I will not go through the full list of measures we have introduced on an almost bimonthly basis since 1 January. Most recently, we reduced the rate of VAT for the hospitality sector to increase employment. The main task we have is getting people back to work. The best way of dealing with poverty in a household is to have an earned income in the house. That is better than the alternative. That measure was intended to get people back working in the hospitality industry, in our pubs, restaurants and hotels. There are now 2.5 million people in the workforce. The policies we are introducing are paying off. That is the highest number of people ever in the workforce.

In the coming weeks, the Government will publish the summer economic statement, which will set out the budgetary framework within which we will consider the measures to be introduced next October. The budgetary strategy will be aimed at restoring the public finances to a stable trajectory in the uncertain times ahead. We are going to see that in the coming weeks and it will set the framework for where the Government goes. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the fact that interest rates are rising and the taxpayer has a high level of national debt. We must be conscious of the extra cost of that debt on the Irish public.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all accept we are in a situation that is far from perfect.

We know that interest rates, inflation rates and all the rates one would not want to rise are rising. Unfortunately, the consumer, householder and citizen can feel all of this on a day-by-day basis. We must be able to offer them something so they can get through it. We all accept that employment, particularly highly paid employment, is a means of breaking poverty. However, a considerable number of people are falling into fuel poverty and becoming the working poor. We must facilitate them. They do not have alternatives to putting petrol or diesel in their cars. I understand we can still reduce their costs but it needs to be done straightaway. We also need to consider the cost of home-heating oil. We need to know what sorts of conversations the Government has had with the European Commission. What are the possibilities for cross-European mitigations? People need support as soon as possible. They are in dire need.

Deputy Sean Fleming: We will continue to assist households in dealing with the cost of living where it is possible to do so. It is imperative that policies are designed in a manner that does not increase inflation. Putting more Government and taxpayer money into the economy to try to counteract the effects every time there is an increase in inflation rates would add to the inflationary pressure. Budgetary policy must be carefully crafted to avoid becoming a part of the very problem we are trying to address.

The pandemic continued into this year. Some €7 billion was ear-marked for issues relating to Covid-19 this year. More than €3 billion of that was allocated and a further €4 billion remains unallocated and is in the contingency fund. There are ongoing costs relating to Covid so we cannot dip into that fund at this point because we do not know what will happen with the virus in the next six to eight months. We hope we will not need to fund a further response. Some of that money may have to be used because of the extra costs caused by the Putin war, including in dealing with the 35,000 Ukrainian refugees. None of us can dispute that if we have money to spare, we must look after families who are fleeing a war-torn economy. Nonetheless, we have put €2.5 billion into the Irish economy this year.

Derelict Sites

11. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the introduction of a derelict property tax; if he will replace the derelict site levy that would be implemented by the Revenue Commissioners; if any research has been carried out by his Department into this proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31302/22]

Deputy Steven Matthews: I wish to hear the Minister of State's views on the introduction of a derelict property tax. Will the Government consider replacing the current derelict sites levy with a derelict property tax to be collected by Revenue? Has the Department done any research on this matter?

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank the Deputy and appreciate his raising this matter.

Addressing vacancy and dereliction, and maximising the use of the existing housing stock, is a priority objective of the Government, as evidenced in the Housing for All strategy. One of the four pathways in the plan is specifically dedicated to this area.

The Minister for Finance has been advised by his colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, that the existing Derelict Sites Act imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that 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 that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. These powers include the power to prosecute owners who do not comply with notices served, making compulsory land purchases and carrying out necessary work at charge to the owners for the cost.

The Minister has also been advised that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage continues to liaise with local authorities on the implementation of the Act with a view to improving its effectiveness. In this regard, a review of the Act was initiated in November 2021 and initial submissions have been sought from local authorities on potential improvements to the legislative provisions and the way they are applied. We understand the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is now in the process of establishing a focused working group to progress speedily this matter further.

It would be premature to speculate on possible legislative changes and improvements in the levy collection mechanisms, including replacing the current levy with a tax to be implemented by the Revenue Commissioners in advance of the completion of this review. It remains a work in progress. The process is open-ended but we want to see the report as quickly as possible so we can decide where to go next.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister of State. I am glad he referenced the Derelict Sites Act because it needs to be addressed. I have introduced a Private Members' Bill to address the issues involved and I hope it will be considered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is the taxation aspect of it that I am interested in, which is the responsibility of the Department of Finance. I am delighted to see work is in progress but this work needs to be expedited.

We have a housing crisis and there is no doubt about it. That has been well documented and much commented on lately. I see tackling dereliction and vacancy as an opportunity to bring life and living back into town centres, as well as addressing people's housing and accommodation needs. We have a derelict sites levy in place. In 2021, over €5 million worth of levies were issued but only €378,000 was collected by the local authorities. This levy is not functioning properly at local authority level, with less than 10% of what is owed being collected. That is why I suggest we introduce a tax rather than a levy, to be collected by the Revenue Commissioners. People pay attention to Revenue; they may not pay attention to the local authorities.

Deputy Sean Fleming: Everyone would agree with the Deputy's last point. When you get a letter from Revenue, you have to take it seriously. The Revenue Commissioners will get you eventually. Even if you are dead, Revenue will get what you owe from your estate. That is one of the sure things in life.

I understand that the operation of the legislation - the complications and implications involved - was very difficult and unwieldy. Issues arose relating to boundaries, registration, property ownership and so on. My local authority has issued a number of compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, on derelict sites and there is no reason for local authorities not to do so. It just takes a push from senior management to make it happen. Local authorities can all find reasons not to do it but there are glaring examples of the benefit of just getting on with it and serving the notice. Notices can be nailed to the door if it is not known who owns the property. That is part of the process and it is happening.

On the question of the involvement of the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Finance cannot comment until it receives the report on possible taxation legislation. We have to hold back on that. On vacant properties more generally, the Revenue Commissioners is very active. I know from my constituency office that it is reviewing cases of people who are exempt from the local property tax, LPT, because they had an uninhabitable house. Revenue is of the view that if such properties can be made habitable, they should be brought back into use. There are different definitions between the Revenue and the local authorities but Revenue is doing very thorough work in this area, which is positive.

Deputy Steven Matthews: The CPO process is one that local authorities can use as a last resort when there is no movement but the introduction of a tax would serve as a land and building activation measure. Sometimes property owners just need a nudge in the right direction and introducing a tax would serve as a nudge. I am aware that the reasons for vacancy and dereliction are many and nuanced. The Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage produced a report on this issue, to which this morning's Acting Chair, Deputy Higgins, contributed. There was cross-party agreement that we need taxation measures in the form of a dereliction tax and a vacant homes tax. I understand there has been some progress on a vacant homes tax. I will liaise further with the Minister of State on this as we approach the budget because I really believe taxation measures are what is required. Often when buildings sit vacant they have a negative effect on entire street scapes. If we can bring them back into use, that could have a really beneficial effect on towns and villages and local economies, both in terms of their general look and in meeting local housing needs.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I concur with everything the Deputy said. We all agree that we should be able to move on this more quickly. I acknowledge the work of the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage which put a lot of time into its report on this issue. I am not personally aware of any Private Members' Bill but that can be discussed in Government circles and with relevant Ministers.

I hope the aforementioned report is published as soon as possible. The Department of Finance has to stand back until it sees the report. In that context, I do not have any answer for Deputy Matthews this morning on taxation measures and will not have an answer until we get an assessment of the problem.

Insurance Coverage

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide an update on the status of his plans to address the rising cost of and limited access to public liability insurance; the detail of his recent engagements with an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30058/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is not the first time we have spoken about public liability insurance. We all know it is a disaster. Many companies and organisations cannot get public liability insurance at all or if they are offered such insurance, the premium is terrible. What engagement has the Minister of State had with the industry on this? We all know that we need certain things to happen, some of which are in the gift of the Minister for Justice in the context of duty of care. We need to see action and we need to see prices coming down.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this issue, which we have

discussed previously. I appreciate and acknowledge his interest in this area. He is concerned to help various groups that are affected by limited access to public liability insurance. The Government recognises the concerns felt by many groups regarding the cost and availability of insurance and has prioritised insurance reform. As the Deputy is aware, we have an action plan for insurance reform and 80% of the actions under that plan have been done at governmental level. Some of the other actions will require implementation through the courts and are related to legislation we have recently passed. The judicial guidelines have been challenged and test cases have gone to court. I understand that one case was dealt with in recent weeks which upheld the guidelines. Some of the insurance companies wanted to see the outcome of those test cases. That will now give a level of certainty. Settlements were being held back while the outcome of those cases was awaited. A lot of people were not happy with the reduced rewards under the guidelines. Their solicitors advised them that they would have secured awards that were double in size last year and that the guidelines could reduce the possible payout by 40%. Many people have held off accepting awards until the guidelines were tested in court. We are making good progress on that and I am confident the Judiciary will stand by its own guidelines.

The other issue is duty of care legislation, which was cleared by the Government recently. I expect that legislation to go through the Oireachtas this year. That will be very important, as will the reform of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, PIAB, to give the board a role in mediation. Until now, the board made a recommendation and told claimants they could take it or leave it. The Government's view is that if PIAB is given a conciliation role, it could negotiate an agreement between the two sides. We hope the relevant legislation can also be completed this year.

Finally, some new players are entering the market and these new insurance companies are beginning to help in some of the areas that had difficulties.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate some of the work that is being done. In fairness, this issue was thrown to the Minister of State when the area was already a disaster. We are dealing with issues now that should have been dealt with years ago. I am delighted to hear that more players are coming into the market and would be grateful if the Minister of State could provide an update on that. If it is not possible for him to do so in public, perhaps we could have a private conversation later.

The duty of care legislation is an absolute necessity. I have spoken previously about a community centre in Blackrock in Dundalk that was quoted a premium of between €10,000 and €11,000, which is absolutely mad. My local residents' association was quoted €3,200 because it has responsibility for a field in the middle of a housing estate. This is absolutely mad stuff and we really need to bring it to an end.

Deputy Sean Fleming: In certain cases, local authorities may not want to get involved but sometimes they can be pushed. This is especially true for semi-public areas but whether they can be taken in charge by local authorities is a separate issue.

Regarding new insurance businesses in Ireland, I joined IDA Ireland at a conference last Tuesday in Amsterdam at which the agency was meeting potential new clients. I also met a large American insurance company this week. I will not put its name on the record of the House today but it has started business in Ireland in recent weeks. It has taken some of the play activities under its wing and is now writing insurance in that area. It will provide cover for organisations when their next annual premium is due. I am not sure what month of the year that will be

but the company is already in the market.

The main issue is that once we get the judicial guidelines settled by the courts and the duty of care legislation passed, people will know where they stand. The insurance companies say that the one thing they cannot cope with is uncertainty and there has been a lot of uncertainty in the insurance market until now. IDA Ireland is saying that now that there is some certainty in the Irish market, it can sell Ireland internationally and can invite insurance companies in whereas two years ago, it could not have done so. It can now actively try to attract more companies into the country and while that can be a long process, all of the signals are good. We want to see a reduction in premiums.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is the best news I have heard in relation to public liability insurance but the Government must make sure it happens. I have spoken previously about insurance for those in the entertainment sector. At this point in time, none of the companies that offer bouncy castles for hire has insurance and that needs to be rectified.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I have been directly involved in encouraging the insurance industry to provide cover to certain sectors. The equine industry had a problem last year but we got that sorted out last spring. I was told last Christmas that there was no insurance available for ice rinks but two rinks succeeded in getting insurance. The situation with regard to play and activity groups is that a new American company has set up in Ireland in recent weeks and is moving into that market. The company has already met the national body for those groups and has, through a broker, offered policies from their next renewal date. The Central Bank will issue a report next week on public liability and employers' liability. I do not know what is in the report but it will be very beneficial. We will have a discussion on that next week.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Sector Pay

86. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on his negotiations for a new public service stability agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31505/22]

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The Minister is currently involved in very important negotiations for the new public sector pay deal. The current public sector stability agreement is set to conclude at the end of the year. Given we are now at the midway point, will the Minister provide the House with an update on the negotiations for the new public service stability agreement?

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I thank Deputy Ryan for the question. Public service pay has been governed by a system of collective agreements since the Croke Park agreement was negotiated in 2010. These collective agreements have helped to ensure public pay is managed in a sustainable, affordable and orderly manner. These agreements have also enabled significant reform of public services and changes to work practices.

The value of public pay agreements to the Government and the taxpayer is ensuring pay costs are managed in a sustainable and orderly way and in a climate of industrial peace. By and

large, public pay agreements have delivered on these objectives over the past 12 years.

The current public service agreement is Building Momentum. This agreement is weighted towards those at lower incomes, with headline increases of approximately 5% for the lowest paid public servants. These groups will also benefit more from other measures in the agreement, including the overtime rates and premia payment adjustments. The current agreement is a two-year agreement that is due to expire, as Deputy Ryan has said, at the end of 2022.

As Deputies will be aware, exploratory discussions have taken place between the parties to the agreement following the triggering of the review clause in Building Momentum by public service unions and associations due to the increasing cost of living. These discussions have now moved to a formal phase of discussions, which are being facilitated by the Workplace Relations Commissions.

As the Deputies will appreciate, while these discussions are ongoing it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the detail of those talks, which should remain confidential to the parties. However, inflation and cost of living issues are a feature of those discussions.

These are very challenging discussions given the impact high levels of inflation are having on living standards of workers but also because of the uncertainty in the global economic outlook. The aim in these talks will be to strike the right balance and seek to achieve a deal that is fair and affordable to taxpayers generally and public service employees.

An agreement on public service pay could play an important role in underpinning stability, minimising industrial unrest and supporting the continued delivery of reform and quality public services over the period ahead. However, any such agreement would need to reflect the broader economic context and the current fiscal position where significant challenges are emerging.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: As the Minister will be aware, ordinary people are really feeling the pressure in the midst of the unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. Workers and families are really struggling. There are increased energy prices, increased food prices, and even increases in the price of housing. Yesterday, an AA survey showed that petrol prices have increased by 11.5% in the past two weeks. Diesel is now 45% more expensive than it was last year. According to the latest residential property price index, property prices nationally rose by 14.2% over the past year. It should be clear that workers need a pay rise. They need a pay rise that accounts for inflation. Anything less will be a cut in real terms. We are aware the wages of public sector workers can help to anchor the wages of those in the private sector. A genuine wage increase would have a positive spillover effect for the wages of those in the private sector. The Tánaiste has recently spoken about making the minimum wage a living wage, which would be most welcome. The Tánaiste referred to 2026. We cannot wait until 2026.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Ryan. As we stand here today in the Chamber, the officials from my Department are in negotiations with the public services committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to see if new pay arrangements can be agreed. I do not want to say anything that would be unhelpful to that process. I hope it comes to a successful conclusion. We are entering a critical phase in those discussions now.

The aim here is to strike the right balance. We must be fair to public service workers and recognise the impact of inflation on their living standards. We also must recognise the needs of the State generally. We are now in an environment where the global economic outlook is increasingly uncertain. There is no sign, unfortunately and tragically, of the war in Ukraine

ending any time soon. Obviously, the inflationary environment is having a direct impact on workers and on the State generally. It is about striking the right balance. I believe we stand a good chance of reaching agreement but this will require goodwill and co-operation from all parties. We will know shortly whether that is possible.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I completely understand where the Minister is coming from and that we must try to manage the public finances in a prudent manner. I get that. We in Sinn Féin get that. We are, however, constantly hearing the talk about the risks of a wage-price spiral. There is a problem in that. The argument has been there was not any evidence for that, and there has been wage growth in some sectors. The Minister will be aware this wage growth has mostly been in the multinational sectors. For many other sectors wage growth has been stagnant for some time. We are going back to like it was in the 1970s. We cannot go back 50 years and use the same model currently. It is not possible. By giving public sector workers a proper pay rise, I believe this will help them to deal with the cost of living and it would help to ease the burden on families. It would help them to cover their increasing costs. At this stage these are ever-increasing costs. We do not need to transport back to the 1970s. We need to move forward, if possible, please.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I have acknowledged publicly the need to go beyond terms of the current agreement. This is why those negotiations are under way today, and it is hoped they will come to a successful conclusion shortly. The backdrop is challenging in a number of respects. I have acknowledged the impact of inflation on the living standards of workers, both public-sector and private sector workers. There is an increasing level of uncertainty about the global economy. We are facing significant fiscal pressures in the State also. We must make sure whatever arrangements we enter into are affordable. It is certainly my objective and my desire to have a public service pay agreement. It is in the interests of all parties because it does afford industrial peace, which is an important ingredient in having a successful economy.

We must watch the competitiveness agenda. We have to make sure we do not make any decisions in this very difficult time that would disadvantage Ireland from a competitiveness point of view. Ultimately, the success of our economic model is that Ireland has been very competitive in attracting inward investment and as a base for Irish companies to export throughout the world.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

87. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on his Department's guidance for public service employers during Covid-19 in relation to special leave with pay for Covid-19; if there are further plans in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31504/22]

Deputy Patricia Ryan: With regard to the Department's guidance for public service employers during Covid-19, the special leave with pay for Covid-19, what are the Minister's further plans in this regard and will he make a statement on this?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank Deputy Ryan for raising this important issue. I will take this opportunity once again to acknowledge and pay tribute to the immense contribution made by our public servants, in particular across our health services, during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their efforts ensured we kept services to the public and to the vulnerable

in our society running, to the greatest extent possible, in the most challenging of circumstances. In recognition of this, the Deputy will be aware the Government provided for an additional public holiday earlier this year and a special recognition payment for healthcare staff, which is currently being paid to many of them.

Reflecting the obligations to self-isolate laid down in public health advice and to assist in the prevention of the possible onward spread of the virus in the workplace, special leave with pay for Covid-19 arrangements were introduced by my Department in March 2020. This was a temporary measure in response to the unprecedented circumstances presented by the Covid pandemic. Special leave with pay has been used in lieu of sick leave across the public service to assist in the prevention of the possible onward spread of Covid-19 in the workplace.

From the outset of the pandemic it has been made clear in the guidance and frequently asked questions document that was published at the time that special leave with pay is a temporary measure that is kept under regular review. Changes have been made to the arrangements over the course of the past two years in line with changes to public health, Government guidance, and the general return to the workplace.

It is important to note that special leave with pay is not ending. From 1 July 2022, special leave with pay for Covid-19 will continue to be available for the stated self-isolation period, which is currently seven days. This is in keeping with the rationale of assisting in the prevention of the possible onward spread of Covid-19 in the workplace. I understand the Department of Health is working on a proposal to deal with legacy Covid cases in the healthcare sector. My officials will examine any proposals as soon as they are finalised. This issue has been raised directly with me by a number of colleagues across the House. The public service sick leave scheme continues in operation and in many instances the critical illness protocol will be relevant as well.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: My colleague Deputy Mairéad Farrell has raised the issue of long Covid with the Minister on a number of occasions. When she did so, he informed us that flexibility was to be provided to public service workers. That is good. The scheme provides for certain payments to staff during periods of absence from work due to illness from long Covid. This is despite long Covid not being recognised by the likes of the HSE as a specific illness. With the pandemic emergency declared over, the scheme is being wound down. Is it still the case that the Government has no plans to introduce a special scheme for those suffering with long Covid? Many who are still suffering feel the additional resources the Government is providing are insufficient.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The special leave with pay scheme was an exceptional intervention, which was warranted back in March 2020 because of the need to ensure people who contracted Covid did not have to go to work and would be paid accordingly. It was never designed as an instrument in itself to deal with long Covid, which was not even recognised at the time as being in existence. We have the standard public service sick leave scheme and, as I have acknowledged, there is also the critical illness cover. There are examples of public service workers, particularly in healthcare, who contracted Covid and may still be out of work because of it. That is why I have acknowledged that the Department of Health is examining that specific issue and is engaging with my Department on it. I expect that the Department of Health will finalise a proposal in that regard shortly. We stand ready to examine that and assist in any way we can, while recognising that this probably impacts on quite a small number of people.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: I appreciate what the Minister is saying. The Government has taken some measures in response to long Covid, but those who are still suffering feel it is not enough. The pandemic emergency may have been declared over but they are still suffering. For these people, long Covid is with them every day. It manifests in shortness of breath, chronic fatigue, brain fog, an inability to concentrate and a multitude of limiting impacts. I appeal to the Minister at the very least to meet the campaign group and hear what it has to say.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Minister for Health is acutely conscious of this issue and there is work on it ongoing within his Department. There are legacy cases of people who, unfortunately, contracted Covid, quite possibly in the workplace, at a time when the risks were not fully known. They went to work to protect everybody else. The Department of Health is working on proposals that will be shared with my Department once they are finalised and we will respond as quickly as we can. The general public service sick pay scheme continues in operation. There are other categories of people who suffer from conditions and are availing of that scheme, as opposed to special leave with pay, because of when they contracted that condition. I am alert and aware of the issue. The Department of Health is working on proposals at this time. Those proposals will come to us and I will then respond as quickly as I can.

Construction Industry

88. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he intends to introduce a new public works contract for the construction industry to ensure the risk in these contracts is shared in an equitable way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29034/22]

Deputy Seán Canney: I raise the issue of public works contracts, which have been in place since 2007. I acknowledge the Minister's efforts in introducing a variation to the contracts for the unreal price increases that have happened. However, I fear that if the contracts are not overhauled, we will have serious issues in trying to get contractors to do work for us. Are there any plans to reform them or introduce proper contracts?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Osian Smyth): As Minister of State responsible for public procurement, I will be taking this question. The public works contract was introduced in 2007 in response to significant cost overruns on public infrastructure projects and must be used for projects that are delivered under the Exchequer-funded element of the national development plan. Contracting authorities are expected to ensure projects are comprehensively designed to enable contractors to price with greater certainty and account for any risk that is transferred under the contract. The contract, which is a key component of the capital works management framework, CWMF, has undergone significant reforms over the years since it was introduced, and the level of risk contractors are expected to carry has been reduced in a manner that is proportionate and in line with market developments. The most significant review was conducted in 2014 and it has undergone a series of further refinements since then. It continues to be amended when appropriate.

Most recently, in January 2022, in response to materials price increases not seen in over a generation, amendments were made to reduce the level of inflation risk transferred. By March it was clear a further intervention was necessary in light of the growing inflationary pressures and uncertainty in supply chains brought about by the war in Ukraine. In May, the Minister and I introduced the inflation and supply chain delay co-operation framework after extensive

consultation.

The contract is but one element of the CWMF. In March 2019, a much broader review of the policies and practices deployed in the procurement of public works projects commenced and is ongoing. The focus of the review is on improving the delivery of construction projects in terms of quality, timely delivery and outcomes and will result in significant changes to the CWMF over the coming years. It should be read in the context of a suite of measures, including the review of the public spending code; the establishment of the commercial skills academy to provide relevant training for people involved in public procurement; a review of productivity in the construction sector; and a review of the capacity of the public sector to deliver the national development plan. All of these taken together will improve the performance of the construction and operational phases of a project. The CWMF review involves extensive engagement, with both industry stakeholders and the public bodies charged with the delivery of public works projects on a range of issues, including price variation; risk management; reflecting quality in the award of contracts; the adoption of building information modelling, BIM, on public works projects; liability, indemnity and insurance requirements; performance evaluation; and encouraging collaborative working.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Minister of State said a lot there. I will give him some facts. Right now, the construction industry is in free fall. Contractors are not going to price public works contracts as they stand at the moment. It is a particular risk in the engineering contracting. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, is here. This also affects flood relief schemes, where there is an enormous risk in taking on one of these projects. Civil engineering contractors will not take them on because they cannot price the risk and the risk is not seen. A lot of the work is in water and rivers and cannot be seen. I have tried to elicit this information from various Departments.

Since the contracts were introduced, what has the performance been in terms of delivery on time, the cost and the overruns? There is also the cost of litigation, arbitration and the claims environment that now exists within the construction industry. How is that being costed into each project? I saw a project from the HSE that was 60% over the tender price. Some of that was probably due to additional works but a lot of it was contractual claims. The head of one contracting authority told me last week that before a project starts, the first thing that goes on site is a Portakabin and into that go quantity surveyors who start the claims process against the contracting authority. We have an adversarial industry and we need to correct that as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Two major changes have been made to counter the new problem of inflation that has arisen as a result of the Ukraine war. First, the contract template is meant to take inflation into account. That is not just the consumer price index, CPI, but the sub-indices of inflation that apply to that contract. If there is a particular material involved, such as concrete or wood, that sub-index will be taken into account. That is a risk transfer whereby some of the risk is being taken by the State rather than the contractor. If all the risk is transferred to the contractor, the bid would have to be very high and may result in people not being able to bid. Where somebody has taken on a contract, they may find they cannot feasibly complete it without their company folding or becoming insolvent. It is with that in mind that we changed the template. We also made retrospective changes whereby contracts taken out since the start of the year were compensated with a view to preventing those contractors from ceasing operation, where it could be shown that contract was suffering from material price inflation.

Deputy Seán Canney: I accept that, but when we think about how to have a collaborative industry in which contractors and the contracting authorities will work together, we need to look at what has been established in other jurisdictions such as the UK, where there is the new engineering contract, NEC. In that case, there is risk-sharing and more is got out of the contract.

The Minister of State referred to building information modelling, BIM. That is for the large contractors, but what about the small contractors that build one-off houses, an extension or a housing adaptation? They have to comply with the same criteria within the public works contracts. It is unfair and totally wrong that this contract amounts to an albatross around the necks of contractors, the construction industry and the public money going into it. A lot more money is being spent but, in my view, we are not getting the jobs built on time or to budget. The cost is being masked by the arbitration and the claims that go on within contracts. We need to look at this in a more realistic way.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: We have a collaborative system of working with the construction companies and their representative bodies. We want to avoid an adversarial situation; that does not work for anybody. We cannot end up in court or in disputes. With that in mind, I meet representatives of the Construction Industry Federation every quarter and I am in regular contact with people such as Sean Downey in order that I can ensure their concerns about how construction contracts with the State will be taken into account, that we will have a practical framework for co-operation and that our projects will be delivered on time. That is under constant review. At the moment, a working group of representative bodies of employers, including the Construction Industry Federation, is reviewing the guidelines for public construction contracts.

We absolutely need to work with the industry. We do not want to be in an adversarial position and we are not in one. We are in constant communication, as recently as within the past week.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 89 replied to with Written Answers.

Public Expenditure Policy

90. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has considered the need to front-load public investments in areas including health, education and transport if compact development is to be a success. [31241/22]

Deputy Richard Bruton: One of our key challenges as we try to take a more sustainable approach is to build compact communities, which will bring less travel in cars and require fewer parking places, lead to more sustainable public transport and allow us to right-size buildings more easily. In many areas in constituencies such as mine, however, and I am sure in that of the Minister of State's constituency in Cork, there are long stretches where the only amenities are takeaways, bookmakers and barbers. We need to see a front-loading of investment in transport, education, childcare and sports facilities in order that these communities will have a chance to develop, and it must be a sustainable, social approach as well as an environmental one.

Deputy Michael McGrath: As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations for Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. The responsibility for the management and delivery of individual investment projects, within the allocations agreed under the national development plan, rests with the individual sponsoring Department in each case. The Government has committed €165 billion for capital investment, as set out in the national development plan, NDP, published last October. The figures announced in the NDP represent a substantial increase of almost 50% on the previous NDP of 2018 and they target investment levels among the highest in the EU, at 5% of GNI*.

This year, €12 billion has been made available to Departments to spend on vital infrastructure in areas such as transport, education and health, as well as housing, water infrastructure and cultural amenities. The NDP includes indicative Exchequer allocations for each Department for a five-year period, 2021 to 2025, and overall capital expenditure ceilings out to 2030. This expenditure was considered and agreed to support those sectors that will be key to delivering the ten national strategic outcomes identified in the national planning framework, NPF, including NSO 1, relating to compact growth. NSO 1 aims to secure the sustainable growth of more compact urban and rural settlements supported by jobs, housing and essential services.

Initiatives such as town centre first, Croí Cónaithe and the urban regeneration and development fund are aimed at supporting the regeneration of our towns and cities and encouraging compact growth. In addition to these specific measures, substantial investment has been prioritised for sustainable transport, including active travel, BusConnects for all our major cities, MetroLink and DART+, all of which will further contribute to more sustainable cities and boost infilled development.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Will the Minister consider that he has responsibility not just for the cash spent but also for the overall coherence of the investment? If our goal is sustainable communities, it is not adequate that the Department of Education, for example, will typically not build a school until ten years after children have been there, following many years in pre-fabricated buildings. Similarly, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media will not provide sports grants to these communities if they do not have established clubs and facilities to develop. Childcare is also often very delayed, while transport projects often arrive even longer than a decade late. On the north fringe of my constituency, we are committing to very substantial expansion, but to make that feasible, will we not need to front-load some of these key public service infrastructure projects to make those communities viable as living, working centres, with the 15-minute city for which everyone now advocates?

Deputy Michael McGrath: In agreeing an NDP out to 2030 and setting capital budgets for each Department out to 2025, we now have a multi-annual framework that will enable Ministers and their Departments to plan the delivery of vital infrastructure projects over a number of years. At €12 billion this year, we have the largest ever capital budget and there is an obligation on every Department to ensure we are working in a coherent and consistent manner towards the implementation of the national planning framework and implementing the NDP in its totality. That involves working towards compact growth, and we need to ensure all the levers we have, whether that is investment in healthcare, education or transport, are consistent with that objective. Moreover, there is the Project Ireland 2040 delivery board, which has overall responsibility for overseeing the delivery of the NPF and the NDP. As the Deputy will be aware, I recently concluded a process whereby I appointed a number of external members to that board to complement the experience and skills of the Secretaries General who continue to serve on it.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The Land Development Agency now has 56 ha, most of which is located well outside the city boundaries and does not have established facilities, schools and so on. Surely the Minister recognises that if we are to develop that land into sustainable communities, the Department of Education will have to change its policy whereby it will not build until five or ten years after the need has been clearly established. That is too late if we are to allow them to become strong communities. Likewise, we cannot wait to roll out the public transport until years down the line. That is a challenge. We recognise green and sustainable climate consciousness has to be embedded in our NDP, but I do not think it is at present in the practice of many Departments, and I look to Deputy McGrath as, perhaps, the best Minister to challenge the coherence of that.

Deputy Michael McGrath: On that point, as the Deputy may be aware, we are setting up a new climate division within my Department because we sit at the centre of government and have a key role in ensuring Government policy will be applied consistently throughout the Departments. Agreeing the multi-annual capital framework has enabled Departments to undertake that co-ordinated forward planning he talked about. It is important schools be built in tandem with the delivery of homes in order that as children grow up, school places will be available and we will not always be playing catch-up in trying to retrofit infrastructure where homes have been built. When it comes to transport, for example, we have made an exception to our multi-annual policy and provided transport with the certainty of a €35 billion capital budget out to 2030. It is about ensuring all these Departments work together towards that NSO 1, which is about compact growth.

11 o'clock

Public Sector Pay

91. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his intentions in relation to adjusting public sector pay in view of the exceptional increases in the cost of living; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29035/22]

Deputy Seán Canney: I would like the Minister's overview on how we will deal with public sector pay in light of the exceptional increased costs of living and also how we will deal with the overall pay structure to make sure work pays in order that people who go to work get the benefit of an income into their pockets rather than being the victims who must pay for everything.

Deputy Michael McGrath: We already had a priority question from Deputy Patricia Ryan on this issue. I will reiterate some of the key points I think are relevant.

First is the importance of having a collective agreement. We have collective agreements now consecutively since 2010 when the Croke Park agreement was negotiated. It has by and large served us well over the last 12 years in that we have had continued industrial peace through that period although, of course, there have been different disputes at different points in time. We have sought to resolve them at all times, however, within the framework of the industrial relations machinery we have within the State.

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We have an existing agreement in Building Momentum, which is in place to the end of this year. As the Deputy will be aware, the public services committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, some time ago triggered the review clause in that agreement because of the exceptionally high level of inflation that is being experienced at this time and the cost of living pressures that are resulting for its members and public service workers.

Of course, the same applies across the private sector where we are seeing individual pay deals being done across the country as well. That agreement is now the subject of that review clause and at this very moment, officials from my Department are negotiating with representatives from the public services committee. This is the critical phase of those talks. They have been having informal discussions over a number of weeks and this has now moved to the formal stage. Those talks are being held under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and I expect we will have a good sense of the outcome of those discussions within the next short number of days.

In seeking to agree on new public service pay arrangements, there are a number of key considerations. Of course, cost of living and inflation will be among them. There is no denying the impact the current level of inflation is having on the living standards of workers both public and private. Though these talks relate to the public service and the importance of securing industrial peace, it is important for us and our economic model to ensure that we can offer stability with regard to industrial relations.

The importance of ensuring that we retain our competitiveness as a country and an economy is fundamental to Ireland's future as well. We must ensure that any deal is fair to the public servants who are represented in the talks but also to taxpayers generally. We must ensure it is affordable and sustainable for our country at a time when there is much uncertainty in the global economy, which has resulted in the downgrading of growth forecasts pretty much across the board, including in respect of the Irish economy.

The Exchequer is facing much pressure. There is a cost to looking after refugees who come here from Ukraine, which we will absolutely continue to do to the best of our ability, and others who seek international protection in our country as well. Of course, there are always legitimate demands to improve public services across the board in healthcare and education, to continue to invest in infrastructure and provide a budget package that enables us also to address cost-of-living measures through welfare increases and improvements in the taxation system for low and middle-income workers in particular.

There are, therefore, many issues on the table but the talks that are ongoing at the moment are focused on pay across the public service. Some 365,000 public servants are essentially represented at those talks and it is at quite a sensitive point at this stage. I hope that within the next day or two, we will have a clear idea of where we stand.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Minister is right; we are at critical stage. However, I believe that people who go out to work want to see the benefit of that work. It is not all always about the pay scale. It is actually about what will happen in terms of tax credits, especially for the lower and medium income earners. If they get an increase in wages, what often happens is that it puts them over a threshold for student grants or medical cards or whatever. I also think the transition from a 20% to 40% tax rate is too much. There has to be a more graduated form of taxation. This all has to come into line because the private sector just cannot keep paying out more wages.

The person who is working needs to see more money coming into the household to meet the cost of living. There should also be tax credits for the cost of traveling to work where a person does not have public transport such as trains and buses. People have to go to work and pay for that themselves. It is important that we get all of this in line in order that working pays as opposed to not paying.

Deputy Michael McGrath: On the question of tax, we have a programme for Government commitment that I strongly support. If we were to have a static tax system in which no changes were made at a time of rising incomes, it would be the equivalent of an increase in income tax. I do not believe it is fair that workers who earn that little bit more would then be paying more than half that in tax through USC, income tax and PRSI. Therefore, I anticipate there will be changes in respect of income tax but it will be about keeping pace with the reality that we have rising incomes for many workers across the country and we do not want more and more of their income to be taxed by stealth at the marginal rate of tax.

There is, therefore, a programme for Government commitment, which I believe is important that we continue to honour. The forthcoming budget will have a cost of living focus, however, and it will not be all about tax. It will predominantly be on the expenditure side, as it has been in recent budgets. That is where we can make the greatest difference and target the limited resources that are available to the people who most need it.

Public Sector Pay

92. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the current public sector pay talks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31318/22]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report makes for very stark reading today. It says that the number of people living in energy poverty is now nearly one third of all households and that is set increase to as high as 43%. Are the pay increases the Government is going to consider going to be in line with this absolutely shocking increase the cost of living?

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, estimates that the average worker has lost €2,500 in income in real terms. It is obviously necessary for workers to have that returned to them in pay increases. I think that should be pay increases in the order of what we have seen in terms of Dunnes and Tesco workers with 10% to compensate for that level of loss. It is also in the interest of the economy, however, because that is purchasing power those workers no longer have, and if they do not get compensated with significant pay increases and increases in things like the living wage, it will actually lead to a significant hit on the wider economy.

Deputy Michael McGrath: We are not going to agree a new public service pay deal here; it will only be done at the WRC. Those very issues the Deputy legitimately raised are the subject of discussions at this very moment. We need to allow that process to take its course and conclude and, hopefully, it will reach a successful conclusion. I want a deal. It is in everyone's interests to have industrial peace and reach a settlement that is fair to public service workers and that takes account of the level of pressure people are experiencing in respect of cost of living.

The Government and I must also take into account wider considerations, however. We

are seeing the cost of borrowing rise for all of us. It is now up at approximately 2.5% for the Irish State. Not too long ago, it was essentially zero. Therefore, there are changes in the wider economic outlook here which, unfortunately, has deteriorated globally. We must make sure whatever we do is affordable.

We have levers other than pay, some of which we have used so far. We acknowledge that we will need to do more in the budget to address the cost of living. It will not solely be addressed through pay mechanisms and we must watch the competitiveness issue. It is important for the future of our country. We have seen the employment growth we have experienced in recent months. We want that to continue but we must also make sure that work pays for people.

Deputy Seán Canney: Returning to the question about the overall tax position and the idea of having people working and making sure they get their due reward, it is important that all the social welfare thresholds are also increased in line to ensure people do not lose entitlements whereby they have gone over a threshold due to a pay increase, are taxed on that and end up being a lot worse off. A great deal of synchronisation has to happen between Departments to make sure that if there is a pay rise, the effect of that is in the pocket of the worker and is not eroded by other services being taken away from the worker, such as a medical card. I encounter many situations where young people who work for the summer do not qualify for a Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant as a result. In these times when people are crying out for workers, we are penalising people who want to work for the summer to earn a few euro because that is being taken into account when they are being assessed for the SUSI grant.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Deputy raises an important point about the secondary effects of a pay rise. We will have to pay close attention to the issue of ensuring that work pays because we are seeing job vacancies and labour shortages throughout the economy. We have to examine all aspects of the system and how they interact with each other to make sure that any disincentives to work currently embedded in the system are weeded out so we can enable, encourage and facilitate people to work and we do not punish them in that way. The Deputy makes an important point, but it is complex when getting down to the nitty-gritty of how individual schemes interact with each other and their entitlements. It is an important point that we are awake to and are examining.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This Saturday, the Cost of Living Coalition will see thousands of workers, students, pensioners and people on low incomes coming out to protest the cost-of-living crisis. One of the messages they are seeking to convey to the Minister is that this is not an either-or issue. There must be pay increases for workers and income increases for those on pensions and social welfare to match the level of inflation. Otherwise, in real terms, people are taking income and pay cuts. That is the reality. There is no justification for that.

In addition, we have to reduce the basic cost of living with regard to accommodation by introducing measures such as rent controls, actually deliver affordable housing and reduce the cost of childcare, public transport, education and so forth. It is not an either-or matter. The Minister says we cannot borrow too much. Yes, we cannot borrow too much, but the elephant in the room in all this is that there are some people making a lot of profits at present. There have been some winners in the inflation crisis, and perhaps they can contribute to ensuring that ordinary people do not see their incomes fall and that they get the pay increases they deserve.

Deputy Michael McGrath: As we approach budget 2023 there will be many demands, and we will not be able to meet all of them. The Government will have to prioritise and make

choices as to what the priorities are. At a time when people are under considerable pressure, the priority will have to be to address cost-of-living issues, particularly for low-income and middle-income households, to ensure we assist them at this time. There will be many ambitions across the government to implement the programme for Government in full and to expand and improve public services. This is a Government that has prioritised investment in public services. Public expenditure has been increasing significantly, and we have a very ambitious national development plan. We must ensure that the basics people need in their lives are looked after. I understand that point. That will have to be the focus of the forthcoming budget and I will be determined, working with colleagues across the Government, that this is where the focus will lie.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I have two brief questions. First, I commend the Minister on his efforts to get a deal. How does he estimate the impact in percentage terms on pay of the existing concessions he has provided - VAT, excise, transport, fuel scheme and medication - to give us an idea of how that is relieving pressure on families? Second, how does he factor in the fact that we all cannot be compensated for external cost increases that arise from world energy and commodity prices? We do not produce them so we have to pay for them. In net terms, somebody in Ireland has to pay. How will the Minister factor that in as well into the discussions on the future of pay trends?

Deputy Michael McGrath: The talks under way are focused on public service pay. There have been wider discussions at the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, on other issues that the Government can assist with in respect of the cost of living and public policy on a range of key issues for employers and employees. We have implemented a range of measures so far. The Deputy will be well aware of them. If one goes back to the most recent budget and what we have done since, it was in the order of €2.4 billion. That is why I have made the point that we cannot solely address inflation and the cost of living through pay. If we were to do that, it would put at risk the competitiveness of the economy as well as creating and sustaining further jobs into the future. That is a consideration. We have to make sure that we remain competitive, so it is about ensuring that through pay, tax and other levers the Government has we are, insofar as possible, providing sufficient support to people at this time.

All the advice has been to do it in a targeted way and to take account of the impact of one-off measures, some of which have been implemented so far, and of temporary measures. The Government is working on that. However, public service pay is approximately one third of current expenditure. It is approximately €24 billion so securing certainty about that bill for the remainder of this year and all of next year is an important ingredient in the overall budgetary mix.

Deputy Alan Farrell: May I raise a point of order? Not for the first time, although it is the first time in respect of the Minister's Department, my question has been grouped with Deputy Haughey's question, which is identical to the previous two questions, which were also grouped, and which is identical to the priority question the Minister has already answered. That means the Minister is now going to revisit the question for a third time. It is a dreadful waste of the Minister's time and absolutely a waste of mine. I know it is not in the gift of the Chair, but I respectfully ask the officials to note it and to do better.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): It will obviously be noted because you have just said it, so we will leave it at that and move on.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I do not think my Department groups the questions.

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Deputy Alan Farrell: I understood it was the Department, but if it is the Bills Office, I point my ire at it.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I will check that, but the substance of the Deputy's point is fair.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): It is the Department that groups them.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Is it? Okay.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I understood it was.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The next question is in the name of Deputy Shortall, who indicated she would not be in attendance.

Question No. 93 replied to with Written Answers.

Public Sector Pay

94. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the exploratory discussions on public service pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29645/22]

97. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on his Department's engagement with the representatives of an organisation (details supplied) regarding public sector pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30552/22]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not mind how the questions are grouped. I was listening to the discussion earlier and I wish the Minister and his Department well in these talks. I wish to examine a particular angle. Is any work being done in respect of sectoral-specific challenges within the public service, where vacancies cannot be filled? For example, is there any focus on vacancies in health and disability services? Those vacancies are causing major deficiencies in the delivery of public services. We cannot currently fill them because of pay and also because of other issues, and I believe this provides the opportunity to do that.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 97 together.

The Deputy made a very good point. In the current agreement we provided for a sectoral bargaining fund. For example, on 1 February there was the option of taking the flat 1% increase or putting that into a sectoral bargaining fund. The public service was divided up into a large number of sectoral bargaining units and there have been examples where that fund was used to address specific targeted issues in individual sectors. There are still some ongoing negotiations, for example, in health, where it has not been fully settled. I have no doubt that the outstanding issues will form part of the discussions that are currently under way at the WRC. The question of whether we have a mechanism in the future for addressing sector-specific issues is one that is under consideration at the talks.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I welcome that. The Minister knows himself, for instance in health, that there are so many challenges in filling vacancies in the therapies and for consultants and nurses, in particular advanced nurse practitioners, all of which would make a significant difference to the delivery of services. Similarly, vacancies cannot be filled across the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, and educational psychology services that we will

talk about later. Pay is an issue, in particular compared to that in the private sector, but there are many other issues as well, especially when we dive into the conditions of work within the HSE, for instance, and in hospital groups, which seem to put people off applying to work in the public service. All that means is that we are not delivering proper public services. The Minister is investing significantly in public services, but we are not seeing the benefit of the investment on the ground. In particular, parents of children with additional needs are not seeing that investment. People on waiting lists are not seeing the investment because of our inability to fill vacancies. We have a short window in the context of the public service pay talks to address that.

Deputy Michael McGrath: There are a significant number of vacancies across the system, in particular in healthcare. Recruitment is too slow. That is definitely having an impact on service delivery and we need to address that. In addition to having a mechanism where we agree general round increases, the Deputy raised the specific point about individual sectors. Of course, there is always the potential knock-on consequence of relativities. Different groups will examine how other groups fare in discussions on public service pay. I am aware of recommendations that the Public Service Pay Commission has made about this particular issue, and having a mechanism to address outstanding matters. We endeavour to do that in the sectoral bargaining fund, with some if not complete success, and the issue of addressing pay at a sectoral level is one that is under consideration in the course of the talks currently under way.

Deputy Alan Farrell: Like my colleague, Deputy Calleary, I want to focus my attention on the consequences of the public service pay talks in the context of a cost-of-living crisis. Where we would like to see the Government head with these talks is towards targeted measures at lower-income public servants, the threshold for which I will allow the Department and others to decide. If we are to be realistic about the effect of public service pay increases at this time, we need to target them at those who need it most, as opposed to those in the upper echelons of the public service. I believe there is opportunity.

The cost-of-living crisis has had a profound effect on the entire economy and if the Government is to respond appropriately to that in addition to the substantial measures that have been introduced, we should target the public sector pay talks at lower-income individuals because it cannot be done in isolation.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank the Deputy very much for raising that point. It is a principle that we embedded in the current agreement, Building Momentum, that for each general round increase, a floor was set so that the benefit should be at least €500, even though it was to be 1% overall. If that 1% resulted in less than €500 for individual workers, then they would be given €500 in the general round. The percentage increase for them was greater than for workers generally under the public service pay agreement. That is a principle that we adopted in the current agreement and will again be considered in the context of the current negotiations. Some of the other measures in the existing agreement do favour lower- and middle-income workers in particular in terms of overtime rates, twilight payments and so on. Those in trades and with technical skills in particular benefited more under the existing agreement than people on higher flat salaries, for example.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I know the whole area of relativities is embedded in the concept of a lot of these talks, but if relativities and the need to restrict their effect is impacting on the delivery of public services, is there an argument to be made for some measure to be put in place to balance the need to deliver to people on waiting lists and parents of children with additional needs? There is a need to make a difference to citizens' lives and some balance must be given

to that in regard to the whole area of relativities.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Of course. At the end of the day, we provide public services with a view to them reaching where they are needed and that citizens receive services. That is ultimately what having a public service pay deal or a fit-for-purpose public service is all about. We do need to have accountability, so that where public money is being provided through Votes in this Oireachtas, that it is used for the purpose for which it is intended.

Deputy Calleary's specific point about ensuring there is a mechanism to address particular pay issues so that recruitment can be successful is a fair one, which we will take on board. I acknowledge his consistent work in advocating in the area of disability services and special needs, in particular, and highlighting the deficiencies that exist in the provision of services currently. I assure him that it is a priority for the Government. I will ensure that the pay deal will not provide any barrier to addressing them by means of recruitment of the people we need.

Deputy Alan Farrell: My focus is similar to that of my colleague. What level of consideration does the Department give, in the context of the public service pay deal, and with the backdrop of the various tax measures that may be implemented in the October budget? As Deputy Calleary correctly pointed out, the difficulties in recruitment at certain grades and levels within the public service right across the board are of real concern. Many cite pay as the primary reason for not taking up posts. To be sector-specific, in the context of the Defence Forces, in particular at entry level, that is clearly an issue as well. Could the Minister please comment on that?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I think it is about a blend of measures. As I stated earlier, it is not solely down to pay to address cost-of-living pressures that undoubtedly exist. The Government has other levers. We have used some of them to date in the exceptional measures that have been introduced outside of the normal budgetary calendar. It is open to the Government to use some of those in the context of the budget as well. The cost of living can be addressed in a number of ways. Pay is one and obviously social welfare measures, and other targeted measures such as reductions in costs people face in accessing public services. The reduction in public transport fares was a very progressive and important move in that regard, in addition to taxation measures as well.

Question No. 95 replied to with Written Answers.

Capital Expenditure Programme

96. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if capital expenditure to date in 2022 is within profile; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30528/22]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I wish to query where we are at currently with capital expenditure profiles given that we are nearly halfway through the year. I know the Minister is doing a lot of work to reform capital expenditure systems to make sure money is spent quicker and without the kind of delays we have been seeing. When can we expect to see changes?

Deputy Michael McGrath: As the Deputy will be aware, the drawdown of capital expenditure from the Exchequer is detailed each month and is publicly available in the Fiscal Monitor,

which is published on the *gov.ie* website. All line Departments and agencies submit information on their expenditure levels against profile to my Department, along with an explanation outlining details regarding any variance of underspending or overspending against profile.

The latest capital expenditure figures available to the end of May reveal that the net capital spend, including capital carryover, was €2.7 billion. When the carryover amount is omitted, the net capital spend amounts to just under €2.2 billion, which is €453 million or 17.1% behind the profiled amount of €2.648 billion, with all but two Departments declaring underspends against profile. Expenditure on capital infrastructure and programmes for the first five months is some €310 million or 16.4% ahead of the same period last year. Capital expenditure by its nature tends to be lumpy, with a particularly high drawdown at year end. It is therefore not unusual for Departments to record an underspend or overspend against profile throughout the year.

The Government has committed to investing €165 billion in capital programmes and projects across a range of investment sectors, as set out in the national development plan published last October. In the current year, almost €12 billion is available to spend on vital infrastructure in areas such as housing, transport, education, enterprise, sport and climate action, and our annual capital investment as a percentage of national income is among the largest in the European Union. We will continue to monitor and report on capital expenditure developments as the year progresses.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Of the €12 billion projected spend, we had only completed €2.2 billion by the end of May. Is the Minister confident we will reach that €12 billion target? I understand and get the pattern of capital expenditure. Of all the Departments, only two are over profile. Is there any Department in particular the Minister or his officials are concerned about that is substantially behind profile? What steps are taken to intervene or work with a Department that, for whatever reason, is behind profile? Given we are halfway through the year, will there be a particularly focused review at this time to identify any particular outliers?

Deputy Michael McGrath: It is fair to point out we had significant underspends in 2020 and 2021, which were largely attributable to Covid and the shutdown in the construction sector that took place for a number of months in each of those years. However, that same reason does not apply in the current year. Every line Department is making the case to my Department that it will spend its capital budget. Having provided resources, we want to see them spent and we want to see the projects delivered across the implementation of the national development plan.

It is too early to come to a firm view on this. We are keeping it under review and there is always the opportunity, where there is an underspend in one Department and where projects are ready to go in other Departments, to transfer that additional funding. That requires a Supplementary Estimate and a process has to be gone through but it is one we have done in the past. I am very much open to it because I want to see the capital budget drawn down and spent and I want to see projects delivered. We need a competitive element between Departments. If some Departments are better at getting things done, they should be rewarded by means of their budgets.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is coming towards the end of the session. We have four more sitting weeks. Does the Minister foresee any Supplementary Estimates around capital expenditure that may enable some projects to start? For instance, the Department of Education is doing some excellent work on its capital side at present. I commend the Minister, Deputy Foley, on that. However, there is a reluctance in that Department to commit expenditure to some projects

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ahead of 2023 that are necessary, for instance, e-hubs. I am sure there are many other examples. Are any supplementary capital Estimates planned before this current Dáil session ends?

Deputy Michael McGrath: At this time, we are not planning to transfer funding for capital budgets from one Department to another this side of the recess. We will keep it under constant review. The Deputy identified the Department of Education, which is a Department that is busy with the implementation of a school building programme. Like other Departments, it has experienced inflation in respect of public works contracts and delivering on the infrastructure it has. We expect Departments to stay within budget and to manage their budgets effectively over the course of the year. While there are underspends across a range of Departments at this time, it is certainly the case those Departments are providing reassurance to my officials that they will catch up and spend their budgets over the course of this year, but we will keep it under close review.

Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 94

Flood Risk Management

98. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide an update on the selection of a contractor for the Glashaboy flood relief scheme; the length of time that he envisages this process will take; if he will give assurances that selection will be completed as quickly as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31073/22]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask for an update on the selection of a contract for the Glashaboy flood relief scheme, the length of time the process will take and an assurance it will be done as quickly as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Glashaboy River flood relief scheme at Glanmire and Sallybrook in Cork is being progressed by Cork City Council. The Office of Public Works, OPW, in partnership with the council is engaging proactively to progress the flood relief scheme for Glanmire.

The scheme was confirmed in January 2021 by my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 to 1995. The scheme is being funded from the €1.3 billion in flood relief measures under the national development plan to 2030, as part of Project Ireland 2040. Provision for the total project budget for this scheme is included in the Office of Public Works multi-annual capital allocation to the Department. The Office of Government Procurement inflation and supply chain delay co-operation framework agreement, published on 20 May 2022, will help address the appropriate inflationary costs.

The Glashaboy flood relief scheme will protect approximately 100 properties from a significant risk of flooding in the area. There is currently a procurement process under way, to which the Deputy alluded, to appoint a contractor for the scheme. As the procurement process is ongoing, it would not be appropriate for me as Minister of State to make any further comments at present. I expect the procurement process will be completed in the coming weeks.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister of State is fully aware of the long history of

flooding in Glanmire, as is the Minister who met with residents a few years ago. There were flooding events in 2009, 2012 and 2015. In 2012, approximately 51 residences and 42 commercial premises were affected by flooding that cost tens of millions in damage. We were delighted when, in 2021, the Minister of State and the Minister confirmed the scheme would progress. I believe it was one of the first schemes approved by their Department but, unfortunately, it seems to be one of the first that will fall foul of the inflation we are suffering.

I understand Cork City Council is working with the OPW to try to progress the scheme. Cork City Council is seeking a number of legal clarifications in the event the successful contractor drops out. Will the Minister of State allude to what discussions or legal clarifications the city council is looking for? I ask him to give a general progress update, if he can, on where we go if the contractor has dropped out.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is right. This scheme was the first to be approved under the new arterial drainage regulations, which came into force in 2019. It is important to state on behalf of the Department that Cork City Council, as the Deputy said, is the lead authority in this and is the negotiating authority in the appointment of a contractor, which is commercially sensitive and confidential. I am precluded from uttering anything that would in any way interfere in that, other than to say the Office of Public Works is committed to working with Cork City Council to try to form a resolution around this.

The council has also taken guidance from the Office of Government Procurement in respect of the appointment of a contractor, which is normal in the appointment of contractors at this scale, because this is not an insignificant number of properties, when we look at the areas that will be covered. These include an industrial estate at Sallybrook, shopping centres, housing estates, and Glanmire village itself towards John O'Callaghan Park. The Deputy has raised this matter previously, as have other Members, including Deputy Colm Burke. The OPW is unwavering in its commitment to Cork City Council to move this forward.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I know the Minister shares my disappointment, and that of Deputy Burke, as he mentioned, about the way the scheme has progressed until now in respect of the possible withdrawal of the contractor. The Minister of State cannot specifically comment on that while the process is live but, generally speaking, in the event that an appointed contractor withdraws from the process, which I believe is the case, is the normal process to revisit the existing tender list that went out? Will the Minister of State clarify that?

As I said, it is disappointing for the residents and businesses in the area, especially when in other parts of the country and in other parts of Cork city we see OPW schemes and flood relief schemes being halted or slowing down for various reasons. This is a scheme that is ready to go. It would be a shame to see it delayed any further.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Regarding the Government's commitment to the council as the lead authority, I wish to make it clear that the Office of Public Works is committed to this scheme. There are residents, traders and representatives who are anxious, but the scheme has planning permission and is ready to go. Any commercial discussion around the appointment of a contractor is a matter for the council, which will receive guidance from the Office of Government Procurement. The council has also been in discussions with our officials. We hope that the issues around the appointment of a contractor by Cork City Council can be resolved in the coming weeks. We will then be in a position to move the scheme forward and support it financially.

Capital Expenditure Programme

99. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of all projects costing more than €100 million approved under the public spending code in Galway in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30717/22]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: This is a specific request for the details of all projects with a cost of more than €100 million that have been approved under the public spending code, PSC, in Galway.

Deputy Michael McGrath: My Department is responsible for maintaining the national frameworks within which Departments operate to ensure appropriate accounting for and value for money in public expenditure, for example, the PSC. This code sets the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating, planning and managing capital projects. The management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister.

The PSC sets out the oversight and approval process for public expenditure proposals, which are incremental in nature, progressing through decision gates 0 to 3 in terms of a project life cycle. Decision gate 0 requires a strategic assessment report, decision gate 1 requires a preliminary business case, decision gate 2 requires a detailed project brief and procurement strategy, and decision gate 3 requires a final business case. Government approval is required for proposals with an estimated cost of over €100 million. Government approval is required for a preliminary business case, that is, the Government must approve decision gate 1. Government approval is required for design, planning and procurement at decision gate 2 to proceed to tender. Government approval for the final business case must be secured at decision gate 3 to award a contract.

My Department, while responsible for maintaining the PSC, is not the approver for projects under the code. Therefore, we do not hold data related to details of projects approved under it. However, an extensive list of projects that are planned as part of Project Ireland 2040 is provided for in the investment projects and programme tracker, which was updated in May. The tracker provides a composite update on the progress of all major investments with an estimated cost of more than €20 million. In addition, the MyProjectIreland interactive map includes details of 1,100 projects around the country. There are also regional reports, including the one published for the northern and western region, which set out project details for each year up to 2021.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for his reply. I appreciate that he cannot give me the details, given the role played by his Department. I have in mind the status of the outer bypass in Galway - I have a view on that - and the hospital's accident and emergency unit.

The Minister has set out the four decision gates. Decision gate 0 requires a strategic assessment report and decision gate 1 requires a preliminary business case. However, I am utterly confused by the answers that I have received from the Saolta University Health Care Group. The Minister might help me. On 13 June, I was told that a preliminary business case report had been completed and submitted to the HSE for approval. Following that, it was to go to the Department of Health and then the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Six months beforehand, though, I was told that a preliminary business case report was required, a draft of it was ready and it had gone to the HSE. As such, six months passed and nothing happened.

The preliminary business case is for an accident and emergency unit in Galway, given that the current one is not fit for purpose. Those are not my words, but the then Taoiseach's. In a letter dated 26 May, however, the Minister for Health wrote that the accident and emergency department project was in the early stages and a strategic assessment report was needed.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I do not have the full details of that project in front of me, but if the Deputy provides them to me, I will have them looked into and try to give her a proper assessment and summary of where the project stands. In essence, the line Department is responsible for ensuring compliance with the PSC. My Department has a role in overseeing the process. Formal approval for major projects has to be given by the Government at a number of decision gates. Where a preliminary business case is referred to my Department for assessment, I have ensured in all cases that it is dealt with expeditiously. The line Department is responsible for ensuring compliance with the PSC and taking a project through the various stages, and if my Department can assist in any way, we will do so.

I am happy to revert to the Deputy with a specific update on the timeline and what role my Department has played to date, if any. I would be happy to check that out for her.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister, but will he confirm whether the first gate requires a strategic assessment report?

Deputy Michael McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: A project cannot move on from that gate to the preliminary business case stage. Given that the Minister for Health has stated in a letter that the strategic assessment report is still due, the HSE is presumably confused in what information it is giving Ministers. I do not know where the fault lies, but this is confusing. We received the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath's response, for which I thank him. We have worked through all of the information we have, but trying to make sense of it has been difficult.

The Minister has outlined the practices that are in place to protect public money, which I welcome. A new accident and emergency unit will be built in Galway at some point for more than €500 million. In the meantime, we are building a temporary accident and emergency unit for €15 million or €16 million. Somewhere in cyberspace are the results of the options appraisal that was completed a few years ago regarding a brand new hospital in Merlin Park. At what stage does the Minister's Department examine what is happening with this higgledy-piggledy development of a serious piece of infrastructure? The focus should be on a brand new hospital, particularly given that the new accident and emergency unit will cost more than €500 million.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform does not interfere in the policy decisions made by line Departments, in this case the Department of Health and the HSE. When it comes to improving facilities and delivering new infrastructure, such decisions are made by them. What we insist on is that the PSC and the approval process be conducted properly and fully complied with. The strategic assessment report that the Deputy referred to is the first step. It involves an examination of the various options. A project then proceeds to the next step, namely, the preliminary business case. The line Department brings the project through the various stages. It comes to the Government if it is a large-scale project costing more than €100 million.

I will examine the issues that the Deputy has raised, particularly the application of the PSC and the approval process. If she wishes to furnish me with the two conflicting items of corre-

spondence, we will try to get a coherent response for her that sets out the factual position.

Questions Nos. 100 and 101 replied to with Written Answers.

Public Sector Pensions

102. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he intends to increase existing public sector pensions to take account of the exceptional increase in the cost of living; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29036/22]

Deputy Seán Canney: Regarding public sector pensioners and the cost of living, are there plans to examine their fixed pensions with a view to increasing them in line with the prevailing cost-of-living issues?

Deputy Michael McGrath: I am acutely aware of the increases in inflation in recent months and the challenges faced by households, particularly in terms of energy costs. That is why a package of measures was announced by the Government this year dealing with the energy costs challenges faced by households.

The Deputy has raised the specific issue of pension increases. As he may be aware, the most recent guidance and instructions on this matter for most retired public servants is outlined in Department of Public Expenditure and Reform circular 10/2021, which is available on the *gov.ie* website. Under the existing policy, pay increases under Building Momentum — A New Public Service Agreement 2021-2022 will be passed on to those pensions awarded under the pre-existing public service schemes where the salary on which a pension is based does not exceed the salary of serving staff at the same grade and scale point after the pay increases have been applied. In practice this means that the vast majority of retired members generally receive pension increases in line with the pay increases due to their peers in employment. The next increase of 1% is due in October under the current deal, which is the subject of renegotiation at the moment, as the Deputy knows.

The position is different with wider public sector pension issues involving retired members of pension schemes in the commercial semi-State bodies. In the first instance, consideration of discretionary pension increases is a matter for review by the key stakeholders such as the parent Department, the scheme trustees and the relevant employer, in relation to each pension scheme. The understandable desire of retired scheme members of these schemes for pension increases to deal with inflation challenges must be balanced with the overall protection of pension benefits for all members of such schemes and with the long-term survival of schemes, particularly given the historical financial challenges which these schemes have had to face. The position of each commercial semi-State body is a matter for the relevant sectoral Department with primary responsibility for each of the bodies.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the fact that pensions will be pegged to increases as they happen. When I talk to pensioners they say they feel they are forgotten because they took cuts under the austerity measures that were taken after the bust. These are people who worked for this State all of their lives and contributed enormously to it through taxation, building our economy and getting the State to where we are today as a good place to live and work in. It is important that we recognise that contribution and ensure that if people are on a fixed income, they are helped with the increases in prices. People who are in pensions see their health costs

and all that goes with that increase. If they have a car, their insurance costs and all of that also increase. It is important that we recognise that in a fruitful way.

Deputy Michael McGrath: In recent years, because we have been going through a process of unwinding the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, there was an issue that impacted on a large number of public service workers. The salary of a serving public service employee had to reach the level of the salary which formed the basis of the pension for the pensioner who was in payment. Until these had begun to match each other, as they now have in the overwhelming majority of cases, a lot of pensioners were not getting increases because the reversal of the measures took a period of time. We are now at a point, having pretty much achieved full restoration of the position pre-FEMPI, that the salaries of the existing employees have reached or exceeded the salaries on which the pensions of the pensioners are based. From this point onwards, in general terms, any increases in public service pay in general rounds are passed on to the pensioner as well. There was a gap period because of FEMPI and the outworking of that but that has essentially washed through the system at this point.

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome what the Minister is saying and I know every effort is being made to help pensioners who worked in public service. I refer, however, to semi-State bodies like the ESB and others whose pensioners are really caught in a bind. It is important that we look at that and assist these people. The Minister says it is left to each line Department or entity to deal with the issue but there is a case for the Government to consider it and see what it can do. Coming up to the budget, I know there will be hundreds of demands but we must look after the people who looked after us and worked for the State in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. We must make sure they have an income that will match the cost of living and allow them to live comfortably. It is our duty to do that.

Deputy Michael McGrath: In the case of the commercial State bodies, what generally happens is an assessment is carried out by the line Department. It has to have regard to the scheme trustees and make sure the benefits are protected for all the members. It will then make a recommendation. In some instances, the recommendation will come to my Department for approval and sign-off. I make sure those issues are dealt with quickly. For example, a recommendation was recently made to the line Department that there be a 2% increase in the pension for former RTÉ employees. That made its way to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and I signed off on it. That is the process that is in place. One has the specific details of an individual scheme and one must recognise the role of trustees of the scheme, the fact that there are existing and future pensioners and the role of the line Department. My Department is at the end of that line and the matter comes to us when we have a full assessment of the situation and a recommendation that takes account of all of those factors.

Earcaíocht san Earnáil Phoiblí

103. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Caiteachais Phoiblí agus Athchóirithe cén céimeanna atá glactha aige agus cén achmhainn bhreise atá curtha i leathaobh aige ó achtaíodh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla chun na forálacha maidir le Gaeilgeoirí a earcú do 20% ar a laghad de na folúntais a chomhlíonadh roimh 2030; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [31336/22]

123. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of his Department's work to date on the implementation of the Official Languages

(Amendment) Act 2021; if a representative of his Department has been appointed to the Irish languages services advisory committee to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30771/22]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ba mhaith liom fiafraí den Aire Stáit cad atá déanta aige ó a ritheadh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021 i mí na Nollag seo caite? Cén obair atá le déanamh laistigh dá Roinn chun déanamh cinnte de go mbeidh Gaeilgeoirí á earcú ag an leibhéal 20%?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Ba mhaith liom Ceisteanna Uimh. 103 and 123 a fhreagairt le chéile. Mar is eol don Teachta, tá spriocanna nua earcaíochta in Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021. Chun na spriocanna seo a bhaint amach, tá ar gach Roinn sa Rialtas comhoibriú le chéile. This is against a backdrop, in line with the July 2019 audit findings of an Coimisinéir Teanga, whereby only 0.4% of posts are designated currently by Civil Service employers as being Irish-speaking posts.

The Act provides that within six months of the date of enactment, the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media shall establish an Irish language services advisory committee. I understand that the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, is finalising the establishment of this committee. My Department shall be represented on this committee at principal officer level and I understand that the Public Appointments Service, PAS, has similarly nominated a principal officer to the committee. The functions of this committee are set out in the Act and include the preparation of a national plan, within two years of its establishment, to increase the provision of services through the medium of Irish as well periodic surveying of the number of Irish speakers employed by the public service. The work of this committee may include consideration of approaches to the future recruitment of Irish speakers.

Some of the actions that my Department and PAS are already taking to increase the number of fluent Irish speakers in the Civil Service include dedicated recruitment and promotion competitions targeted at Irish language speakers. Since last summer, PAS has held general Civil Service competitions for individuals with fluency in Irish at clerical officer, executive officer, higher executive officer and principal officer levels. The outturn of these competitions reflects that the number of fluent Irish speakers applying to join the Civil Service, or otherwise declaring a fluency in Irish, remains low. Another action being taken is to have Irish language training for existing civil servants. In addition to new hires, Irish language training courses continue to be made available to all existing civil servants via OneLearning, the learning and development centre for the Civil Service based in my Department. Close to 500 such enrolments for such courses took place in 2021, with a further 200 enrolments to date in 2022.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Rinneadh achtú ar an Acht seo i mí na Nollag. Ní bhaineann sé leis an Aire Stáit ach bhí an coiste comhairleach le bheith i bhfeidhm roimh na seachtaine seo chugainn. Tá seachtain ag an Aire, mar sin, an coiste comhairleach sin a bhunú agus tá gach rud bunaithe timpeall air sin. An príomhrud anseo ná gur spriocanna uailmhianacha iad. Glacaimid leis sin ach is poist le Gaeilge iad gach uile post sa státseirbhís. Sin an t-athrú bunúsach a chaithfidh teacht agus ní fheicim ón mhéid atá ráite ag an Aire Stáit go bhfuil an t-athrú meoin sin tagtha sa Roinn seo nó in aon Roinn eile sa tír. The key issue is that there has been no change of mindset, which is required from the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, whereby every job in the Civil Service needs to be regarded as a job with Irish because 20% of all recruitments in the future to the Civil Service have to have a competency in Irish. That change has not happened and a lot more work needs to be done, not only in the Department

but outside it as well.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Mar is eol don Teachta, tá deacrachtaí againn daoine a aimsiú a bhfuil Gaeilge líofa acu.

12 o'clock

I accept we are not at 20% yet. We are still at the initial stages. The Minister, Deputy Martin, is setting up that committee. My Department will collaborate with her and we will do everything we can to meet what has recently been agreed in the Official Languages (Amendment) Act. If the Deputy has suggestions on how we could do it better, I am open to them.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: De réir mar a mhéadaíonn praghsanna fuinnimh mar gheall ar an gcogadh, fuair an Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, amach go bhfuil duine as achan trí teaghlaigh anois ag maireachtáil i mbochtaineacht fuinnimh agus diúltaíonn an Rialtas seo gníomhú. Tá níos mó daoine ag titim isteach i mbochtaineacht fuinnimh agus iad ag streachailt leis an ngéarchéim chostais maireachtála agus tá seo do-ghlactha. D'iarr Sinn Féin arís agus arís ar an Rialtas seo cáinainéis éigeandála a thabhairt chun tosaigh, a thabharfadh faoiseamh do na teaghlaigh agus do na hoibrí seo atá ag streachailt. Tá saoránaigh ar fud na tíre seo ag iarraidh Rialtas a thacaíonn leo agus a chuireann in ord tosaíochta iad ach tá Rialtas againn atá ag fágáil ar leataobh iad.

As the Tánaiste hosted a private dinner last night to celebrate Fine Gael's decade in power, the ESRI was finalising its report on energy poverty in this State as prices increase at the fastest rate in 40 years. Today's report found the average household is now spending €2,000 more on fuel and energy, and this could increase by another €1,500. Prices are through the roof and people are struggling. One in three households now lives in energy poverty and this could rise to a staggering 43%, as the ESRI said this morning. The report states, "As fuel bills go up, it is people and families on lower incomes that suffer the most." It goes on to say, "In rapidly increasing numbers, households are facing the choice between putting food on the table, buying back-to-school clothes or heating their home."

Today's report paints a picture that is undeniable. Households who were already at the edge are now being plunged into energy poverty. This is the Ireland of today, with people, including working families, skipping meals or queueing for food parcels, something they never thought they would have to do. They are having to do it because the State is not supporting them but letting them fall through the cracks, and those cracks are getting wider. While Fine Gael toasted its success in government last night, the reality is many families are being pushed to the brink. The last thing they are thinking about is raising a glass to Fine Gael's success because they are worried about how to get to the end of the week, pay the bills at the end of the month or put food on the table for their children.

Facing these pressures, these families are confronted by a Government which refuses to take further action now. The Government has repeatedly ruled out measures to support house-

holds until October at the earliest, despite Sinn Féin calling on it week after week to take such measures. That is not sustainable, nor is it acceptable for those tens of thousands of families pushed to the brink. The Government is allowing struggling households to wither on the vine and its message to them amounts to “Buckle up because you’re on your own”. Government has a moral duty to support those who are struggling and protect the most vulnerable, but those who need it most have been left behind. This Government has refused to act.

I plead with the Tánaiste to change course and bring forward an emergency budget with the measures Sinn Féin has proposed, including cost-of-living cash payments to lower and middle-income households and a social welfare package that protects the most vulnerable from the cost-of-living crisis. Will the Tánaiste change course? Will the penny finally drop? Will he wake up, take action and understand that people cannot wait a further four months for him to bring forward a budget, and then whatever time after for him to implement it?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. That was a cheap shot. I hosted a dinner last night to thank colleagues for their years of service. There was no public money involved. Sinn Féin hosts dinners in America, charging people €1,000 per plate to attend, and the party leader flies first class to get there. That is what Sinn Féin does in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. I believe she is about to announce another first-class trip to Australia, which she will undertake in the coming weeks. She will be clinking champagne glasses with the Trinity alumni in Australia and meeting the Australian business association. That is a cheap shot, particularly coming from a hypocritical party like the Deputy’s, which receives millions in donations from vagabonds who live in a caravan-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Anything to avoid the question. Your housing crisis, your health crisis, your childcare crisis.

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

The Tánaiste: -----and that is one of the biggest landlords in the State, owning 50 properties-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Anything to avoid the question, a Cheann Comhairle. I am being provoked again.

The Tánaiste: -----and from a person who operates his constituency office using public money from some sort of republican company. Cheap shots from Deputy Doherty should be seen for what they are by the Irish people.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Like they see the housing disaster.

The Tánaiste: I want to deal with the issue, having responded to the cheap shot. The ESRI report is stark. I do not think it is surprising to anyone in this House. We all know the extent to which petrol and diesel prices have soared in the past year. You only have to fill your tank or go into the forecourt to see that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Taxation.

The Tánaiste: We all know the extent to which the cost of electricity and gas has gone up. You only have to look at your utility bill to know that. People are feeling the squeeze. Some families are really struggling and having to make very difficult decisions about what they spend their money on because of the increase in the cost of living. These are largely driven by inter-

national factors, including the mismatch between global supply and demand and, in particular, Putin's war in Ukraine. If Deputies go to Northern Ireland, Britain, France, Spain or Germany, they will see they are experiencing the same problems we are because this is an international problem.

Government can help and is helping. In January we introduced €1 billion of budget measures, including an increase in the minimum wage, increases in welfare and pension and reductions in income tax for middle-income earners, which Deputy Doherty opposed. The average couple, both on the average income, would be paying €800 more in income tax this year if the Deputy was finance Minister, and that is a fact. Since then, we have introduced another €1.4 billion in additional measures. We have taken 20 cent of the cost of petrol and 15 cent off the cost of diesel. We are as low as we are allowed to go under European law when it comes to taxes on diesel.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true

The Tánaiste: We cannot go any lower. I have confirmation on that in relation to diesel from the Minister for Finance today. We have reduced VAT on electricity and gas to 9%, which is the lowest it has ever been. We have taken €200 off people's electricity bills and introduced a targeted measure giving people on fuel allowance an additional €100. That is what has been done so far.

We accept we need to take further action to help people with the cost of living and are working on such action. The budget is three and a bit months away. We are working towards that, looking at the options and seeing what we might be able to introduce more quickly. Rather than waiting until January, February or March, we are seeing what we can do in October, November and December to help people before Christmas in relation to the cost of living. I do not rule out additional measures between now and then. We will continue to monitor the situation and see if prices moderate or continue to rise. I do not rule out interim measures but, as things stand, we have none planned and are working towards a budget package in a few months' time that will be in place for the winter and help people with rising costs.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste's opening gambit again displays how out of touch the Government is. I really thought as somebody whom the Director of Public Prosecutions is assessing whether to prosecute him under the corruption Act, he would be a bit more humble in his response.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, without interruption, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let me put this to the Tánaiste. This report is not just expected. We knew it was going to happen because the Government has failed to act to protect the most vulnerable. This is a report of shame. One in three households is in energy poverty. The Tánaiste is not a commentator. He is the Tánaiste and the leader of a party in government. We need action now. There are four weeks left in this sitting of the Dáil. There are people who are going to St. Vincent de Paul and people who are queuing up for food parcels today. There are people sitting at home wondering how they are going to meet their bills next week. They need Government action right here, right now. The Tánaiste says the Government will assess how prices work out in the medium term. Open your eyes. We know they are only going in one direction. The ESRI points that out. Energy prices will continue to rise in the autumn. Even

if they do not, people are struggling in the here and now. They need action from Government. Is the Minister for Finance on board with bringing in new measures, which would be the first time, contrary to what the Taoiseach and the Minister have said? When will the Government make a decision on such measures?

The Tánaiste: That was another cheap shot-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It was a factual shot.

Deputy John Brady: It was true, though.

The Tánaiste: -----and a very personal shot, which says a lot about the Deputy and the character of the kind of person he is. It is particularly strange coming from him because he was prosecuted. He abused and mistreated a member of An Garda Síochána. He was prosecuted for that and found guilty. He got away without a conviction because of his age at the time but he was actually prosecuted. He was arrested. That is what happened to him. There are a huge number of convicted criminals in his party and in the wider republican family, whether they be tax dodgers like Slab Murphy, a good republican according to Deputy McDonald - a good republican, a tax dodger - or people who have been convicted for murder. We know what his party's attitude is to rape and paedophiles and what it has done in that regard. The Deputy's cheap shots say a lot more about him than they do about me.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Shameful. Scraping the barrel, Tánaiste. Shame on you.

Deputy John Brady: Will the Tánaiste answer anything?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The people will decide.

The Tánaiste: The courts will decide, as they decided on Deputy Doherty. He was prosecuted and taken to court.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: One in three are in energy poverty.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I listened to part of the Tánaiste's interview on Newstalk yesterday. I know he agrees with the President that the housing situation is now a disaster. However, he seems to have trouble figuring out who is responsible for that disaster. I will join some of the dots.

The Tánaiste and Fine Gael have now been in government for 11 years. For most of that time, there has been a housing crisis. His party has repeatedly told us that houses cannot be built overnight. Enda Kenny was one of the first to use that line in 2015. People have been listening to the Tánaiste's party acknowledging the crisis for eight years and now he is acknowledging that is not just a crisis, but a disaster. In 2016, Deputy Coveney told this House that not even rapid-build housing could be built overnight. Of course, it was never built so the Government tried something else. It brought in legislation for strategic housing developments that bypassed local planning procedures. That was supposed to speed up the delivery of housing but, in fact, slowed it down and eroded local democracy, creating great problems in the planning system. There is a real scandal in An Bord Pleanála in that regard that has yet to properly unfold. The Government brought in build-to-rent legislation that allows developers to build lower quality rental accommodation. Build-to-rent accommodation is now practically the only residential accommodation being built in Dublin city because it is the most profitable. In 2020, nearly 82% of residential schemes for which permission was applied for or granted in Dublin were

build-to-rent developments, all of which come with sky-high rents. Where are people supposed to buy? People are being pushed out. One would start to wonder about the 15-minute sustainable communities. Some of Government's other innovations have been equally bad. It spent a long time trying to bring in co-living developments, that is, apartments smaller than car parking spaces for disabled people. It finally abandoned that idea and now mostly focuses on handing developers cash rewards of up to €144,000 for every apartment they build and continuing lucrative tax breaks for vulture funds.

Does the Tánaiste know how enraging it is for people who have been listening for years to promises that this crisis will be sorted out to hear the Government absolve itself from causing that crisis as if it is a disinterested party? What is he going to do to resolve this disaster, which he has acknowledged?

The Tánaiste: What I acknowledged yesterday is that the very real housing crisis we face in this country is a disaster for many people. It may not be for the 60% or 70% of us who are lucky enough to own our own homes, whether through a mortgage or outright, but it is certainly a disaster for people who cannot afford to buy a home and really want to and for people who are paying very significant proportions of their income in rent. I do not deny that is devastating for them and that there is a housing crisis, nor have I. I did not need to be told by anyone about the problems we face as a country. However, it is also the case, and it is just a fact, that the origins of this housing crisis lie in events that happened a very long time ago, when we had a property bubble that was followed by a banking collapse and a construction collapse. As a result of that, instead of building 30,000 or 35,000 new homes every year for a decade, which would have been the norm, virtually no houses were built for a very long time. We have a deficit of houses in the State. There are probably 250,000 fewer houses than we need. That is the origin of this housing crisis. The responsibility of those parties who are willing to be in government, and the Deputy's party has chosen not to enter government on several occasions, which is something we can come back to, is not to describe problems but to try to come up solutions and put them into action. That is hard. It is difficult work but it is work we are willing to do, unlike the Deputy's party.

The Deputy asked what we are doing about it. The main thing we are doing is increasing supply. On its own, increasing supply will not solve the housing crisis but we will not solve it without increasing supply. Where are we at the moment? Approximately 25,000 new homes will be built this year, more than in any year for a very long time. Approximately 35,000 homes are now under construction, more than have been for a very long time. Approximately 45,000 have got planning permission in the past year so you can see a real pipeline of new housing coming on stream. The Deputy probably saw the figures that came out yesterday. In April of this year alone, more than 1,000 first-time buyers bought their first home. As far as I can remember, it has been a long time since 1,000 first-time buyers bought a new home in just one month. That is not enough. I want to see it increase to 2,000 and 3,000 a month. That is where we intend to be. Among the reasons that is happening is our help-to-buy scheme. More than 30,000 individuals and couples have received help in buying their first home through that scheme in recent years. That is something the Deputy's party wants to take away from them.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I will address one issue with regard to the number of people who own their own homes. Many of them have family, children and grandchildren, living with them. People are squeezed into box rooms with no hope. With regard to this idea of segregating and saying that people who own their own homes are grand, many people are worried about their children. This is not a one generation issue but a multi-generation issue that people are

concerned about.

Affordable housing is a key issue. Some 82% of planning permissions granted in Dublin relate to build-to-rent properties that will be provided at very high rents. The kind of city being built is unsustainable. The Tánaiste is hell-bent on keeping things on that particular track, which makes 15-minute sustainable cities unachievable because people are being pushed out further. Looking at the evidence, it shows it is not working, it is a disaster and the Tánaiste should acknowledge that.

The Tánaiste: There is one point on which I agree with the Deputy, which is that the housing crisis affects a great number of people in society in different ways, whether it is people experiencing homelessness, people paying unaffordable rents, people who want to buy their first home but cannot or people who own their own home but who still have adult children living with them, which they find very distressing on behalf of their children. I get that and so does the Government.

The Deputy touched on the need for affordable housing. She should look at what the Government is doing. Cost rental is a reality for the first time. The Deputy was critical of my party and that is fair enough, but that was a policy initiated by Deputy Coveney and Eoghan Murphy. It took a few years for it to happen because it takes a few years to build houses and apartments. People are now being offered cost rental accommodation for the first time. We need a lot more of it. The current Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is really leading the charge on shared equity schemes so that more people can buy their first home. There are also local authority loans for people who cannot get a mortgage from a bank. Thousands are now getting mortgages backed by the Government through local authorities to allow them to afford a home. The Deputy has not been particularly supportive of those policies. I think that is a shame.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We do not support policies that drive prices up.

Deputy Bríd Smith: When I was listening to the Tánaiste's spat with Deputy Doherty earlier, I was thinking this House must be full of bowsies. I, too, went to jail, along with dozens of other ordinary people, fighting the cost-of-living increase in 2003. Bin charges, which are now privatised, are going through the roof and vast profits are being made, and this is one of the issues in the current cost-of-living crisis. However, today's ESRI report is really startling and shows that there are many more thousands of people living in energy poverty than this Government ever calculated for. The Government calculates energy poverty based on the number of recipients of the fuel allowance. The ESRI calculates energy poverty based on the number of people spending more than 10% of their income on fuel. The number of households living in energy poverty has risen to 550,000. The measures the Government has introduced and which it goes on about, such as the increase in the fuel allowance and the €200 payment for electricity customers, do not even scratch the surface of what needs to be done. The Government must intervene between now and the budget rather than doing nothing in that period.

On Saturday, ordinary people will be staging an intervention by taking to the streets in around five cities throughout the country to protest against the rises in the cost of living. A huge chunk of society is being hammered and this Government has no plan to do anything substantial to address it. There are 200,000 households that do not get the meagre fuel allowance and do not benefit from any of the measures introduced as part of the household benefits package, which has not increased since 2013. There are 480,000 people who qualify for that.

The Government has quite a scandal on its hands and it is not doing anything to intervene to help people. What needs to be done is that workers and people on low incomes who are dependent on social welfare need a pay rise to match inflation. The reports from the public sector pay talks are worrying, and the Minister beside the Tánaiste will know, this, in that they indicate the Government is only talking about below-inflation increases. That will not cut the mustard at all. Workers and people on benefits need increases to match inflation. If they do not get that, the crisis will continue to spiral. Measures such as €100 here or €200 there will not do it. All the Government keeps saying is “*mañana, mañana*”. What is the Government going to do today, tomorrow and before the kids go back to school in September to alleviate the struggles people are facing, including pensioners, people on social protection, workers, families and students, who also face massive costs and earn very little pay? The unions need to step up to the plate and put in pay claims that match inflation, and workers must insist they get that. That will set the benchmark and Government will then have to increase social welfare benefits to match inflation.

The Tánaiste: Listening to the Deputy’s contribution, somebody would be forgiven for thinking we had done nothing at all this year. We have taken a lot of action this year, including increases in the State pension, weekly welfare payments and the minimum wage. We are currently in negotiations with public servants about pay increases for them. A lot of pay increases are happening in the private sector at the moment. The Deputy mentioned students. We have made changes to the SUSI grant which will kick in in September. All of these measures have been taken in recent months. We are working towards additional actions on budget day that will make a difference in terms of helping people with the cost of living.

The Deputy mentioned the ESRI report. The ESRI is a Government body, and calculates energy poverty based on the number of people spending more than 10% of their after-tax income on energy. It is not the same as living in consistent poverty or being at risk of poverty or deprivation. It is a particular means of calculating it. Around 30% of households are now experiencing energy poverty, which shows that it is not just those on the lowest incomes who can experience energy poverty. Those on middle incomes can also experience it. That is why I stand over the decision of this Government to introduce universal measures as well as targeted measures. Those on middle incomes, working families and middle-class people are also feeling the pinch. That is why I stand over the decision of this Government to bring in universal measures such as taking €200 off electricity bills, as well as targeted measures such as the extra €100 for people on the fuel allowance. I think that will be the approach we will adopt going forward. We will introduce universal measures to help everyone, because everyone is hurting, and targeted measures to help those who are hurting most, namely, pensioners and people on welfare.

Deputy Bríd Smith: There is a view, and it might be argued by the Ministers here, that if you give people a rise in their income, it leads to spiralling inflation. That is nonsense. There has not been a decent rise in income for most workers in this country for years. The ICTU reckons that over the past two years, workers have lost about €2,500 of their income because of inflation. The Tánaiste can say what he likes about the Government’s interventions, but what we are talking about here in this cost-of-living crisis is a reality. We are not making it up. Everybody feels it. The Tánaiste himself has just outlined how middle-income earners feel it too. Middle- and low-income earners are workers, and they need a pay rise. The reports we are hearing from the public sector pay talks are quite worrying, because that will set the benchmark for everybody. That is why we are calling on people to get active on the issue and to insist their unions put in inflation-matching pay claims. It is not true that staff working in Tesco or ESB

got inflation-matching pay rises. Over the years, the rises will average out at 2%, 3% or 4% at most. We have a real crisis on our hands. Giving workers and those on social protection an income that can match inflation will not cause inflation.

The Tánaiste: Looking at the facts and statistics, and the data are produced by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, so it is not my opinion; they are just facts, for the past few years up to this year, average earnings have risen faster than inflation. That is true in respect of the minimum wage, public sector pay and pay generally. This year is different. We are seeing unprecedented inflation and prices rising faster than incomes. As a result of that there must be a response. Part of that response is going to be bigger pay increases than had been planned in the private and public sectors. We are currently in negotiations with the public sector about that. However, we should not see pay increases as the only lever and the only mechanism for dealing with this problem. We can do other things too, for example, reducing the tax burden on people, reducing the cost of childcare-----

Deputy Bríd Smith: What about taxing profits? There should be an increase in tax on profits.

The Tánaiste: -----and reducing the cost of public transport, as we have done. We have to see it as a package in the round. That is the way the Government is approaching it.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The programme for Government promises to highlight inequalities and implement policies to do better by people. There is a sizeable group of people in this country who are suffering from inequality that follows them even when they have passed away. Today, I am asking the Tánaiste to tackle the unfairness of the situation that arises when a person who does not have any children of their own dies and leaves their house to a close family member. Currently, the child of a parent who dies does not pay tax on the first €335,000 of the value of what he or she inherits, but a beneficiary who is not a direct descendent, such as a nephew or niece, only enjoys a fraction of that tax-free allowance, even though he or she may have been the closest person to the deceased for decades.

According to a report by Daft.ie based on prices for the first quarter of this year, in Galway city the average asking price for a house is more than €335,000, while in Dublin it is well over €400,000. I will use the example of a house whose value is in between those figures, at €350,000, that has been left to a niece who has been unfailing in looking after the needs of her uncle or aunt for years, perhaps running messages, visiting them every day, bringing them to medical appointments and taking them on social outings, demonstrating a true family bond. The first €32,500 is tax-free, which is less than one tenth of what the house is worth. The niece will have to pay tax at the rate of 33%, or one third, on the remaining value of the house. That means that the niece must pay capital acquisitions tax amounting to more than €100,000. There are some very limited exemptions from inheritance tax for a favourite niece or nephew in certain situations, but they are very restricted.

Our current inheritance rules are effectively punishing people for not having children of their own. I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that that is wrong. These people have worked all their lives and have paid all their taxes, just like people who have become parents. In fact, those who have never married will have paid much more tax, having borne the brunt of our taxation system as single people who are doubly penalised. It is worth noting we have gone backwards in relation to tax-free thresholds. Until 2009, the tax-free allowance for a niece's or nephew's inheritance was more than €54,000. I have in the past suggested changing the rules

relating to a family home in pre-budget submissions to the Minister for Finance. My question to the Tánaiste is simple. Will the Government commit to changing this grossly unfair taxation regime when forming the next budget?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. We believe it is appropriate to apply inheritance tax on transfers of wealth between generations. If people are taxed on earned income, it is only fair that people should also be taxed if they inherit income. It has always been recognised, however, that where the beneficiary is a child, including certain foster children, there should be a generous threshold before inheritance tax kicks in. These are called group A inheritors and the threshold is currently €335,000. A child can inherit up to €335,000 from a parent without having to pay any inheritance tax at all. It only kicks in on the amount above that.

However, the view has always been taken that where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, niece, nephew, lineal ancestor or lineal descendant of the disponer, a much lower threshold should apply due to the greater distance in relationship. This explains the current group B to which the Deputy referred, where the threshold is €32,500. It should be noted that in certain situations nieces or nephews may qualify for a favourite niece or favourite nephew release in respect of gifts or inheritances. In those situations, they are treated as though they were a son or daughter. Qualifying nieces or nephews are those who have worked substantially on a full-time basis for a period of five years prior to the gift or inheritance being given carrying on or assisting in the carrying on of a trade, business or profession of the disponer. For the nephew or niece to be deemed to be working substantially on a full-time basis in the business, he or she must work more than 24 hours per week at the place where the business, trade or profession is carried out or more than 15 hours per week where the business, trade or profession is carried out exclusively by the disponer, any spouse or civil partner of the disponer or the nephew or niece. That is the current situation whereby a nephew or niece could qualify as though they were a son or daughter.

The point the Deputy made is correct. I think that probably is too narrow. We should examine ways of broadening it. An example that occurred to me is a situation in which a favourite niece or nephew is acting as a carer and has been looking after an aunt or uncle in the last couple of years of his or her life. That is not counted. It counts if a niece or nephew worked in a business but it does not if the same niece or nephew was caring for an aunt or uncle, full time or part time, in the last couple of years of his or her life. In that case, the favourite niece or nephew status does not apply. There may be a number of such examples on which the Deputy and I could work together. We could change those rules. I do not think it would be right to change them wholesale and to treat every niece and nephew as if they were the same as a son or daughter but where there are particular cases like that, we could broaden the criteria. My office and that of the Minister for Finance would be happy to take that issue further with the Deputy.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. It is a different scenario in Northern Ireland and Britain. A niece or nephew in the same situation in those jurisdictions would not have to pay a penny in inheritance tax. Several other countries in Europe and around the world also make it easier for family members to hold onto the family home. Sweden, the Czech Republic and Norway have all scrapped inheritance tax. The same is true in Austria where a small property transfer tax must be paid instead. The niece or nephew being left a €350,000 house would pay little more than €40,000 in Poland, approximately €20,000 in Italy and less than that in Bulgaria. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India are just some of the other countries in which no inheritance tax is paid. Will the Tánaiste commit to resolving the

inequalities that exist in the inheritance tax system in Ireland for people who have no children and wish to leave their homes to a close family member?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. We are not going to abolish inheritance tax. As I said earlier, we think it appropriate that if we tax earned income for which people have worked, it is, therefore, also appropriate that we tax unearned income that people receive by means of inheritance, capital gains or other means but I agree that we should increase the thresholds over time. That threshold of €335,000 has been increased in recent years. It is supposed to be pitched around the cost of an average house so the average person could pass on the average house to a child without being liable for inheritance tax. As house prices rise, we need to continue to look at that threshold. It has been increased in recent budgets. We also need to examine the issue of a nephew or a niece being counted as a favourite nephew or niece, particularly if they have been involved in caring duties. I am not going to make a commitment to abolish inheritance tax because I do not agree with that. However, we can make changes to make the system fairer.

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

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On Monday, Oireachtas Members from County Meath heard that the HSE intends to move imminently into the final stages of implementation, as it calls it, at Navan hospital. By September, the HSE intends to close all intensive care unit beds in the hospital and to close the emergency department and replace it with a medical assessment unit. This clear intention was restated yesterday at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health by Mr. Paul Reid, despite no additional capacity in place in Drogheda and no additional GP or community capacity even planned.

At the same time, the Minister for Health and the three Ministers in government from County Meath act like commentators. The Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, was on local radio this morning and said she is frustrated by the process. What exactly does she think her role is? How does she think the people of County Meath feel? Instead of pausing and pausing again this process, the Government needs to stop it and invest in emergency services at Navan. On behalf of the Government, and as all of County Meath looks on today, will the Minister commit to that?

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The situation, as the Deputy knows, starts and ends with patient safety. The Deputy and I heard directly at that meeting from national clinical directors and the clinical director for Navan. What they said to us is that a small number of people from Meath attend that hospital per day, perhaps as low as five, and because it is a small hospital with a small emergency department, those patients are at risk in a significant way. We all accept that those clinicians are giving us that advice only in consideration of patient safety and that we must all have that first and foremost in our minds.

As was raised and covered at the meeting, concerns are being raised about making sure that if those patients were to be transferred to the much bigger emergency department in Drogheda, there are resources in place to deal with it. This is not a debate about only Navan hospital. We need to consider both hospitals and make sure everything is in place. Whatever is done, the Deputy can rest assured that it will begin and end with patient safety in mind, with which I am sure the Deputy will agree.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The ESRI energy poverty report brings home to us that not only are we facing a crisis, we are in the midst of an economic and social crisis in this country and we must use every tool in our economic arsenal. We feel we should have an emergency budget or an early budget. Failing that, we think there is scope for the Government to implement targeted measures similar to those that have been implemented in our fellow EU countries, including price caps on energy. We ask the Government to consider that. The Minister for Finance has the power to do that and would be following other EU countries that have done so.

There is also scope for increases to the fuel allowance and a doubling of energy bonus payments. Will the Government heed the advice of the ESRI and get to grips with the energy poverty people are facing by introducing a summer welfare bonus, expanded access to fuel allowance and price caps to protect people from the pressures they are feeling every day?

The Tánaiste: I would argue we have already introduced an emergency budget. Some €1 billion worth of budget measures kicked in only in January. Since then, we have approved a further €1.4 billion in additional emergency measures after the budget, including the reduction in VAT, the reduction in excise on petrol and diesel, the €200 discount on electricity bills for every household and the additional €100 in fuel allowance. As I mentioned earlier, while I am not ruling out further interim measures, we do not plan any at the moment. We are working towards a significant package in the budget, which is now just over three months away.

The Deputy is right that other countries have imposed price caps but they do not work very well. For example, the UK has had to keep on increasing the price caps. Why is that? We do not control the price of oil or gas. It comes in from other parts of the world. The amount that the retailer charges can be capped but if the retailer cannot buy the petrol or diesel at that level, there will be no supply at all. What governments that introduced price caps have had to do is keep increasing them and that does not work for people.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I would argue that the measures the Government has introduced to date are not working. Indeed, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, report published today is sending a clear signal to the Government that the measures it has brought in so far are not working. The ESRI has recommended a number of targeted measures which it believes is the way out of this crisis. One is an emergency Christmas-bonus-style double welfare payment and another is an expansion of the fuel allowance to include those in receipt of the working family payment. Will the Tánaiste commit to looking at those two measures and to bringing them in before October? This crisis is really going to hit people in the coming months and waiting until January to bring in measures is not going to be good enough for people.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy mentioned, the ESRI recommends a number of measures in its report. I was interested to hear spokespeople for the ESRI talk in interviews about discounts on energy bills - one of the things we have done - as another option and one that benefits lower income households more than higher income households, proportionately. They also talked about increasing income tax credits, which is a form of income tax cut and they also talked about reducing PRSI. There are lots of options on the table and lots of ways that we can help people with the rising cost of living but we are working towards a budget package at the moment.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: October is too late.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Last week the Health Research Board, HRB, issued a report on drug treatment from 2015 to 2021. To say it made for sombre reading is an understatement. One of the main findings of the report relates to cocaine use in Ireland. Treatment for cocaine use soared by 171% over an eight year period and cocaine has now overtaken heroin as the main problem drug in Ireland. While I, along with my party colleagues and many other Deputies in this House, welcome the harm reduction policy of the HSE and the Department of Health, we need to go beyond that because it is largely lip service. We need to talk about drug addiction in a very frank way, particularly in the context of the Citizen's Assembly. Having read the HRB's report, it is clear that we are losing the war against drugs, whether we like it or not. It is a losing battle and we need to change direction.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I agree with everything the Deputy has said. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is taking the lead in this area. Additional investment is going in and some important things are happening, including for example, the opening of additional rehabilitation beds for men and women around the country.

Deputy Kenny is absolutely right that this matter will be looked at by the Citizen's Assembly. My view is that it needs to be primarily treated as a health issue rather than a criminal issue. Obviously there is a criminal element when it comes to supply and distribution but for people in addiction, we need to be addressing this issue first and foremost as a health issue.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I ask the Tánaiste to address an anomaly that is occurring in Tipperary and across the country. Experienced drivers are being forced to stop driving school buses once they reach 70. It is not viable for younger people to obtain a D licence due to the costs involved so the bus and coach industry is losing out due to this ridiculous age restriction. A significant number of drivers on school runs are retired people who choose to work part time. This type of work lends itself to such employees. The irony is that drivers who are over 70 can continue to work in the private hire sector once they are annually certified as medically fit to do so. We have a situation where drivers over 70 can drive a full-size bus to the UK or any part of Europe but they cannot do a school run. They can also work for State bodies such as Transport for Ireland, TFI. There is a staggering contradiction here that needs to be addressed. I urge the Tánaiste to ask Bus Éireann to review its policy and to restore the dignity and respect for drivers reaching 70 years of age.

The Tánaiste: I will ask Bus Éireann to take a further look at this. The Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Naughton, announced that from Monday, 21 February 2022 the age at which an applicant for a driving licence must supply a medical report is going to increase from 70 to 75. Drivers under 75 will no longer have to supply a medical report confirming their fitness to drive unless they have an identified or specified illness or are required to do so by law. In addition, drivers aged 70 and over may continue to apply by post to renew a licence or learner permit and the Road Safety Authority, RSA, believes that between February and August this year there will be in the region of 15,000 applicants per month who are aged 70 or over.

Bus Éireann has no current plans to increase the age limit from 70 to 75 for school bus drivers. That does seem a bit inconsistent, given that the Minister of State has changed the rule from 70 to 75, so I will definitely take that up with Bus Éireann.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Tánaiste is completely out of touch with reality regarding the hardship people are facing. The ESRI report published today is shocking and finds that

people could be paying more than €2,000 extra. What about the squeezed middle, particularly those with mortgages to pay, given the predicted increases in interest rates? The average mortgage interest rate in the eurozone is 1.46% while in Ireland it is 3.64%. What is wrong here? That rate is going to increase. The banks are exiting even though we bailed them out. The public had to take the pain there but the banks are getting away scot-free. They are giving no rest or breathing space to hard workers who want to have their own homes and pay for them. People have had no problem doing that but they need a break here. They need some kind of parity with our so-called great friends in the EU that ye all talk about. Everything is twice as dear or more than twice as dear here. Why is this happening in Ireland?

The Tánaiste: Deputy McGrath must be the one who is out of touch if he needs an ESRI report this morning to tell him that we have a cost of living crisis.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I did not need it. I am saying that the Tánaiste might read it.

The Tánaiste: Anybody filling their car with petrol or diesel would have known that for months.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He should give it to his friends and his party, so they might read it.

The Tánaiste: Anyone looking at their utility bills over the past couple of months would know that. They would know we are facing a cost of living crisis, that we have high inflation and that it is largely driven by energy prices.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government should take note of it.

The Tánaiste: On interest rates, the Deputy knows the answer to this. We have higher interest rates in Ireland relative to other countries and there are three reasons for that. They have higher bank charges than we do. In those countries they have bigger markets so there is more competition, and also in Ireland, for very good reasons, we make it very hard to repossess properties and evict people-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What about the vulture funds?

The Tánaiste: -----which means often debts go unpaid for years and years. The truth is that the cost of that is socialised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Tánaiste is really out of touch.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: We have seen media reports in the last week on a new investigation report into abuse in HSE residential services in Donegal. Shockingly, ten more perpetrators, along with Brandon, have carried out up to 40 incidents of abuse. What is even more shocking is that these incidents were all on file with the HSE. Management knew about them, just like in the Brandon case. That needs to sink in. The HSE was aware of all of these incidents of abuse. Families were not told and some only found out this week. Will the Government now ensure that there is a fully independent public inquiry into the management of disability services in Donegal and nationally as a matter of urgency?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I thank Deputy Pringle for raising this issue. Earlier today I had a meeting with the HSE to get an update on that validation report. I have sought further information which the HSE will revert with in the

next ten days and I will keep the House updated.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: As we gather here today, every 48 seconds someone dies of starvation in the horn of Africa. On Tuesday last Deputies were invited to a very stark briefing organised by Dóchas. We were addressed by the Dóchas CEO, Ms Jane-Ann McKenna, and four of the aid agencies operating in the horn of Africa, that is, Goal, Trócaire, Concern and Oxfam and were told that 181 million people in the horn of Africa face starvation due to food shortages, climate change and political unrest in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. The number of people facing extreme hunger has doubled in the last year. The UN estimates that 750,000 people across five countries are facing immediate starvation. I know that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Irish Aid officials are doing their best in very difficult circumstances but we need to redouble our efforts. The alarm for famine has been sounded in the horn of Africa. I ask the Tánaiste to provide an update on what the Irish Government is doing to assist people in the horn of Africa.

The Tánaiste: We are very aware of the risk of famine that now arises from the food security issues that have been thrown up by Putin's invasion of Ukraine. I attended talks in Geneva earlier this week where this was very much on the agenda for trade ministers. On our humanitarian response, I am not sure exactly what is planned. I know that we have something planned through our overseas development aid budget but I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Brophy, to come back to the Deputy on that with a bit more detail.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Apropos of the issues that dominate the public debate inside and outside of this House with regard to the dual issues of inflation and housing, and recognising the difficulties overcome by the Government, the successes of Government and the accelerated plan that is now showing results, and notwithstanding the Opposition's claim that the Government has been in government for ten years, six of which were controlled by the IMF - everyone knows that except the Opposition - notwithstanding the success so far, can I ask if it might be considered to set up a task force to examine the obstacles to an accelerated housing programme at this moment? As the Ceann Comhairle and I know, there are many such obstacles in planning, in appeals, in the various systems and judicial reviews around infrastructure development, in procurement and so on that are holding up the advanced acceleration of a housing programme, which we urgently need.

The Tánaiste: We need to do everything possible to accelerate the number of new homes being built. As I said earlier, it is accelerating. Some 25,000 new homes were built in the past 12 months, 35,000 are under construction and 45,000 are going through planning. One can really see that pipeline coming through. It took us a while to get there, and we are still only getting there, but it is coming through. There are more things that need to be done to speed it up. The Minister of State, Deputy Burke, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, are working on reforms to our planning laws because often it is planning issues that delay the construction of new homes. They plan to bring in statutory timelines for An Bord Pleanála so that decisions do not get stuck in An Bord Pleanála for too long. They will also seek to change some of the rules around judicial reviews so that more important housing developments and infrastructure developments do not get caught up in the courts for too long.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The Coombe Hospital operated an antenatal clinic outside of Naas General Hospital before it closed at the start of Covid-19. This was a godsend for mothers-to-be from north Kildare and beyond. I have been in touch with the HSE, which says it might open it in the wider midlands area. It worked for people in Naas. The people in north Kildare

believe, as I do, that if it ain't broke don't fix it. If we are to live with Covid, as the Tánaiste has said, it means making it up to our women who lost out hugely in previous waves, with many of the partners banished during antenatal visits and with many women left to labour alone. One thing is for certain: we will still be having babies. How will the Government make it up to women and guarantee that the Coombe antenatal clinic will reopen in Naas General Hospital?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I acknowledge Deputy's Cronin's comments on the service. The midwifery-led service from the Coombe Hospital has been a huge success. I know it was valued greatly locally. We are in the middle of a very significant expansion of maternity services through the 2016 national maternity strategy. I will seek an update from the Department and the HSE about the ongoing provision of community-based care, which does form an essential part of the agreed new model of maternity care.

Deputy Michael Collins: As the Tánaiste has already heard in the House many times this morning, household energy bills have gone through the roof. Electricity and fuel costs have been hyped up with massive Government taxes, which take people's household bills beyond reach. Farm contractors, hauliers and ordinary mothers and fathers are not able to keep up with the cost of fuel. An even bigger concern is the huge amount of businesses in west Cork which contact me on a daily basis from Bandon, Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Bantry and its surrounds. They are telling me they will have to close their businesses this September or October if the Government does not step in. Businesses such as restaurants, fast food outlets, cafes and pubs tell me their electric bills have gone from €2,000 or €3,000 every two months to €5,000 or €6,000 every two months. They cannot and will not survive the green agenda's taxes on fuel and energy to pay for pet projects to keep the Green Party aboard the sinking ship. What will the Tánaiste tell those businesses in west Cork which are facing closure in the months ahead? These are businesses, I may add, which are decades delivering jobs and services in their rural communities. What answers does the Tánaiste have for the struggling businesses which simply cannot pay their electricity bills to keep the lights on?

The Tánaiste: I say to these businesses that we understand the pressures they are under. This is why we reduced excise and took 20 cent off petrol and 15 cent off diesel, but unfortunately we do not control those prices as they are internationally determined. This is why we put in place the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality sector, which is particularly important given the tourism hot spot that Cork south west is. That will run into next year. It is also why we reduced the VAT on electricity and gas to 9%, which is the lowest it has ever been, in order to help people with those particular bills. Just today, with the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, and the Minister of State, Deputy Browne, I announced €55 million in funding for businesses to help them to invest in smart meters, in heat pumps and in green energy and renewable energy to help them reduce those costs in the long term.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: With regard to the cost of living crisis, does the Tánaiste agree that the most effective way to help families and individuals who are in employment, in their current difficulties, would be to increase the threshold at which people enter the top rate of income tax? Currently it is just over €38,000 of earned income for an individual and double this for a couple, at which they enter the top rate of tax.

I also wish to raise the issue of overtime. I have heard the Tánaiste speak about this before. Those people who are in employment and in a position to work overtime often see more than half of that earned income going to the Exchequer in some form of tax or universal social charge. The most effective way to deliver an improvement in their standard of living would be

to raise that threshold at which they enter the top rate of income tax.

The Tánaiste: I do not think there is any one single way that is best to help working families or middle-income people with the cost of living. There are a number of different ways. I have never been in favour of just one solution or saying there is just one solution to these challenges. Obviously, one way is through pay. This is why we increased the minimum wage this year and why I announced just this week plans to introduce a living wage. This is why we are currently in discussions with public servants around pay increases for them. The other way is to reduce costs such as for childcare and healthcare. We have done some things in that regard but we need to do a lot more in the forthcoming budget. Yes, part of the solution is reducing income tax for middle-income people. The average salary earned by a person in Ireland who works full-time is about €45,000. If he or she gets a pay increase this year, and most will, the person will lose 52% of that in universal social charge, income tax and PRSI. I think this is unfair. I do not understand why the party opposite thinks it is fair. I think this should change. One of the ways we could improve that is by raising the standard rate cut-off point.

Deputy David Cullinane: In many elements of healthcare at the moment there is a real crisis in recruiting staff. The Tánaiste will be aware that there are millions of home help hours that cannot be provided because we cannot recruit the staff. There are some 700 vacant posts in network teams supporting children with disabilities. Yesterday I met with the Irish Pharmacy Union and there is a real crisis in recruiting community pharmacists. A range of solutions are needed. Partly it is to do with terms and conditions of employment, but many of the organisations that represent patients and workers in these areas advocate that we look at including some of those professions on the critical skills list. Is this something the Tánaiste would consider? I am not suggesting this as an alternative or substitution for measures to deal with the recruitment and retention issues, but given this crisis where children with disabilities are going without hundreds of thousands of hours of therapy between them because we cannot fill posts, as with home helps, pharmacists and many more, is this something the Tánaiste would look at as part of the solution?

An Ceann Comhairle: I invite the Minister for Health.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Tánaiste is the Minister responsible in this regard.

The Tánaiste: On the critical skills permits, we could certainly examine that. This falls under the responsibility of the Minister of State, Deputy English, but obviously, he reports to me. This is something we could definitely examine.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I wish to raise the issue of public transport for the Cavan-Monaghan area and specifically the Bus Éireann Expressway route No. 30 that takes people from Donegal, through Cavan and on to Dublin. Over the past weeks it has been aired very robustly on the Northern Sound airwaves how people are being let down entirely by this service. One can imagine that in a constituency like mine we very much depend on this critical part of our public transport. We depend on it for the airport and we depend on it for hospital appointments. I have anecdotal experience from people living in the area of where the bus either failed to turn up or turned up too late so that people had to ring to make other arrangements to get the airport or they were going to miss their flights.

Will the Tánaiste make an intervention with Bus Éireann to see what can be done so that we can have a reliable form of transport that people can depend on?

1 o'clock

I also ask that it reopen the bus station in Cavan town. It is disgraceful that it remains closed this far on from Covid.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising these issues, which are important to people in Cavan and public transport users in particular. I do not have any information to hand but I will make sure the Minister for Transport knows the matter was raised in the Dáil and will ask him to contact the Deputy directly.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Under the legislative programme, the Government proposes to bring forward a Bill to exempt children under 16 years of age from the inpatient charge when admitted as public inpatients. While this is welcome, there is also a commitment under Sláintecare, which was agreed by all parties, to abolish such charges for all who present as public inpatients. When will this Bill begin pre-legislative scrutiny? Is there a plan to fulfil the commitment given under Sláintecare to abolish public inpatient charges?

The Tánaiste: That legislation is being drafted at the moment. I cannot give a definite timeline but the intention is to have that done before the summer recess so we can implement the measure this year. Reducing or abolishing out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare is an important part of Sláintecare. Abolishing inpatient hospital charges for children is an important step in that direction and I hope we can extend that to the abolition of inpatient charges for adults in the future as well.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I raise an issue facing thousands of middle-income workers and families. This cohort, the so-called squeezed middle, earn too much to qualify for many State supports and pay a larger proportion of their income at the higher tax band. The Government needs to focus on targeted measures to cut rising costs and increase supports for the so-called squeezed middle. It is crucial that we now recognise the change in costs facing families across Ireland, whether in energy bills, in the supermarket trolley or at the pumps. I ask the Tánaiste to ensure the next budget package will specifically consider the squeezed middle families and the challenges they face. It should include a tax and welfare package and universal supports such as subsidies for childcare and public transport and lower college fees, to ensure no family has to choose between vital services and to lessen the burden on the squeezed middle due to rising costs.

The Tánaiste: These are budget matters and decisions will be made on them in the run-up to the budget in October. The programme for Government provides for a tax package every year, agreed by all three parties in the coalition. Therefore, there will be a tax package in the forthcoming budget. We just have to decide how best to do it. It should be targeted at middle-income earners, as the Deputy has said. There are other things we can do, such as reducing childcare costs, which middle-income families spend a lot of money on. We are an outlier internationally in that regard. We need to increase the universal subsidy for childcare and bring down those costs. Doing so would also have an economic benefit in that it would free up more people - particularly but not exclusively women - to enter the workforce, if they choose to. One area the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is focusing on is reducing the cost of putting a child through college. He has some good proposals in that regard. For people on middle incomes who do not qualify for a grant, when the registration fee and accommodation costs are added up, it is a huge burden.

Deputy Imelda Munster: For the umpteenth time, I raise the Government's refusal to extend the short-hop zone from Dublin to Drogheda and Laytown. I have met with the National Transport Authority, NTA, numerous times and it has acknowledged that its policies are directed by the Government. We know the Government can reduce fares with the stroke of a pen because it was done several weeks ago. There is a very strong and urgent case for reducing these fares in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. There is also an obvious environmental case for it. There is nothing stopping the Government from doing this thus far, only the lack of political will. Will the Government consider doing this? There is nothing to stop it. We are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis and the Government can do something to give people relief. When will it extend the short-hop zone to Drogheda and Laytown?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I understand the strong case that is being made to extend the short-hop zone. My colleague Councillor Sharon Tolan has been leading the charge on this. Her argument is that if Kilcoole in County Wicklow, which is 55 km south of the centre of Dublin, is in the short-hop zone, Laytown, Bettystown and Drogheda should also be included in that zone. That is a strong case. We need to assess the cost and see if other areas fall into the same category. For example, some towns in Kildare would be as near to Dublin as Drogheda but also do not fall within the short-hop zone. We would have to look at it in the round, or in the arc if that makes any sense, and we are doing that at the moment.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Abdullah al-Howaiti was a 14-year-old boy when he was arrested and tortured until he confessed to a crime he could not have committed. In November 2021, the Supreme Court of Saudi Arabia overturned the decision to kill him. On 13 June 2022, only three days ago, the court of appeal upheld the death sentence. Will the Tánaiste call on this despotic regime, which he recently visited, to reverse this unbearable cruelty on this young man and repeal the death sentence? Doing so would demonstrate, at the very least, that the Government can be as tough on human rights with Saudi Arabia as it is with Russia.

The Tánaiste: I am not familiar with that individual case but I will certainly check it out with the Department of Foreign Affairs. I can unequivocally say to the Deputy that I am opposed to the death penalty. This Government is opposed to the death penalty and we call on any country that still has it on its statute books, including Saudi Arabia, to desist and not to execute any of their citizens under any circumstances.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will send the Tánaiste the petition.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can the Tánaiste assure me that the Government will oppose any move by the EU to amend the taxonomy for fossil fuels? The proposal being made is to add fossil gases, including possibly fracked gas, to the list of investments that should be considered green up to 2030. It seems to be a total contradiction of all the policies of this Government.

The Tánaiste: I am not sure whether the Government has made a formal decision on this matter. We need to give consideration to the fact that we will continue to need to use natural gas as a fuel for the next number of decades. We just signed off the other day on a major investment in new power plants, which we need, and those power plants will be using natural gas in the main. While natural gas is a fossil fuel and contributes to climate change, it is much better than coal and oil. There are some decisions that have to be teased out there. There is also a difference between blue gas, which comes from under the sea, and fracked gas, which is much dirtier. I am not sure the Government has made a decision on that just yet. I will have to come back to the Deputy on it.

Special Educational Needs: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I will take this opportunity to speak directly to the parents and families of children with special educational needs, SEN. While I could not possibly understand all the day-to-day pressures they face, I am on their side and the Government is committed to ensuring every child with special educational needs has access to an education. One child who does not have a place is one child too many, and I fundamentally believe our most vulnerable children in society must be prioritised.

As a Government, we fully recognise the importance of an inclusive and all-embracing education system and never is that more important than in the case of children with special educational needs. It is their right under the Constitution and nobody in this Chamber would disagree with that. My number one priority, therefore, is to increase the number of special school and special class places until every child in this country has a place, and I will not stop until this is achieved. I have made clear that I believe every school should provide special education and that that is where we need to get to as a society. I know we are not yet there and that this is the reality facing some families, but that is where we must get to and I believe we will get there. We have to get there, because there is no other option.

We have made significant progress over recent years in increasing the number of special class places and special school places, as well as the number of special education teachers, SETs, and special needs assistants, SNAs, to record levels. That cannot be forgotten. This year, the Government will spend in excess of €2 billion, or more than 25% of the Department of Education's budget, on providing additional teaching and care supports for children with special educational needs. This represents an increase of more than 60% in total expenditure since 2011.

As for where that money goes, it goes, for example, into increasing the number of SETs and SNAs. I thank them for all the amazing work they do throughout the school year in teaching and caring for children with additional needs. Some see the disabilities, but special education teachers see the possibilities. In 2011, the total number of special education teachers in the mainstream school system was 10,575, and there are now 14,385, which is an increase of 48%. I acknowledge the important role of individual SNAs in supporting some of the country's most vulnerable children. Their work and commitment ensures children with SEN can attend school and participate in school life to the fullest possible extent. Provision has been made for 19,169 SNAs by the end of 2022, which will represent an increase of 81% since 2011, while 1,165 additional SNAs will be allocated this year. Schools have maintained their SNA allocations since 2019 and an average of 1,000 additional SNAs per annum have also been allocated to schools since that time in 2020 and again in 2021. We have made significant inroads for SNAs over the past few years, which has been a key priority of mine.

We had a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme. In this regard, the National Council

for Special Education, NCSE, recommended that a new national training programme at level 5 of the national qualification framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. This is a major educational initiative, which will enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs, who are crucial to the inclusion of students with additional care needs in the education system. I ensured that the programme would be fully funded by the Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA. I am also aware of Fórsa's campaign to have the minimum essential qualification for SNAs reviewed. The Department has committed and communicated to Fórsa that it is open to reviewing the position, which I fully support.

Where else does the budget go? It also goes into increasing special classes. As I mentioned, these classes are vital in supporting the development and potential of children with special educational needs. In 2011, we had just 548 special classes in mainstream schools. From this September, we will have 2,463 special classes in mainstream schools across the country. That is an increase of 450% in 11 years. Special classes to support children with significant special educational needs are smaller than the mainstream. They have a pupil-teacher ratio as low as 6:1 and have SNAs assigned to look after the pupil care needs. Overall, there are almost 12,700 pupils enrolled in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, representing approximately 1% of the overall pupil population.

Budget 2022 provided for the creation of 287 additional special classes for the 2022-23 school year. These additional classes were to provide more than 1,700 new places for September. So far, we have exceeded our projection so that 1,800 additional places in 315 new special classes will become available in 2022. The Department will continue to engage with the NCSE, school patrons and school authorities over the summer months to increase capacity where needed.

The budget also goes, of course, into supporting special schools. One of my favourite and one of the most rewarding parts of this job is being able to visit special schools across the country. It is really amazing to see the work that is going on in these schools. I recently visited St. Martin's Special School in Waterford, which truly is an example of how far we have come. It is also an example of what can be achieved. It has music programmes, food preparation and nutrition classes, with an adjoining garden where children grow their own vegetables and herbs. There is also a woodwork and craft studio. These are all practical skills that children are learning from a young age to use into further education and beyond. They are life skills that are vitally important in order to be able to achieve their full potential. This is the type of model I want to see every child have access to in the future and that is what I am working towards.

As we know, special schools also have lower class sizes and will also have SNAs assigned. They cater for particular categories of disability. There are now 129 special schools providing specialist education for approximately 8,000 pupils annually with more than 1,400 teachers. That represents approximately 0.8% of the total pupil population.

Budget 2022 also provided for an additional 23 teaching posts and 46 SNA posts in special schools, which will create an additional 140 class places. Two new special schools opened last year. A further two, one in Cork and one in Dublin, are scheduled to open this year. These are the first new special schools to be developed in the country in more than a decade.

As I have highlighted, the special education budget of €2 billion is being spent on the front line to increase these key resources that are supporting special education provision. I spent the

first part of my speech outlining the increase in numbers and statistics. However, I know for many parents out there listening that numbers and statistics do not mean anything if their child does not currently have an appropriate school place. I want to tell them that I am committed to doing anything I can to try to ensure that their child has access to the support he or she needs.

Over the last 11 years, Fine Gael has prioritised investing in children with special educational needs. We believe in supporting all children, especially children with special educational needs, to achieve their full potential. I believe this commitment was clear when the Tánaiste appointed me as the first ever Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion.

I take this opportunity to outline what I have done and what I will do further to increase special education provision. First, I secured an agreement with the Department that ensures all new school buildings will have compulsory special class provision moving forward. This is an important step along the way to ensuring eventually that every school will provide special education provision. I said this is my number one goal and I truly believe it is the only way forward. I introduced a number of new strategic initiatives, particularly in the last two years, to deliver the scale and quantity of special education provision that is required for our children and young people.

This future-proofing will include the incorporation of at least four special classes in all-new 1,000-student post-primary schools and other large-scale projects and *pro rata* for medium to smaller schools. At primary level, accommodation for two special classes is provided for eight to 16 mainstream class schools and for four special classes at larger schools. Despite what the Opposition claims, there is forward planning and work under way on enhancing special class and special school provision across the country.

I also introduced a new forecasting model. A geographic information management system is being utilised to support a strategic and co-ordinated approach to planning and delivery of special educational needs provision. That is essential in allowing us to prepare for the future. In March of this year, I announced for the very first time that special education provision would open with a fee-charging patron, namely, the Spiritan Education Trust. This is something many people said would never happen. I also expect to expand on this precedent going forward.

I also appointed a new CEO of the NCSE, whom I believe will make the necessary changes in order to reform the organisation. There are legacy issues that need to be addressed; I am well aware of that. I will put in place the necessary resources that are required to achieve this.

Another key priority of mine is to use whatever legislative tools I can to provide more places for children as quickly as possible. As Members will know, I already initiated the section 37A process. We are currently examining how we can streamline that process and if emergency legislation will help us to do that. I am also looking at commencing section 67 of the Education Act. This provides a power to the NCSE to designate a school place for an individual child in a special class or special school. This is something I believe we can do.

Although we do have many challenges ahead, the NCSE has informed me that, save for Dublin, it is confident there will be enough special class and special school provision to satisfy demand across the entire country. More broadly, the Department continues to work closely with the NCSE and relevant stakeholders in the school system with regard to the overall special education placement requirements. This is particularly in the case of the Dublin area to ensure

a supply of placements coming on stream to meet emerging demand.

There is ongoing work to provide additional special classes and special school places for the next year in order that the remaining gaps in provision from the current 99% to the full 100% is achieved as quickly as possible. As I said, I recently announced that I would be initiating the section 37A process to compel schools to increase places for children with special educational needs. As I said on Tuesday, I felt like I was left with no other choice but to take substantive action. I believe that is a necessary step to try to ensure that every child gets the supports he or she needs and access to a school placement. All parties would clearly prefer to see schools actually volunteer to provide more places rather than places being secured on the back of an order or direction from a Minister.

Schools have been working with us and the NCSE, though, to open new classes and we will open at least 315 additional classes this year. I am grateful to all concerned for their ongoing work in this regard. Where schools do not volunteer to provide more places, however, I will absolutely compel them to do so. I said that on Tuesday evening and I will say it repeatedly. I fundamentally believe that all schools should have to provide places for children with special educational needs. It is not good enough to say that they do not cater for children with additional needs. I cannot and will not accept that.

The second stage of the section 37A process is now complete and the NCSE will now provide a detailed report to me on the matter. We will consult with school patrons, national parent bodies, school management bodies and the teacher unions, which is requested under the process. I insisted that this be done as quickly as possible and I expect that it will be.

2 o'clock

I believe the process has to be streamlined and shortened because there are too many stages in it. I have made it clear it requires reform.

The other legislative option I have mentioned is section 67 of the Education Act. This provides a power to the NCSE to designate a school place for an individual child in a special class or special school. The Department has recently engaged with both the NCSE and Tusla about commencing this provision, and these discussions are continuing as a matter of priority. I believe we must have a common-sense approach to this issue. For me, it makes complete sense to commence section 67, as it is the NCSE that knows about the students who need special school and special class places the most. It has also already worked with the schools directly to open these places, so let it fill them. Furthermore, we are separately considering whether there is a need to introduce new emergency legislation to assist in securing additional special educational needs provision. As I mentioned on Tuesday, the Department recently met the Office of the Attorney General to discuss the matter. This work will consider whether new legislation would assist in expediting the section 37A process.

The Department and I are working closely with stakeholders, including parents and advocacy groups, and we have a consultative special education forum to ensure children with special educational needs can access education placements appropriate to their needs. I am very aware that listening to the voices of parents and of those representing children with disabilities is essential to ensure what we deliver meets the needs of the children. Sometimes in special education there is too much emphasis placed on the deficit and not enough on the strength. We have to harness that strength and determination to work intensively on the issues facing us in

respect of school placements so that we can find a way forward with the best interests of the children at heart.

As I said on Tuesday, this is a very emotive topic for thousands of families and I realise every case of a child with special educational needs is different. I have met with many parents recently and I want to let them know we are listening to them. I assure every parent that I am committed to ensuring each child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place. After all, it is the child's constitutional right, and I will not stop until this is achieved.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: First, I apologise to the Minister of State for being absent for the start of the debate. I was travelling up from an event in Cork this morning but I was listening to her contribution. I am often critical, but I recognise the Minister of State is well motivated and wants to see progress on special education. I believe I appropriately commended the Minister of State at the time of the budget on the additional budget for special educational needs. That was welcome.

I listened to the Minister of State's speech and the start of it was an outline of a series of figures. She correctly acknowledged the fact that for many parents any number of numbers is not going to change the fact their child does not have a place. However, it is more than that. To a significant extent, this is not a budgetary issue. It is about forecasting and planning. The Minister of State said that forecasting happens in terms of places. I find that hard to grasp because there has been the same pattern in recent years. The geography changes a small amount, but fundamentally, in areas where there is a young population, it is the same pattern every year. Parents come forward in September and October to inquire because they are worried about school places, indeed for the following September as well. They go to the Department and the NCSE, who assure them there are an adequate number of places. They continue to reassure them until the Department and the NCSE panic in March and April and, unfortunately, this year, in May and June because they realise there are not enough places. We know there are more than 120 too few places in Dublin.

If there is a projection model being used by the Department and the NCSE based on population data or, for example, the number of children in special classes in primary school going into special classes in secondary school, I do not understand how significant numbers of children, well over 250 across the State at a minimum, continue to be missed. I am of the view that if the Department had identified in September and October there were 120 children in Dublin who do not have a place in a special class, and there are probably 700 or 800 schools in Dublin, it is surely the case the Department would have been able to find places in special classes had it and the NCSE put the effort in at that stage. I absolutely believe that is the case. That is the part we need to crack. Over the course of the past 15 years or so, we have increased the proportion of the educational budget that goes to special educational needs, but we have not got anywhere near cracking the issue of planning. That is the issue on which my motion on Tuesday focused and which I urge the Minister of State to get right from now on because it is leading to parents currently not knowing where their child will be in September and to parents worrying about where their child will be in September 2023.

Some of this is because, perhaps, there is a desire on the part of the Department and the NCSE to will it into existence, to hope there are enough places. That is obviously not the case. There is an awful lot to do. There is the medium term and the long term. In the long term we want to work towards a system where there is greater fluidity whereby children have much more scope to move between special school, special class, mainstream and mainstream special

class as their needs require, as they progress and so forth. We are a significant distance away from that because a number of things must happen at the same time. First, to ensure children who have additional needs can thrive in the mainstream, we must bring class sizes down and ensure there are an adequate number of special needs assistants, SNAs, which is a point to which I will return. We also must crack the issue of therapies. I saw the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, here a short time ago and I am sure she will return soon, but therapies are an essential element of this. This is not just education in terms of teachers and SNAs but also in terms of speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists, who will all play a crucial role in ensuring these children can thrive. We must move forward on all those elements together, and some of them will take time.

In the meantime, the bare minimum we should be providing is enough places in special classes and special schools every year. I do not believe that is beyond our budget. This is not just a question of throwing money at it and hoping it will go away. Only proper planning will achieve it. If there is a forecasting model, we need to hear a little more about it because it does not appear to be cutting the mustard.

There is another issue in respect of section 37A. There is the medium term and the longer term, but we have the immediate term, which is an emergency situation for this September. That emergency has been apparent for some time. Several parties in the Opposition, as well as AsIAM, Inclusion Ireland and Families Unite for Services and Support, FUSS, Ireland, have been making it clear there is an emergency. I heard the Minister of State talk briefly about section 37A, saying she has begun that process. She has spoken in the past about the need for emergency legislation. I am not sure I heard that in her opening statement today or in her speech on Tuesday. It appears this will be rolled into the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, which is more a medium-term project and objective.

Where stands the proposal for emergency legislation on section 37? How are we going to ensure people have a place for this September, which is only 14 to 15 weeks away? It is a very short period of time until those children will be going to school. Obviously, that puts the schools in a difficult position, but it also puts the parents and the children in a difficult position. I did not hear enough from the Minister of State. There was some good stuff in the statement but I did not hear enough about how we are going to get places for those children in September. Will section 37A meet the needs? Is there going to be emergency legislation? Are these centres of special education going to happen? It seems to me they are not. I welcome the fact they are not because it is isolationist and would segregate children from their peers. The parents in these instances chose to send their child to a special class as part of a larger school community because what they wanted was the opportunity to integrate with the wider school community. This would have sent them away on their own. I know the Minister of State will say it would have been a temporary measure, but we have an entire history in this State of temporary measures that end up being far from temporary. Direct provision is a classic example. The NBA flats near where I grew up were meant to last ten years and they lasted 30 years. We have a long track record of temporary solutions proving permanent or semi-permanent. I note the Government has not explicitly ruled it out at this point, but my fear is that if it is put in place, children could end up there until well into the following year and perhaps even a full school year. That would not have been in keeping with the principles of inclusion and ensuring those children get the best possible opportunity.

Undoubtedly, section 37 needs to be streamlined but there is a need for an emergency response. We should not need an emergency response. The Department and the NCSE should

have been on top of this a long time ago, but we are in this situation and we must do what we can to vindicate what is a constitutional right for these children.

I also want to touch on the subject of SNAs. The Minister spoke about SNAs and the importance of their role. I very much agree they play a crucial role, one that for far too long has been neglected, diminished and shown inadequate respect. I fundamentally disagree with the approach adopted by the Department on the minimum qualifications. The Department makes a big play of the SNA announcement in the budget every year. It has been 1,000 or 1,100 every year for the past four or so years, but in each of those years we have not actually got 1,000 or 1,100 because the terms and conditions are not attractive enough. It is usually 750 or 800 that come through the system. When schools wonder why they do not have enough SNAs, in particular new and developing schools, a big part of the problem is that it is not all that easy to recruit SNAs because it is not the most attractive job in the world. In part, that is down to the minimum qualifications. The Minister of State and the Department are trying to roll this into part of the public sector pay talks. That is completely the wrong approach. It is putting the cart before the horse. That means it will be years before there is any real progress. The expert independent analysis, which we will be discussing at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science this week or next week, should happen in advance of anything like that in order that their qualifications can be properly evaluated and any pay talks can reflect the improved conditions.

I will finish on that because I may possibly be going over time. We have an emergency situation that needs to be addressed urgently. I urge the Minister of State to use every power in her capability and, obviously, budget, but this is more than that. In the longer term, we need to get better at planning. These children have a constitutional right. We need to plan better, and it needs to be right at the start of the school year that we make these decisions.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I welcome much of what was in the Minister of State's statement. As my colleague Deputy Ó Laoghaire has said, we recognise that efforts have been made to resolve many of the issues that have been there for so long for many families who have children with various levels of disability.

The issue raised with us most often relates to special needs assistants in schools. In recent weeks, a young man from Drumshanbo contacted me about his son who is starting school soon. He said the school, St. Patrick's National School, which is a mainstream school, has 1.83 SNAs. His son has muscular dystrophy and he will need a lot of attention. The two SNAs that are in the school are already working with three other children in the school. The man has to apply for a special exemption review to look for an additional SNA. The point he makes is the system is clearly broken when that is the case. We need to have a much better way of assuring children and parents in particular that the service will be in place at the outset when they send their child to school. They should not be doing it in the current manner. One of the issues that needs to be examined is how to bring the system up to date so that it deals with people efficiently and effectively from the very start.

The Minister of State has gone through many of the other issues, for example, in regard to the provision of special classes. Several school principals have been in contact with me, including the local school, Carrigallen National School, in County Leitrim, which has an application for an extension for another special class. It already has one and there is a second one in place. It is looking to expand the criteria that are in place at present because some of them are very tight and difficult for them. There needs to be an openness to deal with each school

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individually, in particular if a school is prepared and is looking to the future. In fairness, that particular school, like many others, is looking to the future and it sees that what it is doing now will not be enough in seven or eight years' time and that it will need to apply again. Rather than coming back with another application for another extension or new building in seven or eight years' time, if it could be done the first time with a bit of extra space in place and if additional resources were put in place to do that, it would save the State a lot of money.

Another issue that comes to mind is the qualifications, which Deputy Ó Laoghaire mentioned. Many people set out to become SNAs and discover it is difficult and onerous. We need to re-examine that as a matter of urgency. It is not something that will take a long time to do and it could happen quickly if the effort is put in to do so.

Another issue was raised recently by a woman who has a practice in Drumshanbo. Her name is Anne Bohan and she runs her own private clinic, Assist Dyslexia. She works with children with dyslexia and she sent me a message in recent days:

Why are individual readers in exam being replaced by a helper for several students who will read occasional words or sentences? There seems to be a complete dismantling of support for Dyslexic kids at primary and second level. I have a copy of the letter one student received saying that's what has been granted.

In other words, a child with dyslexia in the past would have had a reader to assist him or her with the exams, but now the reader could be assisting several children. The system is not working. It cannot work. The experience of families is clearly set out in the letter. What families understand now is there is a withdrawal of support, yet when the Department is contacted it states supports are in place as normal for children with dyslexia when they are doing their exams. It is clear the support has been dispersed among several children and the reader who was previously available for one child has to work with several children. That is simply not appropriate. I think the Minister of State would acknowledge that needs to be examined.

The overall picture is that the experience of many families who have a child with a disability of whatever kind, such as autism or the various other issues that come to mind, is they have to fight every inch of the way. The Minister of State might acknowledge that is what most families tell us. We need to change that fundamentally. A child with special educational needs will have difficulties in life in general and families need to work hard to do their best for their child, but the State should be there to assist them, not to try to block them and hold them back. There are too many people in positions in various agencies who believe their job is to block anybody from getting anything rather than assisting them to get it. That attitude needs to change as well. I say to the Minister of State the leadership must come from the top. She has a role in that regard and, in fairness to her, she is taking the role seriously, but we have not seen it play out at the bottom yet. There are many experiences parents relay to us of situations they have come up against where the system just says "No". That is not good enough and it needs to be examined and changed.

The issues are wide and varied. They are also about pre-planning and making sure we have planning in place to have enough services in place for the future. There is good work being done. I pay tribute to the many people who work in the services, who do great work and who are committed to helping children and to liaising with families and working with them, but we still have a long distance to go.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: A child who has special educational needs or has learning difficulties will need appropriate educational provisions and facilities to address those needs. Such assessments should also determine the educational setting he or she should attend. The child could have speech, language and communication needs or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. He or she could have autistic spectrum conditions or specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Regardless of the child's needs, difficulties or disabilities that interfere with learning, all children, especially those with special needs, have a right to a broad and balanced education. For the most part, children with special needs will go to an ordinary school and some might attend a special unit within the school grounds. Other children with special needs will go to special schools. In an ideal situation, the parents of the child, the school and the school board work in partnership to make the best decisions for the child's development and progress.

Homeless students face even greater challenges. For them, the classroom can represent, in a chaotic life, the only safe, consistent and stable place in their lives, as they often have to deal with difficult challenges outside the classroom that will directly impact on their academic performance. For children already identified as needing special education services, the stresses of homelessness can greatly increase learning problems.

The impact of the pandemic has brought new challenges for parents and children with special educational needs as they return to school. Many children were unable to participate in remote learning and, as a consequence, have lost crucial developmental skills. In my constituency, Dublin North-West, we have some of the highest waiting lists in the country for special needs places. I have met with parents who spoke to me of their experiences of trying to find a place for their child in a school. What was most striking from my conversations with these parents was the severe lack of places for children and the great difficulties parents face in trying to access resources. This has led to high levels of stress and anxiety for the parents and the child concerned. They highlighted the obvious reductions in the levels of special education teaching allocation and SNAs.

This was also highlighted in a survey conducted by three of the leading disability advocacy organisations in the State: Inclusion Ireland, Down Syndrome Ireland and AsIAM. Their report also found that while children with additional needs benefited from the return to school, it is clear they also faced new challenges, especially around accessing supports and being included in schools. The parents expressed to me in the strongest of terms that these issues must be addressed immediately and their children should have access to appropriate educational facilities and supports, such as additional teaching time and SNA supports.

An article published in 2020, "Special education reforms in Ireland: changing systems, changing schools", written by a group of academics from Trinity College Dublin, Dublin City University and the Economic and Social Research Institute who all have expertise in special needs education, highlighted the possible misuse of special needs teachers. The Department of Education was investigating at least 50 such cases and *The Irish Times* also reported there had been 88 reports of potentially inappropriate use of special education teaching resources since September 2017. However, teacher unions and those involved in school management bodies have said that such misuse of special needs teachers arose as a consequence of a number of factors, including, as was stated in the 2020 article:

...a lack of resources, gaps in competencies to manage the needs of some students within schools, and a lack of available teachers have impacted the ability of schools to allocate

resources appropriately ... [It is clear that] The inclusion of an increased number of students with a spectrum of needs within schools has ... placed pressure on schools to expand the range of skills and competencies among the teaching staff

We know there is a severe lack of SNAs throughout the State and this has a knock-on effect in the lack of provision of school places for children in special needs education. There is also a concern that many special needs students are being placed on reduced timetables by schools. Such reductions in timetables should be used only in exceptional circumstances. This can be beneficial if seen in the context of supporting the full inclusion and reintegration of the child.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The Minister of State knows we already had a debate on many of these issues on Tuesday night. I will expand my comments to address some of the issues within the system.

The Minister of State will know that not every school is the same. As has been mentioned, there are a cohort of students in some schools who are particularly vulnerable and needy. There may be intergenerational educational disadvantage and addiction issues, in addition to higher proportions of Traveller children, migrant children, children who have just arrived from Ukraine and Roma children as well as a variety of issues with which the school has to deal. Within that school there can also be a higher proportion of children who are under the 30th percentile, so all these allocated resources that will be afforded to the Minister of State will be used in that way to deal with the scenario in front of her in the best way she can. There may be a child in that scenario who may be in the 50th percentile but could be in the 90th percentile with certain appropriate interventions. However, a different school may have the scenario, and I know this to be true, of the lowest performing child in reading capability in that school being at the 88th percentile, yet that child will get resources due to the baseline resources all schools get.

This is something social inclusion policy and the NCSE need to address properly. As I said, the child who is at the 50th percentile could be at the 90th percentile. The difference that intervention could make in that child's life over the course of his or her life could be so fundamental and life transforming, but the resources of one school mean it cannot afford to benefit that child because there are so many other needs in that school, whereas that very same scenario would be addressed in a different school. We must not just have a baseline of support for every school but a baseline of support for every child, if we recognise that the intervention of jumping from the 50th to the 90th percentile would make a massive difference in that child's life. As the Minister of State knows, we have an education system that is based on choice, which means competition. When we have competition, in effect, we have a system in which some schools, unfortunately, have a greater level of disadvantage than others.

The role of the special educational needs co-ordinator, SENCo, in the school system needs to be better supported. It almost needs to have the same sort of status within the school as that of a careers guidance teacher. The number of agencies SENCos deal with, the amount of time-tabling they have to do, the phone calls they have to make, and the assessments on which they have to follow up are quite onerous. If we were to support that position more, we would have a situation in schools where resources would be better allocated and much more streamlined. We would not have the scenario, as has been explained to me, of paperwork clogging up basic applications for laptops, which can sometimes take three to four months to be processed. All these types of things are the daily grind for people in this position. Nobody in the Minister of State's position, or in the NCSE or the Department of the Education, wants to deny somebody the resources they deserve. As I said, the SENCo positions need to be properly recognised.

As has been mentioned, we keep coming back to the discussion about SNAs. It is still regarded by the Department as a short-term scheme 20 years on. The question of recognising SNAs' qualifications and so on goes directly to the lack of respect that SNAs feel they are getting from the Department. This all feeds into the narrative. Every year, we discuss the need for SNA allocations to be made much earlier. We have spoken about how late they were made this year. We need to recognise the SNA position as being more than just part of a scheme and instead as being a career. The lack of recognition that their position gets goes to the heart of the insecurity that SNAs feel.

The Minister of State can point to the increased number of SNAs in the system, and that number is to her credit, but a school told me today about 54 students accessing six SNAs. If I remember my maths correctly, six into 54 is nine. That is nine students accessing one SNA. How could any SNA do that job effectively? Much of this has to do with how we have the largest class sizes in Europe. How can an SNA deal with the variety of educational needs in a class effectively when so many of the duties of an SNA dip into the educational area because the class is so large, the needs are so great and the teacher can only do so much? What the SNA is trained to do and is charged with doing dips into other areas because of the workload in the classroom.

I understand that there are approximately 5,000 deaf children or children with hearing loss in the system. Their advocates are telling me that there needs to be greater awareness among, and training for, teachers and SNAs who are dealing with children who are deaf, hard of hearing or suffering hearing loss, given that the children are not performing as their peers are performing. That is not because of any academic failing on the children's part, but because there is no support, awareness or teacher empowerment. The Department could address this matter.

We are still being governed by the five-year-old circular 13/2017. Principals have told me that they find it challenging that only children who are in treatment programmes with disability teams can get resources allocated to them in school. However, if a child has been diagnosed and is awaiting treatment from a disability team, the child cannot get resources in school. I would be interested in the Minister of State's view on this matter.

As was stated on Tuesday and again today, data are necessary. This is where the challenge lies for the NCSE. I met Mr. John Kearney, its new CEO. I appreciate his dynamism and new approach to finding solutions. However, the NCSE would be better served if it had more data and greater recognition of the level of need on a regional basis so that we were not firefighting every year and could project five years or ten years hence. Neither the Minister of State nor many members of the Opposition want to be here every June having the same argument about, or experiencing the same frustrations with, school places.

What comes to my mind in this debate is the word "insecurity". As I mentioned on Tuesday, if a family is trying to grapple with a child's diagnosis, there is insecurity about knowing when the assessment, intervention, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy will happen and insecurity about whether the child will get a school place. There is insecurity among those working in the system about whether they will be able to empower the child properly. There is insecurity about the career path of the SNA. There is insecurity for the person charged with overseeing all of this within the school system about whether there will be time and space within the school diary to do it, given the various overlapping agencies that he or she must contend with every day of the week. It is challenging.

Every school deserves resources and I am not in any way suggesting that schools do not.

Fair play to the private schools for opening up to other children - I am delighted about that. However, where schools in intense disadvantage are concerned, the children attending them who are not in the siren zone – they are in the extremely vulnerable position of being under the 30th percentile and are progressing okay but could be progressing much better - are deserving of help as much as a middle class child is. This is a challenge for us. The Minister of State will agree that we can find solutions to it, but they must be socially inclusive and we need to work hand in glove with the NCSE on finding them.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome these statements on special educational needs. The need for investment in special education has been highlighted time and again in my constituency. We have made significant progress in recent years on increasing the number of places in special classes and special schools as well as the number of special education teachers and SNAs to record levels. I compliment the Minister of State on her work in this area, including in the Department.

In my county of Mayo, we are fortunate to have recognised special education schools, namely, St. Anthony's, St. Brid's, St. Dymphna's and the St. Nicholas school. I thank the Minister of State for her visit to St. Brid's and St. Anthony's when she came to Mayo last year. A number of additional accommodation announcements have been made recently by the Department in respect of schools across Mayo. I acknowledge the allocation of funding for additional autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units and special educational needs classrooms throughout the country. It is welcome.

In my town of Castlebar, Davitt College, which is part of the Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board, ETB, has received confirmation from the NCSE that it can proceed with plans to open a special class in September for children with autism. This is important and welcome and sends a strong signal that the Department and the Government are prioritising the establishment of special education classes within our secondary school environment so that there is progression from national school. The major building project at St. Brid's Special School is also under way and will be delivered under the Department's ADAPT programme. The tender process for appointing a project manager is nearing completion. I hope that this project will soon progress to construction and be delivered. It would be welcome.

St. Anthony's recently ran a major fundraiser to develop two sensory rooms. I compliment its principal, Ms Fiona Byrne, and her staff on the considerable work they do to progress the school. The two additional sensory rooms will be critical. However, I wish to discuss the allocation of an eighth teacher for the 2022-23 academic year. In terms of its autism profile, the school is increasing its enrolment from 21 children with autism to 26, yet no SNA staffing resource has been allocated to support the new classroom establishment. According to the NCSE's website, 18 special schools in the country were allocated additional teacher posts, with 17 given at least one additional SNA. For some reason, St. Anthony's was never given this additional resource. I know that the Minister of State is working on this issue in her office, but I ask that it be reviewed with the NCSE.

In addition, St. Anthony's has 33 pupils with a variety of special educational needs who require their own support. With 26 pupils with ASD, the school is entitled to access the requisite level of support to match that profile irrespective of the additional needs that they may have. Come September, the school will have a new student with a history of needing and having intensive one-to-one adult support provided at all times across a variety of settings, including school. This will be challenging for the classroom teacher. Ensuring that a full-time SNA is al-

located will be an important step forward. Granting the school's request for resources and supports will ensure that St. Anthony's 99 pupils in September, including 11 new pupils, achieve success and are able to access the best education that can be provided.

I compliment the school on the tremendous work it is doing. I wish to highlight the lack of SNA support. It is an oversight from the NCSE's point of view and hopefully it will be rectified before the next academic year.

I wish to highlight another issue. As recently as yesterday, I was contacted by the family of a young child with special educational needs who needs to attend an ASD-specific preschool. The parents were contacted by a local unit with a view to enrolling their child for the coming September, only to be advised that the child was ineligible due to its age. The age requirement under the school's policy is three years and six months but this child, unfortunately, is three years and four months. The child is two months younger than the age in the school policy, even though enrolment will be in September. There is an issue with this refusal. The school has explained that children will be put on a waiting list but the child in question will be four and a half years of age before it reaches preschool. This is disappointing for the parents. It is crucial that they receive early intervention and support and that the child does not miss out on early intervention in its most vulnerable months. The special educational needs organiser, SENO, senior manager has stated that the school policy is not a legal document and it should be challenged. However, schools are implementing a policy that is impossible for parents to adhere to. I know the Minister of State is aware of this. Decisions such as these should be left to the Department of Education, not school principals. The NCSE and the SENO should have the authority to advise and allocate places for children on the basis of the critical diagnosis provided in cases such as this and for other children going forward. That should be the deciding factor.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We are all glad we are having these statements again. I sit on the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with Deputies Ó Ríordáin and Ó Laoghaire. I listening to the Deputies' contributions and that of the Minister of State. We all acknowledge that we have a record number of SEN teachers, SNAs and ASD classes. All these big figures are great but the Minister of State made the point that numbers and statistics do not matter and that what matters are individuals without a school or an appropriate school place. Despite all the big figures and major investment of €2 billion in the Department of Education budget, there are still gaps and shortfalls in accommodating many students. We need to acknowledge that.

I will raise a number of points and I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would address them. I will try to focus first on the lack of ASD class provision in certain areas. I do not want to go on a geographical journey where I will embarrass individual schools publicly but I might just identify a few cases across the country, including in my county. There are large suburbs in the west of Cork city where there is one ASD class at primary level and one ASD class at secondary level. The area has one ASD class at primary and secondary level facilitating a population of about 25,000 people. This is totally inadequate and imbalanced. Out the road in outlying villages of a few hundred people, the primary school could have three or four ASD classes. This imbalance and the way we have allowed this model to develop need to be addressed.

We speak about working in collaboration with schools rather than adopting an adversarial approach but it is high time we took schools and boards of management to task. The greatest power the Minister of State has, as has been noted, is the section 37A power. I know it is not the

most convenient way to do things. We would like to do things quicker. I understand the process can take up to two years, so section 37A is not the most appropriate of avenues by which to go about this. However, instigating this procedure, where appropriate and as quickly as possible, is a sure-fire way of signalling to these schools that they need to get their acts together.

I welcome the Minister of State's comment that a number of new schools are being established. One of them will be in Cork city. Just yesterday, we had confirmation that a second site in Glanmire had transferred from Cork City Council to the Department of Education in the hope that it will be developed as a special school. It is my hope that we can get on now with appointing a consultant, tendering and procuring for the site and getting the school built as it will facilitate dozens of children in the wider east Cork and Cork city area who require a special school place.

I will bring to the Minister of State's attention a matter that I became aware of only recently. We have approximately 140 early intervention classes at preschool level in the country. The difficulty is that many kids of two and three years of age who depend on the public service to get a diagnosis will more than likely not receive one until they are five, six or seven years of age. We are finding that in the early intervention classes, the majority of kids who are lucky enough to get a diagnosis at that age are from families who have the means to obtain a private diagnosis. The majority of early intervention classes are populated by children whose parents or families have the means to help them to get these places, which are in short supply. As I said, there are only approximately 140 early intervention classes nationwide. We need to work on that, particularly as regards the childcare settings we have. Perhaps we should develop a pod system or an ASD equivalent or perhaps we should expand existing early intervention provision. We need to work on the diagnosis of students if the system is to work.

I will touch on the summer provision programme. I spent 15 years as a teacher. Unfortunately, in that time the programme never had a good uptake for a variety of reasons, which have been well aired. I am hearing about this year's provision again. It is great that it has been assigned its largest ever budget of €40 million. However, I am hearing on the ground that about 80% of the students who could avail of summer provision will most likely not be able to do so. Again, I will not discuss individual schools but I have been told by parents' groups that in the case of a school in County Wicklow, there are 99 pupils seeking summer provision but only 12 of them have been offered a place. A school in Cavan has 183 students seeking summer provision but is only offering a programme to classes of children with severe and profound needs. This situation is mirrored across the country. While funding is welcome, we need to expand the numbers of people who can deliver the summer provision programme. Not everybody who delivers July or summer provision has to be a teacher. I know the scheme is being extended to trainee teachers who are registered with the Teaching Council but why cannot we consider other trainees such as those in the health or childcare sector? In my mind, anybody in the care sector could, in theory, be able to deliver a meaningful summer provision programme that far exceeds what is likely to be delivered this year.

I also flag the need for legislation on ASD provision. As I said, it is high time the Government, the Department or the NCSE took it upon themselves or were empowered to designate where ASD classes would be required. A proper demographic breakdown should be done to determine where ASD classes are most needed and they should then be targeted at those areas. I am not in favour of continuing to leave this at the discretion of schools.

The Minister of State indicated that, with the exception of Dublin, she has been told that suf-

ficient places will be available. That is great and welcome. In Cork, we have about 12 children who are still awaiting a place. Many are opting to take a mainstream place, which their SENO has deemed as inappropriate. Due to a fear that they will not get a place anywhere else, these children are going back to mainstream education. Many of them have tried to exit mainstream education and get into a special school. While the problem might be more acute in Dublin, other areas are affected as well. We have made suggestions to the Department as to how to resolve that. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would follow up the matter.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This week saw the Government vote against a Sinn Féin motion on special education. Instead of engaging and working with Sinn Féin and working together to come up with solutions for the most vulnerable children in the State, the Government again refused to work with us and to listen to those children and their families.

There were 296 primary school special classes in Cork city in 2023. This compares with only 104 at secondary school level, where the ratio is 7:1. This means that there are 2,072 children in primary schools in Cork in special classes and only 728 of them have a guaranteed place in secondary school. Some 1,344 children are at risk of having no place to progress to, despite the NCSE knowing that these children need a second level place. It had eight years to plan. These children go into primary school at the age of five and when they leave at the age of 12 there are no school places available. How can that be right? Why is that not being solved, rather than planned? It is not a capacity issue. It is a scandalous failure by the Government to look after the most vulnerable, recognise the value in all children and nourish their potential. We know about the lack of spaces and the knock-on effect that has. The lack of spaces in special schools sees children with special educational needs put in mainstream schools where they will not thrive and should not be, but there are no other options. There is a lack of special school places, leaving some children with no alternative in September but to stay at home. This is not fair. This needs to be resolved. It is heartbreaking for the parents and the children. Will the Government please deliver for the most vulnerable?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The lack of special educational needs places in schools for children in Dublin Bay North is as bad as anywhere in the State. I have been in contact with a number of parents in recent months who cannot secure a place for their child for the school year starting in September. They have applied to all the schools in the area but cannot access something that is their child's right. These parents face battles every day. They have to battle for their children and are now fighting a battle that they cannot win because of the severe lack of places. These children have been failed by the State.

The Minister has given a commitment to review section 37 of the Education Act, which is welcome but no good to parents here and now. Successive Governments have failed to tackle the issue of appropriate school places for children with additional needs. In the real world, this amounts to neglect by the State. Parents are not asking for much. They ask that their children be given the same opportunities as any other child.

My colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, brought forward a motion on Tuesday calling for the Minister to bring in emergency legislation to tackle the lack of places. The motion also called for a review and proper forward planning for future years. The Government voted against this. Watching that debate, it was clear that the Ministers are failing to grasp how serious this issue is and that it requires urgent intervention. We need such intervention now. Will the Minister of State confirm whether her Department is proceeding with the proposal for emergency special education centres? People deserve an answer to that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Minister and the Minister of State have each stated multiple times, including in the opening part of the address today, that 25% of the Department budget, some €2 billion, is dedicated to meeting the needs of children with additional educational needs. That is an impressive figure but it is little or no comfort to young people and families without appropriate education. It is little help for parents receiving upwards of 20 rejection letters from schools or forced to accept a place for their child that is not appropriate or suitable to their needs. Instead of reiterating the budget spend for this year dedicated to special educational needs, perhaps we should also talk about rights because money does not equate to rights.

In 2016, we were last examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and came up lacking. The committee was concerned that Ireland had “no comprehensive strategy for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education and the encouragement of their autonomy” and highlighted the lack of action for the full implementation of the EPSEN Act. The committee advocated for the human rights-based approach to disability because we did not have that in 2016 and we continue to not have a rights-based framework when it comes to disability.

Despite what our Constitution, our Education Act and the UNCRPD, which we agreed to, might say, the lived reality for too many children with additional educational needs is that they do not participate on an equal basis with their peers. That is not because of the disability, but because of the system.

Census 2016 showed that, of people with disability aged 15 to 50, 13.7% had completed no higher than primary level education, compared to 4.2% of the general population. AsIAM’s appropriate school place survey found that at least 267 children did not have an appropriate school place for this September, though the number is likely to be significantly higher. Some 109 respondents accepted school places for September that are not appropriate for their child’s needs, while 241 respondents stated they did not expect to receive an offer of an appropriate school place before September. When do rights kick in? Is it when a family goes on “Prime Time” or comes to the gates of the Dáil? We all know there is not a human rights approach to disability or a realised right to education for all in our country because we regularly see in our newspapers and hear on our airwaves of children and young people locked out of education because they have a disability or are placed in a system that cannot provide the support they need. However, €2 billion will be spent this year.

Approaching 20 years since its enactment, the EPSEN legislation has never been fully implemented but has been allowed to rot. This was a cost-saving measure, lest we forget. The Act predates our ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018 and, therefore, the ongoing review is essential to ensure it meets international human rights standards. We all fear the review of the EPSEN Act will share the same fate of being left on the shelf unless we commit to neither charity nor best intentions but to full, unwavering realisation and implementation of a human rights framework for people and children with disabilities across our island. We need this work prioritised and expedited.

I will touch on the important work by SNAs. A clear lack of respect is shown to SNAs by the Department. We see it in rates of pay for home-based school summer provision of 2022, for example, where the SNA rate is €16.77 per hour, while that of a qualified teacher is between €35.69 and €47.45 per hour for doing the same job. The majority of our SNAs are vastly over-qualified for their role, considering the current minimum requirement is a FETAC level 3 major qualification or a minimum of three grade Ds in the junior certificate, yet the Department has re-

fused to raise the minimum requirement to better reflect the work involved and the development of the role since 1979. The national training programme for SNAs that launched last year and runs in University College Dublin is still without accreditation despite an incredible campaign run by SNAs throughout the country over the past couple of years. We need our SNAs. I do not think there is a school that would disagree. To improve recruitment and retention and to offer the best support for pupils who require it, we need to better respect the role.

We see a clear continuation of negligence and exclusion from society for those with disabilities. People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience poverty and deprivation as those without. In 2016, only one third of working-age people with disabilities indicated that their main economic status was employed, compared with two thirds of those without a disability. There was also a vast difference in employment depending on the type of disability. Only 15% of individuals with an intellectual disability were employed, compared to 34% of those with blindness or a serious vision impairment, for example. Exclusion from education is exclusion from socialisation, playing and integration for the better of all in our society and it reduces opportunities beyond school. We have to do better. We are failing despite the receipts the Department can produce and that is not to diminish it. Investment and dedicated funding is essential but do not equate to rights.

Only this year the Department produced guidelines on reduced timetables. Of the respondents to the AsIAM survey mentioned earlier, 57% were on reduced timetables. Only this year were positions created for sign language interpreters so deaf children could access mainstream education. I highlight the work of Andrew Geary, a father who had to fight to get this for this son. Parents have to fight consistently and constantly to ensure their children's constitutional right to an education is met.

Questions remain. When will the EPSEN legislation be enacted fully? When will the role of the SNA be professionalised fully? When will their pay be matched with the responsibility and importance of the work? What year will it be when every child has an appropriate school place? We must do everything we can to ensure it is this year, September 2022. Whether that requires emergency legislation or a greater budget, fundamental to it all is a rights-based approach.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate because services for children with disabilities or additional needs are incredibly important.

3 o'clock

Under the umbrella of additional needs come special educational needs. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, on the work she has done and the commitment she has shown thus far. Having a dedicated Minister of State for special education is a genuine show of the Government's commitment to improving the lives of children with special educational needs. This area has benefited from having a dedicated Minister of State and, if I may so, from having Deputy Madigan in that role because her empathy, compassion and passion for reform in this area is obvious and badly needed by families up and down this country.

I will raise a couple of the issues I am most commonly approached about. The first is special needs education capacity. I know there has been intensive engagement between the Departments, NCSE, school patrons and school authorities on increasing capacity in Dublin. The NCSE's recently published opinion with regard to section 37A of the Education Act 1998

clearly outlined that there is insufficient capacity in special classes and special schools in the county at primary level. Approximately 80 special class places and 49 special school places are needed. Since June, eight special classes have been sanctioned by the NCSE. This will increase special place capacity for the coming academic year. That reduces the number of school places the NCSE has identified as being needed back down to 56. That is really welcome progress but we need more.

My area, Dublin Mid-West, is full of young people and growing families. The demand for ASD units, the supply of which is currently stretched, is only going to increase. Since 2011, the NCSE has increased the number of special classes by more than 130%, from 548 to 1,456. The great majority of those classes are ASD classes. It is fantastic growth but, based purely on the number of inquiries I get from parents in my area who cannot find a place for their children in an ASD class, we need to provide many more.

I will also raise the need for grants for departmental emergency works to facilitate accessibility to be approved more quickly than the current process allows for. Right now, schools have to wait until they can confirm their allocation of SNAs before they apply for funding for accessibility works to accommodate, for example, students in wheelchairs. That is crazy. Until the funding is in place, the work cannot be carried out. In a particular case I am dealing with, this means that a child who is due to start secondary school in September has not yet been accepted to their local school, which is the school they want to attend and the one all their friends are going to. Why? It is because the school is awaiting a new building from the Department. The existing building is not up to current standards, which means it is not accessible. As a result of the school not being able to apply for an accessibility grant until recently because it did not know its SNA allocation, no decision has yet been made on funding. It is the student and his or her family who are paying the price. They are under enormous stress and strain because of this. This administrative hurdle is a major barrier for children and young people with additional physical needs when it comes to accessing their educational entitlement.

I will also highlight another particular issue I have come across in my area. A group of six children are in a preschool early intervention ASD unit. It is approaching the time for them to go to primary school and five of the six have been offered places in the school, either in the mainstream class or the ASD unit. However, one child was offered no place at all. I have been corresponding with the NCSE on this matter and it is proactively engaging on it but I wanted to take the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State that broader issue because if a child is in an early intervention preschool ASD class in the grounds of a school, there simply must be an ASD place available for him or her when it comes time to go to primary school. That must be guaranteed. We need to put that in place.

Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole, which is in my area, was chosen to take part in a pilot scheme to provide in-school and preschool speech and language and occupational therapy services a number of years back. The scheme had a really positive impact and offered a more joined-up approach to delivering services that are tailored to each child's individual needs. I do not know the current status of that scheme but it needs to be revived and rolled out to additional schools, especially schools in the area of community healthcare organisation, CHO, 7.

As the Minister of State will be aware, the CHO 7 area is highly populated and my constituency falls into it. It is notoriously a massively challenged area when it comes to speech and language and occupational therapies and other additional needs supports for children. A student in my constituency recently wrote to me to share her experience of navigating the education

system with learning disabilities, namely dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and developmental language disorder. What struck me most was this child's struggle to get a proper diagnosis. She had spent years of primary and secondary school being told she was not trying hard enough or being passed over by teachers who did not have either the authority or the training to recognise learning disabilities. The student eventually got a private diagnosis in her late teens thanks to the perseverance of her mother. Unfortunately, that will not change the educational disadvantage she has experienced so far.

The State currently spends more than 25% of its annual education and training budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs. That is an increase of more than 60% since 2011 alone. That is very positive. Budget 2022 provided funding for an additional 1,165 SNAs, an additional 620 new special education teacher posts and 287 additional special classes. The trends in funding are most certainly going in the right direction. I welcome that but we still need more. There are issues with diagnosis. I acknowledge that does not fall under the remit of the Minister of State but, when it comes to learning disabilities, we need stronger pathways within our classrooms to identify the signs of disability and to get quicker diagnoses. There is no doubt that we are making great progress in the area of special education. The discussion, the policies, the funding and everything else is moving in the right direction but there are still massive challenges. I know there is political will from the Minister of State and her Department to meet these challenges head on and to deliver a reformed service for the children who so badly need it.

Deputy John Lahart: This is one of my great areas of interest in terms of advocacy, insofar as a politician can advocate on anything, and it has been since my party was in opposition. I want to focus on some of the things I believe have improved but I also believe we have stalled a little bit, that we need to do much more and that we are facing a crisis.

A case that has stuck in my memory is that of a parent who had more than one child with autism and who made a daily journey, starting at 6 a.m. or 6.30 a.m., to transport one child to Saplings Special School in Kill and another to Kiltiernan, County Dublin. The Minister of State will be familiar with Kiltiernan because it is in her constituency. Saplings is in Kill, County Kildare. Can you imagine making that journey twice a day, travelling down the Naas Road before reversing back over the mountains to Kiltiernan?

I do not want to allow this debate to go by without sincerely thanking the passionate advocates. I think of Miriam Kenny of Involve Autism, her husband, Brian, Alan and Colman and all of the others who assist them. I also think of all of the other autism groups and special needs advocates and those involved in groups like Twigs and SparkAbility that provide after-school care for children with special needs. Aside from leaving them exhausted, that advocacy and the time and energy these people have invested in this have done the State, these children and their parents an incalculable service.

I will now come back to us. There have been movements in the right direction. Progress was being made in my constituency, although I think things have stalled a little. I think of St. Dominic's National School in Tallaght, which I visited a number of months ago. The teachers and the SNAs worked in beautiful classes that had been set aside there. A really beautiful sensory room was also established. The school was yearning for a second ASD class. That was the first time I experienced that as a Deputy. I had never come across teachers who said they would welcome a second ASD class. I have encountered that opinion in other schools since. Why do they hold it? It is because it would enable collaboration and end isolation. That

is something the system needs to welcome. I was very proud of the fact that we had got one ASD class, which caters for three or six students, but now I know, although it took a while to dawn on me, that one ASD class in a primary school is simply not sufficient. There needs to be multiple ASD classes. It has been highlighted that the provision for post-primary school is wholly and pitifully inadequate. It is a crisis that is on our doorsteps as we speak. There is also the after-school element. We are doing a lot of work on the sports and after-school care side of it. I have been a great supporter of a particular idea for six years, so I will keep proposing it. Looking at all the building projects that are going on, we should be co-locating preschools on primary school sites. That would enable co-operation in respect of early intervention and the pooling of resources and the facilitation of after-school care for all children, not just those with special needs, but specifically with those children in mind. It would represent a one-stop shop for parents who are ferrying children to different schools.

I wish to raise the issue of political accountability. I wrote a letter to a principal of a school in Greenhills, which had as its final line: "The decision of the independent board is final". The principal wrote back the most eloquent letter and asked who is ultimately politically accountable, stating that we live in a Republic and there must be political accountability. The Minister of State and the Minister for Education are the ones who are politically accountable. The State cannot allow some schools to stand in the way of its policy to provide education for every child who requires it. Every tool at the disposal of the State has to be employed. If schools simply do not have the space, that is fine. However, the issue of space needs to be addressed and we must ask where we can find the space. The approach should also include the threat of removal of some funding if schools do not co-operate. The day has to come to an end where a principal can tell a parent with two children, one of whom has special needs, that the school may not be the best school for the child with special needs. We must ensure that the schools that are enthusiastic and anxious to provide school places for children with special needs are fully resourced in every way.

On the summer provision scheme, considering where the scheme was previously, I think the Minister for Education has done her best in providing additional resources, spreading the scheme over the summer months, bringing forward the payment of teachers and opening the scheme up to student teachers and others to provide it. However, it is not working. We really need to have a long, hard look at it. All of the Deputies have emails in their inboxes from people saying that four out of five of their local schools are not providing the summer provision scheme. As I have suggested previously, I think clusters of schools should work together in particular areas. For example, one school could provide the scheme for one of the summer months, or one school could provide the scheme in a particular year, with the agreement that the other school in the locality would provide it the next year. We have to be more and more creative. We cannot let obstacles stand in our way. As usual, I have much more to say on this issue, but I thank the Ceann Comhairle for bearing with me.

Deputy Chris Andrews: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue. Parents of neurotypical children have an expectation that their children will get a decent education. It is not an unreasonable expectation. However, it is not an expectation that parents of neurodiverse children have. One parent from the Neurodiversity - Irishtown, Ringsend and Pearse Street and Involve Autism advocacy groups told me recently that as a parent of an autistic child, getting a place in a school is a horrific struggle. Parents feel they are begging the teachers, principals and SENOs for a place. They have to pretend their children are not as autistic as they actually are in order that they have a chance of getting the school to accept their child. SENOs will not pick

up the phone to parents because there is nothing they can say to them. In my view, the NCSE is dysfunctional. There has to be a way that the NCSE can gather the information it needs to ensure the resources are directed where they are needed. Currently, the NCSE does not have the information it needs, so it cannot plan. That is a major factor in this human disaster.

Every child should have an appropriate place in its community with the wraparound services it needs and deserves. We have to stop the practice of taxiing children out of their community. I have raised the issue previously. The Government is spending over €70,000 a day taxiing children with disabilities out of their community to schools a long distance away. This practice cannot be allowed to continue. I understand that a child as young as two and half is being taxied out of their community because there are not enough early intervention classes in the area. The Government has failed to plan and failed to act. As a result, it has failed our children.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: We are being told that the NCSE has the data and knows the children and their needs. If that is the case, why are we here relaying the concerns of parents and young people in the month of June? The reality is that the NCSE was aware of children's needs, but failed to put in place a strategy to deal with the situation. If it can do this year after year, why should parents and students believe that next year or the year after that will be any different?

I know we all have the statistics, but I think it is worth repeating them. In Dublin 15, there are currently 30 autism classes in primary schools, which cater for a maximum of 180 students. There are nine autism classes in secondary schools, with a maximum of 54 places. As I stated on Tuesday, despite the promise of the immediate allocation of 22 school places, only one has been provided so far. Looking forward, are we going to have the same outrage from parents who cannot access places in the 2023 school intake process? In Dublin 15, only 20% of students who are currently in third, fourth and fifth classes will have a place available to them. If the NCSE has that information, it must tell the parents of those students how they will be facilitated. We know that many students do not leave special classes. The 22 places that have been promised will be locked in for a number of years. If there is to be a new stream of special needs classes for each year, parents must be informed. They must be given that clarification now.

Danu Community Special School, the special school for Dublin 15, only opened recently but is already at full capacity. The school has stated that it will not be open to new enrolments for at least five years. From 2022 to 2025, there will be over 35 children who will need a secondary school place. Where are those children to go? As Deputy Andrews mentioned, they will be taxied to other schools, or they will be lost to the school system. They will not have a place, and unfortunately, will not get the education they deserve. I ask the Minister of State to provide a full-time behavioural therapist for Danu Community Special School. The school has been pleading for the provision of such a therapist since it opened and moved to the new complex in Rath Dara. I also ask the Minister of State to provide a multidisciplinary team, even on a cluster school basis, to support teachers and students to enable them to attain the highest level of education that we can provide.

I want to raise the issue of the bizarre nature of the assignment of SNAs. I ask that we stop the nonsensical practice of schools having to reapply for an SNA at post-primary level when a child has had an SNA all throughout his or her primary education. If a child needs an SNA in primary school, why does he or she have to go through the process of applying for an SNA at secondary level? I genuinely believe that in future, a Minister will be sitting where the Minister of State is sitting now apologising on behalf of the State for the failure of previous Ministers to

provide an appropriate education for children with special educational needs.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: How do we even know what the needs and educational needs of children are when they cannot access an assessment of need? They are entitled to an assessment of need within three months of application, and to have the resources provided within a further three months. However, children are waiting two and three years for assessments. That assessment at the outset is key. If a child does not get the assessment, diagnosis, resources and supports, the needs grow and it becomes a much bigger problem for schools, the child and the parents as the child enters education. To give an example, parents with a two-year-old son attended my office in recent weeks. That child is non-verbal. His paediatrician says he shows all the signs of fairly severe autism. He applied for an assessment on 2 February and should have received that assessment by now. He was linked in with the CDNT but that was just a box-ticking exercise. The HSE has now told his parents that it could be two to three years before he gets the assessment. His parents are panicked about his future. If that child were to get an assessment, including an assessment of his educational needs, and a diagnosis now, he could get the services and supports that are necessary and he would be in a far better position. If he does not get those supports, his future will be impacted. There will be bigger problems for his education and those delays may define the school he attends. Early intervention is absolutely critical and we are failing disastrously at that level.

I have raised time and again the issue of young people who are trying to get qualifications, doctorates and so on, in educational and counselling psychologically but are unable to get those qualifications because of the massive fees involved. Those fees are deterring or preventing many of them from qualifying. Many young people want to work with children who have special needs but are being charged a fortune for their qualifications. It is difficult for them to qualify. There is no funding whatsoever for postgraduate degrees and doctorates in educational psychology, which is absolutely disgraceful. We give funding to clinical psychology but not to educational psychology. These are the people we need to make the assessments and provide the services and so on that will set young people up and avoid a situation where those young people's delayed development is worsened and their futures are impacted by delaying their admission to suitable schools.

The Government will say there are more SNAs than ever. However, the fact is that the numbers are rising in line with population growth. In terms of the levels of support available from SNAs and special education teachers, we are not even back to where we were before the austerity cuts of 2008 in real terms, when one looks at the proportion of SNAs and teachers available.

We are also talking about places in ASD units. I have been campaigning in support of St. Mary's Boys National School in Booterstown. There has been an identified need for an ASD unit in that area for some time. The school has been campaigning to use the parish hall as an ASD unit. The owners of the parish hall are willing to give it over for that purpose and the Government has committed to supporting its acquisition but despite all the promises, the school still does not know what is going to happen. It is pleading with the Government to make sure that acquisition goes through because it does not know if the hall will be acquired by September to provide the ASD unit that the school needs.

I will also mention Stepside Educate Together, which has a stepping stones unit in its school but does not have enough funding to staff it properly. The failure of the Government to provide resources and staff for places has now led the Government to talk about segregating children rather than including them in the mainstream because of the lack of resources, places,

supports and staff. That is simply not good enough.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I wish to draw a parallel. I attended at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Gender Equality this morning at which there were presentations from groups involved in care work and some academics. It was interesting that the same issue arose about not knowing the full extent of the care needs, the numbers of carers and those who undertake care work in the country. It is, therefore, difficult for those organisations and the supports around them to make plans. There is a parallel to be drawn with the NCSE and the lack of available data to plan for children with special needs. There are similar issues in other areas. I have heard reference to that issue in most of the contributions to this debate and it is a real problem. Policymakers and those whose job it is to enforce policy need to have every bit of data to hand to plan not only for today, tomorrow and emergency situations but also for the future.

I know this an area with which the Minister of State will be familiar because I was with her at the opening of Our Lady of Hope School in Crumlin. She will also be familiar with the magnificent campaign that the parents and the community in that area conducted to get that special autism school. It has been open for a year now and the school has never had any therapists on-site. This is a problem. Despite the school, the SNAs and the teachers, some of these children still have considerable special needs. They need physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, and still there are no therapists on-site. There is a feeling in the area that getting the school was more than most places get so the needs of those students must have been met but that is not the reality. There are enormous needs in an area such as Dublin 12. It is a growing area. It is one part of the country where apartments and homes are being built. We still do not know what resources are going to be needed for all the new families, never mind the existing families in the area.

The D12 autism community campaign conducted its own survey, which cannot have been thoroughly scientific but was carried out as well as the campaign's members could. They surveyed 35 families and found that 56% of the children with special needs in the area have access to no services at all. They are beginning to feel they have been forgotten about because they got Our Lady of Hope School. The supports cannot stop at that. I have submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister of State on the issue and I know the campaign has also written to her. The area has 17 schools, four of which are secondary schools and none of them have special autism classes. The experience of many parents is that their children need to be in special autism classes rather than in mainstream classes. Getting a place in a mainstream class means that the student gets an SNA, if he or she is lucky, but does not necessarily mean they get the therapy required. That is how children fall through the cracks. The longer this goes on, the more cracks appear and the more children fall through them. It is not even a cost-saving mechanism. This needs to be considered as an example of where things could be done differently. It cannot be too difficult to get one special classroom in every school. We also need to ensure the building work is done in time. The building work for one special classroom that is due to open in September has not even started. I plead with the Minister of State to listen to the parents and those who are involved with the children. I ask her to consider the needs of the area.

I have been in touch with a principal of a school in Dublin 8 who thinks the Department does not grasp the choices that principals have to make on a daily basis. Because of that, they are allocated scarce and finite resources and must continually prioritise children with complex needs for whom the schools are not sufficiently equipped or resourced to care. That means the moderate needs of some children, which does not mean they need no help, become more grave because they cannot be facilitated in the classroom. Those children are equally worthy of the

resources to cater for their needs. They are falling further and further behind. There is a pattern involved. As a result of the exasperation and frustration of parents, and the utterly painful lives they have to lead, they are issuing solicitors' letters to the schools to try to get results. That is expensive for the parents and for the principals who are legally obliged to respond.

We need to start planning for what is required. We must understand that absolute data are required to fulfil the needs of children and to plan for the future. A cohort of schools is educating children who are becoming more and more marginalised and are being left behind. I know that the delivering equality of opportunity in schools, DEIS, programme has a special meaning and is supposed to have a special place but schools with that designation are not getting the resources they deserve. It is awful to have to come into the Chamber and complain about the situation all the time but I am lucky because I am not a parent of a child with special needs. Some of those parents who have to live with the situation day in and day out are at the end of their tethers. Something drastically different must be done. The system needs changing.

Deputy Alan Farrell: I thank the Minister of State for her comments, which I welcome. I know she has brought a determination to the role and it is extremely important that the Minister of State with responsibility for special education has that determination because it is an extremely important role. I appreciate her efforts.

As the Minister of State knows, I have a very particular personal and professional interest in the support of children with additional needs. It is important as a State that we recognise that thus far, we have not done enough, although we have made great progress and strides in recent years. As Deputy Ó Laoghaire said earlier, there was some good stuff in the Minister of State's contribution and there is some good stuff being done in the Department. With a bit of help and some additional resources, I am absolutely positive that we will be able to make further enhancements to the services being provided for children with additional needs right across the country.

However, there are issues with the flow of information to schools and the decision-making process that schools engage in *vis-à-vis* enrolment, year on year. In the context of planning, the lack of essential information makes it very difficult for schools to cater for their community's needs, quite apart from the schools that actually refuse to provide the necessary classes or spaces in their schools. While it is the stick element, I do welcome what the Minister said about giving the NCSE the power to compel a school to provide a place to a child with special educational needs. Getting this implemented is essential. I also welcome the further legislative exploration that the Department is conducting with the NCSE and the Attorney General and I hope there is an opportunity for us, particularly through the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, to look closely at that. This is something that NGOs, the committee, the Department and others have explored in recent months and years.

Notwithstanding some of the great strides that are being made and some of the difficulties still being felt, with the record levels of SNAs to cater for the rising level of demand and the addition of quite a number of special education teachers, the Government has shown its commitment in this area. I reiterate what the Minister of State said about the emphasis that Fine Gael in government has placed on this area in recent years, not just in this term but also in prior years. Of course, that was done with the support of most parties in the House, given our minority position in the previous Dáil. Fine Gael was not acting alone. We certainly had the support of other parties but we showed initiative and we are now starting to see the benefit of

that forward planning.

It is imperative that we have a system that is inclusive of all children at all levels of ability and one that enables them to maximise their potential and, more importantly, their happiness. The worry that parents have regarding their child being educated in an appropriate setting has a profound effect on family life. All Members of this House, given the number of families that contact our offices every year, know that the effect of the concerns parents have about accessing services within the State, not just from the Department of Education but also from the Department of Health, to support their children with additional needs is profound. It also has an effect on us as Deputies and our staff and we work hard to ensure that we can cater for those demands. That is why it is so important that we continue to invest adequately in the system.

There is a need for us to maximise the number of children who are receiving support in mainstream classrooms, notwithstanding the additional requirements for some children with additional needs to be in special units. That is obviously dependent upon their diagnosis and the level of support that is required. I am encouraged that the Minister is open to introducing emergency legislation on the provision of spaces. Like her, I am very concerned about the 120 places here in Dublin. I am acutely aware that there are schools in Dublin 15 and in my constituency that have refused to provide places. The patrons, principals and the Department need to get together on that to come up with a more workable solution because educating those children is the imperative. I appreciate that this is seen as controversial but something has to be done. Education must be provided and I would much rather move legislation to require and compel those schools to provide places than do what has been suggested.

This is an area that every Member of this House must spend more time on. The number of Deputies who have spoken this afternoon on what is an extremely important issue is notable. The willingness is there within the Department and the ambition is also there. With a little tweaking in terms of legislative action, we can get the offering to where it needs to be. There is also an onus on Members to work with schools, particularly their principals, to try to convince them that these services need to be provided in each and every community. The needs are most acute in Dublin but they exist right across the country. I commend the Minister of State on her work and look forward to working with her on the Oireachtas committee in the coming months and years.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Every Member of this House who speaks on this topic does so with great empathy and in a very well-intentioned way. The objective of all of us is to ensure that children with special educational needs have an easy and certain passage into education. However, from the point of view of their parents who inspire us all so much, empathy and understanding from us is not enough. It really rests upon us to solve this growing social and educational problem that has developed to a much larger extent in recent years.

Obviously progress has been made in recent years but we still have huge challenges. It is important that we start from first principles and the first principle that I start from is that all children in this country, irrespective of their ability or whether they have special educational needs, have a constitutional entitlement to an education. Article 42 of the Constitution sets out the obligation on the State to ensure that every child is given a free primary education and in effect, there is a constitutional obligation that goes beyond that. That right to an education applies to every child, irrespective of his or her educational needs. This House and the other House have given statutory recognition to that through the Education Act which recognises that the same rights that are appropriate to children without special educational needs should apply to

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children with such needs. There should not be any distinction between the two when they start their education in the same way as there is not any distinction between children of moderate or extreme intelligence when they are starting out in their education.

It is important to recall that this country made a policy decision that the model of education we are going to use for children with special educational needs is one that encourages integration and inclusion. We have decided as policymakers that we want to see children with special educational needs educated in what we refer to as mainstream schools. It is obviously the prerogative and choice of parents as to where their child goes to school and I am well aware that not every child with special educational needs is going to be capable of attending a mainstream school. That said, the basis of our policy is that it is built on the principles of integration and inclusion. In terms of our international obligations, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities holds that people with disabilities should not be excluded from free primary or secondary education. That is expressly set out in Article 24 of that convention.

Having identified the basic principles to start from, we then need to identify the problems. The main problem with the current system is that it is haphazard when it comes to children being able to access places in primary schools. At present, it is not mandatory for schools to ensure that they have places for children with special educational needs who want to come into the school. Instead we have a system, and I have seen it in my constituency repeatedly, where parents must, literally, go through a begging process of going from national school to national school to see if the school will take in their child in the forthcoming September. Regrettably, on far too many occasions the vast majority are told that, unfortunately, the school does not have the facilities to deal with a child with such special educational needs. It is not acceptable that we place an obligation on parents that they must hunt around looking for a space in a suitable school. The principle should be that all primary schools should have places available for children with special educational needs. I am aware there is the power under section 37A, which has been used in the past, but unfortunately I believe we will have to use it more in the future unless schools get into line and provide these services. In my constituency, there were significant issues with primary schools that did not offer ASD classrooms. I am pleased to say the position is improving considerably, but we still need to see it go much further.

On the issue of needs assessments, I had an interesting consultation with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and members of the HSE who do the special needs assessments for children in the Dublin 2 and 4 areas. There are huge resource issues in this area. I was informed that the vacancy rate for the staff who carry out special needs assessments stands at 50%. We all know it is much quicker to get an assessment done if one has the money to go privately. We need to assess whether the State is serving parents and children most effectively by putting them on a list where they must wait for the assessment to be done publicly. Perhaps the State should consider purchasing the private expertise to get this work done much faster.

We also need to be aware that there needs to be much greater recognition of the data. We do not have enough data on the numbers of children awaiting diagnosis, the numbers who have been diagnosed and the numbers who have not been diagnosed but are in need of support. We are also aware that the Department of Education has kept SNA hours at 2019 levels and special education hours have been cut for certain schools so that the schools only get hours based on the numbers, rather than on an individual needs basis. This needs to be looked at. There are simply not enough ASD classrooms at present. I am sorry I am running out of time. We need to identify what can be done to help in that regard. I will return to that issue in a future speech. We need greater emphasis on ensuring that integration, which is our desire, is actually achieved

in policy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are discussing special needs and disability and I agree with many previous speakers that it is all about delivering for our citizens as regards their rights and entitlements in education and any other area. They should not be discriminated against on the basis of their special need or disability.

Let us reverse this and deal with the issues parents face in an awful lot of cases. Whether it is financial supports, housing, supports inside and outside school, speech and language therapy or occupational therapy, we know the difficulties and we know there is not one single place where these parents can go. Many Deputies noted that parents are forced into becoming activists. Sometimes they are lucky and there are already groups up and running and people have already taken this hard road beforehand. This is not the way it should be. As previous speakers said, we need a one-stop shop for parents to know where and what they can access. Many Deputies are probably already doing a haphazard job in that regard. It is just not the way the system should be.

If we are talking about special education and ensuring we can offer what people need, the answer is fairly obvious on some levels. First, we must have information. We have insufficient information on what the need is. We must be able to model into the future what the requirements are. It is as simple as that. Beyond that, we must ensure we have the resourcing, particularly in personnel, to deliver. This applies to SNAs, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists or psychologists. Members have spoken of the difficulties with individual job specifications and in workforce planning or the bits of work that have not been done in relation to that. We know there is a difficulty for psychologists around training and the obstacles set in their way in the context of costs. It is no wonder we have ended up in this situation.

All Members deal with parents who are frustrated about SENOs and the NCSE. I do not want to come down too hard on the individuals who work in these organisations because it is very difficult to offer parents what they need for their child or to offer the supports children require. They cannot offer a place if a class is full or an SNA service if none is available. The NCSE is, therefore, set up to fail at this point in time.

I agree with everything that has been said on modelling and planning, especially as regards streamlining section 37A to ensure we can offer places and classes. At this point, many parents and children will not be facilitated unless we can up with a proper solution that works straight away.

AsIAM has found that 267 children with autism will not be able to get places in September. Deputies have dealt with many parents. We are over and back with the NCSE and we are dealing with SENOs but we are not getting the places that are needed. We are spending a huge amount of their time and our time failing to get the results we need. We must deal with diagnoses and ensure diagnoses are available in order that we have information on needs and assessments do not take two, three or more years. We must be able to offer interventions, particularly early interventions, which might mean that later interventions are required less often.

My son would fall into this bracket. We had him at St. Joseph's National School in Dundalk. I can only commend the work the school has done. I imagine he will go to Ó Fiaich College next year and I expect the service he will get there will be up to scratch. I must also commend the school that has probably made up for many of the services that are not necessarily available

at this point. We need to ensure that all kids get this experience, while accepting that some children have more complex needs than others.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: A child's right to education is enshrined in our Constitution and under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. All children, including children with disabilities and children with special needs, have the right to free primary education up to the age of 16. What defines a person with special needs? A person has special educational needs if his or her capacity to participate in and benefit from education is restricted due to an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability.

We spoke earlier about kids going to mainstream schools. I welcome this, especially when siblings also attend the school as the brothers and sisters can all feel part of the family. I visit many of the schools in the Dundalk region and I see all the work being done with learning supports, resource teachers and special needs assistants. They are doing a fantastic job. I am a parent and grandparent. All people want is for our children to reach their full potential. I have sat with teachers and principals who have given out about the teacher training programme. They told me it needs to be updated to ensure teachers are properly trained to get people with disabilities up to a certain standard. I ask the Minister of State to consider that.

Parents call to my constituency office to tell me that services are not in place or there is not enough money or resources available. The issue most people come to me about is accessibility. They want to get their child assessed to see exactly what is wrong with them. The reason assessments are done is to see what services are needed to meet the child's needs under the 2005 Act and identify the child's health and education needs. When the assessment of needs is completed, the assessment officer will write an assessment and if the child is deemed to have a disability, the assessment report will be given to a liaison officer. The liaison officer then uses the report to draw up a service statement with a list of services the HSE proposes to provide to meet the child's needs. The assessment officer can refer the matter to a relevant public body.

Numerous issues with the assessment of needs process have emerged, including poor access provision for assessment of special needs for school-aged children and using a diagnostic-led rather than a needs-led model. A 2020 report by the Ombudsman for Children, entitled *Unmet Needs*, examined the challenges faced by children in Ireland who require an assessment of needs. The ombudsman noted that the 2005 Act has been commenced in full for persons under the age of five but the assessment of special needs in the furtherance of a child's education plan has not. Indeed, the Minister of State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, noted that the percentage of assessments of needs required has increased from 25% in 2011 to 55% in 2019. The ombudsman said there was a lack of consistency across all public bodies.

People keep coming to my constituency office about this issue. A child coming in could have ADHD, bad hearing, physical needs, autism or anything else. This child is loved by the parents and all they are looking for is help. The thing they keep asking for is a good communication line between the Department of Education and the Department of Health. The child has to be assessed. I keep using that word. It is like everything else. To get into system and find out exactly what is wrong, you have to get assessed. I have seen parents going to credit unions or banks and getting loans to get the information they need for their child privately because at the end of the day people cannot move on until they are diagnosed. What is the plan going forward?

The Minister of State is good and I know she is trying her hardest. There has been a lot of

pressure in the last number of months because of children not being able to get assessed for school in September. It is very important that everybody works together on this. Not a day goes by in my constituency office that someone does not come in asking for help. I mentioned mainstream schools and kids wanting to go to school with their siblings. It is a matter of putting the system right. Do the Departments of Education and Health talk to each other, plan and see what is happening? I have seen some of those kids coming into my office. I have nothing but admiration for parents. I have never come across a parent who would give their child back but the system seems to have failed them. Recently, a school in Togher in County Louth was under severe pressure because of SNAs and teachers. The situation went on for 18 months. In fairness, the Department had a look at it, put its hands up and said the system was wrong and rectified it. The system is not perfect. I ask the Minister of State to ensure these teachers are properly trained. My daughter is an SNA and I am so proud of her. She comes home some days having been bitten and kicked and everything else and she has not one bad thing to say. Parents are looking for a bit of help. I trust the Minister of State will help us.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Provision for children with special educational needs is vitally important. These needs present themselves in a variety of different forms. There is also a range of needs, from those who have specific learning difficulties to those who are exceptionally able and need to be challenged in different ways. Thousands of people work on a daily basis with those who have these special educational needs and we should recognise and appreciate the importance of this work. In school settings we have special needs assistants, special education teachers and other resources as necessary. In addition to the school supports, there are specialists who are responsible for the identification of these needs.

Recently, I have heard a number of stories where short-sighted policy decisions left children going through our education system with their needs unmet. One example is the reduction in SNA provision back in 2011, during the education cutbacks. I heard recently from one parent, Jane Johnstone, about the major impact this had on her son who has complex needs. Once the SNA was removed from this boy's daily education, his progression in education stopped. This has resulted in an even greater cost to the State in the long run as he now turns 18. Jane also highlighted the constant battle for provisions and resources he has had to endure. Rather than putting in place long-term support plans, too many parents are left anxiously waiting each summer to discover whether their child will have the resources they need for the next school year, with funding only being decided in September. We must not underestimate the importance of the support given to those who need it most and must create long-term sustainable plans.

I understand the Department allocated extra resources on a temporary basis to schools to help bridge some deficits as a result of the Covid-19 policies. I do not think the full harsh reality of the lockdown policies' impact on education has been fully realised. Closing schools and banning children from even socialising has had serious consequences. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of students who went without vital special education supports for the best part of 18 months. The Government needs to ensure any extra temporary supports that were made available to schools are extended to help bridge the gaps that were created between 2020 and 2021.

The issue of allocations was raised with me by the principal of a school in Wexford. This school has 700 pupils on campus but a recent NCSE allocation gave it a rating of zero complex hours for the junior and senior schools. Previously, the senior school had 35 hours and the junior school 25. The SENO and the local disability network manager agree this was a mistake but the school cannot seem to get anyone to rectify the situation. The principal was told the Department of Education receives all relevant data from the local disability network manager and the

information was not passed on in a timely manner. The local disability network manager said they did not have accurate information to send the Department. Yet, they had accurate information about every other school in south County Wexford. The local disability network manager agrees that the rating is a mistake and needs fixing. The special education needs organiser said SENOs do not have any role in giving other information to the Department but they also agree that the zero complex needs rating is a mistake and needs fixing. A member of the Department of Education's special education section has stated that the school received a zero rating from the local disability network. He agreed that it seemed unusual that the two DEIS urban band 1 schools would have a zero complex needs rating. The principal asked him to input the correct number but the official said the computer would not let him do it. He said this was the only school in Ireland with this problem, out of 4,000, but he was not in a position to assist. There are 130 teachers set aside to give schools that appeal their allocation and he recommended that the school apply for an exceptional review. He said the NCSE would prioritise the review. The principal pointed out that the schools did not make any mistake but were being lumped with an exceptional review that will take an age to prepare for. He also suggested that the Department give the schools two teachers until the review was completed but he could not do that either. The official agrees that the zero rating is a mistake and needs fixing but he cannot fix it, even though he is in the Department of Education.

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In other words, the principal of a school was dealing with special education support teams and three officials have admitted a mistake was made, yet it seems nobody can sort it out. The school is now expected to go through the rigmarole of an appeal or review system, which involves a lot of work on its behalf, to fix a mistake not of its making. I hope the Minister of State can intervene in the matter. I have given her Department the full details with the names attached. This is the type of problem that should be possible to solve with the stroke of a pen rather than allowing it to drag on.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am sharing time with Deputy Devlin.

I have some examples similar to that raised by Deputy Verona Murphy relating to the intransigence of a system that is no longer fit to serve those it seeks to serve. I have spoken so often in this House about the silo mentality in this country when it comes to delivering public services, and nowhere does that do more damage than in the area of special and additional needs and special education. That is not to take away from the Minister of State's work or commitment or from that of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. Both of them are doing a super job, as are SNAs, teachers, principals and many of the existing National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, teams, but there is a lack of co-ordination, communication and a system whereby the Department of Education works with the HSE and NEPS has a direct line into the HSE. It causes so many unfair delays and so much more stress in what is an already stressful situation.

It was interesting yesterday, when we met representatives of the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, in the context of its pre-budget submission, that its key asks this year include a request for major investment in mental health support for pupils. That is from the coalface of education. One teacher told me at the briefing that, in some cases, pupils are picked up in junior infants and they could be in second class, four years later, before appropriate treatments are put in place. The mantra of so many services relates to early intervention, which could make a journey that may be difficult a lot less difficult, but four years could never qualify as early intervention. We need far greater investment in NEPS and its teams throughout the country in

order that there will be more of them and they will be better resourced to respond to needs as they arise, but that is only the start. That is only the Department of Education's side of it. It is when we get to the availability of therapists in all grades and of treatments through the HSE that the major problems begin.

I spoke earlier during parliamentary questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform about the need in the public service pay talks to identify where there are gaps in services because jobs cannot be filled. Additional needs and disabilities form one such area where we cannot fill vacancies for therapists, medical staff and educational staff, but we should be able to do that. Often, pay is not the only issue. Rather, it can be about how the organisation is run, the management procedures and how children are treated, rooted in a system that may be decades old, where processes and procedures seem to take precedence over persons. Procedures and form-filling can seem to be more important than the child and going through the process and the system seems to get more resources than the therapies and treatment of the child who needs them.

All the while, for every child there are parents who are trying their level best, under very stressful and difficult circumstances, to get the best for their child. At a time when I am feeling more and more inadequate as a public representative representing the views of my constituents dealing with many State services, dealing with disability services and trying to represent and speak for parents whose children have a disability or an additional need is what makes me most frustrated at the moment. That is in education, health and so many spaces. Computer says "No" means a person says "No"; it is not just a computer. Members of senior management in so many areas are not exposed to the reality of their decisions on the ground or to the way they take or communicate those decisions, but those communications and methods are making a bad situation worse.

We cannot continue to clap ourselves on the back for spending money or for having 12,000 SNAs where we once might have had 1,000 when the services those children are getting are disimproving, and we cannot continue to keep talking about it during statements in this House. We have to do something different and make a difference. At some stage, somebody is going to break down the silos and decide people are more important than processes and that children are more important than forms. There is a chance now for the Minister of State, and I am pretty sure the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is determined to try to do it, but we need urgency. There is no sense in us coming back to the House this time next year to have more statements on this, or in schools this time next year having plenty of enrolments but not places because nobody thought to plan four or five years ago for how many students would have additional needs.

All the time these macro, headline decisions are being taken, a child, a parent, an SNA and a school community are under the most inordinate stress. Will the Minister of State please lay out a plan that works, once and for all? Will she break down those silos and take on whoever needs to be taken on? Often, those who are blocking the system do not understand what they are doing or the impact it is having in homes. They do not see that if they just did their job properly, it could make an enormous difference to one child and one parent, and it could create a whole range of options in their lives after that.

Let us resolve that we will not make statements on this issue anymore. I have been here for a lot of statements on this during my 15 years in this House. Once and for all, let us blow up the system and give those parents and, most importantly, those children a chance.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to discuss and examine the supports available for people with special educational needs. As a society, it is critical we deliver an education system that is of high quality for all our children, where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach his or her full potential, and where every child with additional needs receives appropriate educational support based on his or her needs. Over the past 20 years, the system we are speaking about today was developed on a modest basis, and virtually all the Deputies who have spoken have made the point it is not fit for the purpose of the current day. While investment in the system is very welcome and necessary, it needs some sort of overhaul.

I agree with Deputy Calleary's remarks to the Minister of State. Special education is a priority for investment by the Government and I thank the Minister of State, along with her colleagues, the Minister for Education and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, for all their engagement and efforts to date. My constituency, Dún Laoghaire, has many exceptional service providers, such as the Carmona Services. People working in the sector go above and beyond to support people with special and additional needs and their families, which has to be acknowledged. This year, the Department of Education will spend more than €2 billion, or 25% of its budget, on providing additional teaching and care support for children with special educational needs, while last year's budget delivered significant funding for those with special educational needs. Over recent years, the number of special classes in mainstream schools has increased and stands at 2,148 for the school year 2021-22.

The pandemic has, however, resulted in challenges for children with special needs and their families. As we all know in this House, the online learning many of them were offered was not suitable for some of their needs. Some of them could not engage and some of the physical, in-person activities and classes did not resume. In fact, some services still have not fully resumed and that is of great concern to the children in particular and to their families. While some efforts have been made to support them, we need to do more and, as we exit Covid, ensure services get back to full tilt this September. Budget 2022 provided for the creation 287 additional special classes for the year 2022-23 and some 269 new special classes opened for September 2021, with a further 33 opening during the 2021-22 school year. The remaining classes must be expedited over the next couple of weeks for September of this year.

That said, some schools have informed me that the system is complicated and lengthy. It needs to be streamlined, mainly for the ASD units. I know the Minister of State is familiar with St. Mary's Boys National School in Booterstown. She will be aware that it tried to transform a local parish centre into an SEN unit. It should be remembered, however, that the principals are teachers primarily, not project managers. Greater support should be provided by the Department to allow them to focus on their school community and allow the project to work in tandem with that.

SNAs should follow the child as well, which is something we heard earlier. I am aware of a number of cases where a child's much-needed SNA joins him or her in primary school and follows the child through his or her education, by and large. Come post-primary level, however, the child is left in the wilderness unless the school he or she is going to has the additional resources of an SNA. Even at that, some schools share SNAs, so there is no dedicated person who knows the children intimately and knows how to deal with and support them and their educational needs.

The Minister of State will be aware of the work of the Parents, Family and Friends of Car-

mona Services in my constituency in Dún Laoghaire. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has engaged with its representatives in recent months, which is much appreciated. I know they are eager to interact and meet the Minister of State again on the issue of residential care within community healthcare organisation, CHO, 6.

As was said earlier about NEPS and SENOs, all the services that have developed over the last 20 years need to be reviewed, refined and tweaked to ensure children and their families feel the supports are there. The money going into these services is extremely welcome and necessary and it should continue but we also need to ensure it lands with those children who need it.

While much has obviously been done for special education - I commend the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, and her colleagues in this regard - we need to review and improve the processes for ASD and SEN units at all levels of education to ensure they are fit for purpose over the coming years.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: Our children have a constitutional right to an education. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, education must be accessible on an all-equal basis with others in the community in which people live. This right is being denied by a lack of appropriate school places. On page 96 of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to ensure that every child with a special educational need has an appropriate school place in line with his or her constitutional right.

We all saw the struggle of the Milne family from Glasnevin, who featured on “Prime Time” last month. When they were first on television in September 2019, the then leader of the Opposition, the current Taoiseach, raised the case in the Dáil. Three years later, the family have thankfully received a school place. This is not good enough. The Government should not have been shamed into acting. Not everyone is lucky enough to make it on to television; many must suffer on in silence.

A recent AsIAM survey revealed that at least 267 children do not have an appropriate school place for this September. There is no doubt that the real figure is much higher. The Department of Education knows the true number of children who require a place and has not taken the necessary action. We need forward planning, not a snail-paced reaction to a crisis that already exists.

The recent proposal that children with special educational needs be segregated and isolated from the school community in special education centres is absolutely unacceptable. I note that my colleague, Deputy Mitchell, asked for clarity on this. I would also appreciate if I could get some clarity on it.

Parents want their children to be part of a school community in a local school. Gone are the days of hiding away our vulnerable citizens, who need our support, behind closed doors. President Higgins, speaking in County Kildare on Tuesday, referred to people being allowed to participate fully in society with dignity. He also spoke of resisting phrases like, “I am putting you in here”. He said that people are not parcels or objects. People who need the extra support of special education and their families deserve dignity. It is important that the Government remembers this.

I want to share with the House two emails I received recently, the first of which is from a grandmother. It states:

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Can you please help me to get my grandson, Scott, into a school that helps children with autism in Newbridge, County Kildare? Scott is non-verbal and the longer we leave him out of the system it will become harder to teach him the basics of everything. It is terrible that a grandmother has to write to a TD for help when a child's basic entitlements are not there for him. His parents are hitting a brick wall trying to fight to get their son a place in a school that helps children with autism. Scott will be five in December and he is a beautiful child.

The other e-mail I received is from a special needs assistant and reads as follows:

Yesterday, I checked the NCSE website for the SNA allocations for 2022-2023 and realised that my job was gone. In total, we have lost two SNAs from our autism unit. We have bills and mortgages and we should not be subjected to this treatment. It does not happen like this in any other profession. We have families that we need to feed and we call for your urgent help and support in this matter. It is an extremely stressful and unfair system. [Where is the respect for SNAs? That says an awful lot to me.] The most vulnerable children in our school are the ones who will ultimately suffer. This is a huge blow to our special education department here with the knock-on effect of going across the board to all our SEN students.

Those emails I received are a damning indictment of this Government and previous Governments. The system is failing our SNAs and students. Now, the Government is proposing this regressive plan. It is absolutely shameful. This Government needs to get off the stage before it does any more damage if this is how it views this area. I am asking the Minister of State - in fact, I am pleading with her at this point - to approach this in a proper fashion and do something to help these people.

Deputy Francis Noel Duffy: I thank the Minister of State for her opening statement and wholeheartedly support her aspirations in her role. I want to be positive in my discourse, and I hope I am, as the area of special educational needs is very important to many parents, guardians, siblings, providers and, most importantly, the persons who should be afforded an education to allow them to evolve as human beings. I am not here to hold the Minister of State to account. Instead, I would like to relate to her some of my experiences over my time as a public representative. I am not an expert, but there appears to be something missing. From what I have seen, the State is failing and has failed many of these people and their families, at least in my constituency.

We are a wealthy, first world country but we are not meeting our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education. In my constituency of Dublin South-West, there are 21 primary schools with one or two ASD units, which accommodate six students per class, and only three post-primary schools with ASD classes. The question worried parents ask is where are these children expected to go once they complete their primary education.

Many of these families are not afforded the opportunity to pick a school wherever they like or in their catchment area. It is, therefore, already profoundly difficult to find a place for their children. I believe the Department needs to prioritise a solution and process that ensures every single child in this State will be provided with an opportunity to vindicate his or her right to an education. We should not and cannot have our most vulnerable children in the State denied their right to education. We should not put the onus on families to provide home tuition simply because finding a place for their child in school has become impossible.

I understand the Minister of State intends to invoke section 37A to ensure mainstream schools provide the necessary ASD classes. Families and schools would be extremely grateful if the Department could provide clarity on how these schools will be supported with the funding required for facilities, equipment, staffing and other resources they need to set up these classes appropriately. Schools are not maliciously resisting the idea of ASD units. Rather, it is a matter of not having the capacity or support to provide the classes. From what I have seen in some places, these schools are on their knees financially. There are schools in my constituency that have buildings that are close to collapsing. They are unable to secure grants for retrofitting because the buildings are too unstable. Therefore, to ask these schools to put their already limited funding towards an ASD class and staffing instead of repairing the roof to ensure the safety of the students is unrealistic.

I recently met with SparkAbility and have been in contact with other groups such as Tallaght Parents Autism Support Group. It is fantastic organisations that provides valuable services to people with disabilities, mainly autism. It offers support to families and give people with autism the opportunity to grow, flourish and be connected with their community. It is providing a service the State should be providing, and without State remuneration. SparkAbility's funding relies solely on nominal fees and it has no permanent venue. We must ensure organisations of this nature are given security and stability to continue these services to ensure that no child or person with disabilities falls through the cracks. I would be grateful if the Minister of State could afford some of her time to meet with the members of the SparkAbility team and hear their proposals. The organisation has a fantastic model of care that could be used nationwide to help families and children. I will write to the Minister of State with its details.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive opening statement. However, as is often the case with opening statements from Ministers, there is no context given. I welcome her commitment, her bona fides and the positive steps she has outlined, but to understand that one must put it in context. The Minister of State pointed out that it is their right under the Constitution, and nobody in the Chamber disagrees with that, but I call that weak in the extreme. There is an obligation under Article 42 of the Constitution, as the Minister of State knows better than me, regarding primary school education. It does not depend on ability. Unfortunately, in the O'Donoghue case back in the 1990s, the Government sought to argue that some children were not educable. We have moved a long way from that, but that is the background here. I will return to that in respect of the July provision.

We are talking about rights here. The context of this discussion is not proactive. It is not because the National Council for Special Education came forward and said it has a crisis and will have no places in September; it is a result of committed organisations coming forward and the media telling us that there is a problem. We had a response to that through tweets on Twitter, which is not an acceptable way to convey policy. That is my view. I do not believe it is the right way to do things. Policy should be conveyed on the floor of the Dáil. There were tweets going out about this saying that the legislation might be changed, that the legislation in place might be implemented and that we might set up special education centres. Quite predictably, it caused an outcry. Gareth Noble, a solicitor who specialises in children's rights, pointed out that education is not a luxury or privilege, but a constitutionally enshrined privilege. We know that. Áine Hyland, Emeritus Professor of Education at University College Cork, UCC, says the shortage of special places at second level, in particular, is entirely predictable. AsIAM pointed out its shock at the proposal regarding special education centres. More particularly, Adam Harris pointed out that a fundamental change in culture is needed, saying that a deeply-rooted,

charity-based approach is the problem. It is charity-based, not Constitution-based.

I would have a great deal more faith in the system if this was a proactive discussion brought forward by the Government in an open and accountable way to admit that there is a major problem, notwithstanding the amount of money at more than €2 billion, which I welcome, and the eligibility for the July programme, to which I will return. At the very least I would expect that when a speech like that is made, it is placed in context so we understand it. Ultimately, we are talking about a finite number of children. Overall, there are almost 12,700 pupils - a finite number, and approximately 1% of the overall population - enrolled in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools. The Minister of State also told us there are now 129 special schools with 8,000 pupils, which is 0.8% of the total population. We have finite numbers and finite challenges. I do not like to call it a problem. All our effort should be going to help those with disability in the first instance, then national schools and, last of all, third level, notwithstanding that I fully recognise the important role of third level education. However, I would put it in at the other end.

We have this finite number and this finite challenge, yet this is a reactive discussion where the Minister of State is obliged to come here and say she did this, this and this. All the while there are 250 to 270 children with no place in the autumn. That is completely unacceptable if we are taking our obligations under the Constitution seriously. I welcome the fact that the Minister of State has appointed a new CEO, but there is no analysis of what led to this problem. What led to her appointing a new CEO? What analysis has been done, without blaming anybody? What happened that the person could not predict and bring it to the Minister of State's attention so we could have a proactive discussion and examine it? That has not happened.

Then the changes proposed were *ad hoc* and positively dangerous and unacceptable, particularly in the context of saying there will be special education centres and so forth. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission responded with immediate concerns about the plan. It pointed out that young people have a right to education and for that education to be an appropriate education which meets their needs under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. Imagine having to say this. We signed up to the convention and finally ratified it in 2018. We have not signed up to the protocol yet. Various organisations on the ground have had to come forward and point out that they are truly shocked. Adam Harris of AsIAM is shocked by the plan, which will mean the segregation of autistic children from their peers. He estimates there are at least 267 children across the country who have been unable to find a suitable place for September. When I looked at the Minister of State's speech, and when it is near the end of a debate there is a chance to read the speech, I said to the staff who are working with me: "This is such a positive contribution, why is there a problem?" There is more than €2 billion available, so what is going on here? Clearly, what we are saying to the 267 children is that we have done brilliantly for everybody else and that their time will come at some stage in the future.

I could read out what is the actual effect on somebody whose time is to come in the future, but it is too upsetting to read out what somebody writes to Deputies, telling them about their child who is doubly incontinent, has hearing and speech difficulties and who is absolutely reliant on education and the July provision, or the summer provision as it is now called. I do not wish to do it. That is the level Deputies are at in our offices, and then we match that with the Minister of State's lovely speech about all the positive things. One asks if one will be negative again today. What is the problem here? I am of the view that the problem lies in a lack of openness and accountability regarding the procedure that is there, what happened, how we can

change it and how we can improve it.

I will examine summer provision in my last two and a half minutes. I thank the Minister of State for giving me the review. She may recall that I raised this as a Topical Issue because parents are at their wits' end. Again, summer provision, which was previously the July provision, was consequent on the High Court case of O'Donoghue v. the Department of Education in the 1990s. There were minor changes in 2001. It took up to 2001. I was not able to establish precisely when the case started but it was throughout the 1990s. That family was put to the pin of their collar and finally a limited July provision was introduced specifically in respect of the children with special needs who are utterly dependent on such provision. I raised this as a Topical Issue matter and I have received the review. The Minister might clarify if the comprehensive review that was to be done in 2019 is still under way or if it metamorphosed into this review, the inspectorate report, which is anything but analytical? It talks about "the majority of parents" and "some parents" and states that the July provision is "very good". There is no analysis whatsoever of the significant number of families who cannot avail of the July provision because the vast amount of schools are not participating. I will not embarrass a school in Galway, which is a special school, that is not doing the July provision. I have a letter from a woman at her wits' end. The school is renting the gym and other facilities for the summer because, according to it, the school needs money. It is clear that it is not being funded enough for the July provision.

In my last minute, I urge the Minister of State to have a complete, comprehensive, factual analysis of the summer provision. I welcome that it changed in the sense of widening out the eligibility, however, to my knowledge, that is to the detriment of the very children and families it was set up to support. The numbers are tiny. I do not have the time to go into them. I welcome the changes the Minister of State made in regard to special needs teachers and the advantages for them if they take part, but there is a far more fundamental problem, that this is voluntary and only a tiny percentage of those with special needs can avail of it and when they do, they only get a week or two. There is absolutely no clarification on home provision. It is being put in as a saviour, but it is not suitable at all. People are resorting to respite services, which are not there, to get a break. They have begged the special school in Galway. The parents said they would run it themselves in order to get a break.

I welcome the discussion. I hope that at some stage we would have a proactive discussion in which we analyse the problem, and the Minister of State would come back and tell us the solutions within a very specific period and not tell us that at some stage in the future this piece of an Act will finally be implemented or another Act will be changed. There is a constitutional obligation on the Minister of State and the Government to provide education.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the 24 Deputies who spoke in the debate over the past two and a half hours. They have been very frank, honest, articulate and comprehensive in their contributions on special education. I very much welcome that because it gives me an opportunity to hear from individual Deputies around the country, who hear from their own particular constituents and from advocacy groups about the particular issues they want brought to the attention of the Dáil and to my attention.

It was mentioned here today that empathy and compassion are not enough. I agree with that, but they are also important because they are a motivating factor for somebody to make a difference in this area. It was also mentioned today that financial support is not necessarily important. In fact, the combination of empathy and compassion and financial support are the two things that are absolutely required to drive change. I am intent, as the very first Minister

of State with responsibility for special education, on driving that change in a way that has not been done before.

I can say categorically that any of the frustrations that the Deputies in this Chamber may have, I have ten times over, since I am acutely aware on a daily basis of the challenges that we face in this particular area. I meet with parents, families and advocacy groups. I set up the consultative forum on special education so that we could collaborate and have the joined-up thinking that has been spoken about at length here today.

So many issues have been raised that it would be impossible for me to go through every single one in the time available, but I will follow up with the Deputies. We had a Topical Issue debate on the summer provision. Deputy Ellis and Deputy Duffy are still present. There have been many contributions by other Deputies, all of which have merit and value.

The reason I outline the amount of financial support that we have given in the first instance is to show the progress that we have made over the years. That is not to say that it will ever be enough, nor will it solve everything. Practical forward planning is probably the biggest message to come out of today's debate. John Kearney is the new CEO of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. He is seized with the challenge to concentrate primarily on operational issues within the National Council for Special Education. Much as Members will all hold me to account in my role as Minister of State with responsibility for special education, my role is to hold the NCSE and the Department to account in terms of providing supports for children with special educational needs. I outlined earlier the fact that we have grown the number of special classes by 450% in 11 years. We will be at 2,463 special classes by the end of this year, and we were only at 548 in 2011. It is important to state that because it demonstrates the progress that we are making.

In my opening statement I set out very clearly the steps that I have taken in the past two years since I came into this role. I know John Kearney, the new CEO, is also looking at areas that need improvement, in particular the forecasting model which Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about earlier. The Department has 314 school planning areas, which use geographic information systems from a range of sources that include child benefit and our own school enrolment database. What the NCSE does then is it takes the school enrolment data information and builds it into the knowledge and understanding of the incidence of different categories of special education. As we know, the incidence of autism has grown exponentially, not just in Ireland but internationally. The system, which is what we call it, is trying to anticipate the demand and capacity but the desire and intent are not sufficient. We must have it set out in a database that is based on evidence. That is what we are doing. By virtue of the fact that we have the geographic information systems, which are being shared with the planning and building unit, but for the first time only in recent years, we can see through spatial analysis where the capacity is needed and where we can meet the demand in the future.

I have had repeated assurances from the National Council for Special Education that come September, no child outside of Dublin will be without a special class or a special school place come. I have asked that the SENOs would communicate that to the respective parents who may yet be waiting on an individual class. There are some 130 children in Dublin whom I may not be able to provide with a special class or a special place for this September, but we are doing everything we can to ensure that does not happen again. We have looked at every single avenue. We are already at the second stage of the process to deal with section 37A. As I mentioned, I am also actively looking at section 67 of the Education Act, which provides power to the NCSE

to designate a school place for an individual child in a special class or in a special school. That will be critical.

In terms of the UN convention, as a lawyer myself, I do not need another lawyer or advocacy group to tell me about the rights that are enshrined in the Constitution. It is crystal clear that education is a right and our education system has to be rights-based and constitutionally based. I am determined to ensure that we get an appropriate placement for every child at the earliest possible opportunity.

There was a lot of discussion about SNAs as well. We will have 19,169 SNAs by the end of this year. Deputy Martin Kenny brought that up. Clearly, SNAs are of major assistance to children with additional needs in schools. They quite simply could not function without them. The first thing we wanted to do, following the NCSE policy advice, was to set up a training programme for them, which we did in UCD, where 3,500 SNAs availed of that education in five different modules over ten months. We hope more will be able to do so in future. The next step will be to look at accreditation but training was the first thing that needed to be done. SNAs play a very serious role in what they do on a daily basis. The Department is clearly very much aware of that as well.

Summer provision was mentioned. We have put aside €40 million this year for that. I hope this provision will also help children coming from Ukraine who may be able to avail of it for the very first time. Inclusion programmes are in place at primary and post-primary levels. It is important to stress that all 4,000 schools were eligible to apply for summer provision. We provided extra pay and managed to attract graduate teachers, younger teachers and student teachers to supply the summer provision where staff may not have been available in a particular school. Last year, we had approximately 38,000 children. We expect about 48,000 children to participate this year. That is again building on the Covid supports we put in place two years ago. We had the supplementary programme and the Covid learning and support scheme of €52.6 million because we want to make sure that children with additional needs, in particular, do not regress any further than they may have, which they probably did, when all the schools were closed.

I heard Members use some words such as “intransigence”, “insecurity” and “frustration”. I know those words. I hear them every day and I feel them a lot, but we are making progress. In the past two years in this role, which was never in place before, we have already made major changes. We can do more in the future. The House is aware of my commitment to this area. We have many other good things we will do in the future. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to go over time on this issue, which I appreciate. I again thank the Deputies for all their contributions.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Garda Síochána (Amendment) Bill 2022 without amendment.

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 37A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Denis Naughten and Michael Fitzmaurice - to discuss flood alleviation works at Lough Funshinagh, County Roscommon; (2) Deputy Bernard Durkan - to discuss the retention of a teacher at Kilshanroe school and Maynooth education campus, County Kildare; (3) Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss the refusal of consent for operation of a childcare facility in an empty classroom at Clooney National School, County Clare; (4) Deputy Darren O'Rourke - to discuss water infrastructure deficits in Ratoath, County Meath, following six outages to date this year; (5) Deputy Dessie Ellis - to discuss the need to develop the site at the former shopping centre in Ballymun; and (6) Deputy Chris Andrews - to discuss plans to regenerate social housing and flat complexes in inner city Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Naughten and Fitzmaurice, O'Rourke, Ellis and Andrews have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Flood Risk Management

Deputy Denis Naughten: I will raise a point of order before I speak to this. I will place on the record my very strong objection to the removal of three of the six minutes allocated to me for this vitally important debate, which was scheduled to be taken on 1 June. As I tried to facilitate the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy O'Donovan, in being present for the debate, my opportunity to put the case forward on behalf of the local community has been significantly curtailed. I want the record to show that.

I am seeking the establishment of a co-ordinated cross-government, cross-departmental and cross-agency task force as a matter of urgency to address emergency climate adaptation measures to protect homes. The first item on the agenda of this new task force should be the authorisation of flood alleviation works at Lough Funshinagh in County Roscommon as a case study. The reason the Lough Funshinagh works should be used as a case study is that the legal barriers which have been highlighted through two court injunctions have very serious implications for many communities throughout this country. These are communities that will sadly, over the coming years, find themselves in a similar situation to that of the community in Bal-lagh, where its very survival is threatened by our changing climate.

It is questionable whether Lough Funshinagh should have been designated as a turlough under the EU habitats directive. What is in no doubt today, however, is that the lake is not being principally filled by subterranean waters, a key requirement in defining a turlough, and is instead being exclusively filled by surface waters from rainfall, which is falling far more intensively, leading to an accumulation in Lough Funshinagh far quicker than has been the case historically. Therefore, this task force must consider how the EU habitats designation can be repealed.

These legal challenges have also brought into serious question the transposition of EU law and its implications for actions by a council to carry out emergency works under the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the Local Authority (Works) Act 1949 to protect families and homes. The task force must set out how EU environmental laws are expressed in our national laws, and draft amendments to the present Acts of the Oireachtas to allow county councils to take emergency actions to save homes from being permanently flooded.

The work programme of this task force is clearly set out in a letter sent to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, dated 19 May, by the cathaoirleach and chief executive of Roscommon County Council with five very clear asks. We need action on these now, not just for the families in County Roscommon but for other families who will face similar climate-related crises in the years to come.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is my understanding that Roscommon County Council has issued a letter to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, asking him to take charge of all this, including appropriate assessments, environmental impact assessments, EIAs, and the screening out of works the courts sometimes did not recognise. It is also my understanding that the Minister of State is in the process of putting different agencies together. I want that confirmed. We need to know this.

While we have to do EIAs, screenings out, appropriate assessments and all of this for all these directives that are causing major problems, there is an opportunity and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, needs to get involved. This turlough is dead as a special area of conservation. It can be taken out of designation. The NPWS can and should do that. We are four months away from heavyish rain again. The longer we do not get it, the better for those people in County Roscommon, but there are pumps to try to alleviate houses from being flooded. We need a commitment from the Minister of State that the pumps, their fuelling and the personnel will be put in place because, while we are doing all the screening out and all the different appropriate assessments that have to be done to get this pipe up and running once more, we need to make sure those people are safe. They have gone through torture and we need to solve this.

As the Deputy said, it is not alone Lough Funshinagh. There is also a problem on the Connemara-Mayo border. This will pop up in different places and we need to solve it. Regardless of whether we need legislation, the EU directive cannot destroy the people in County Roscommon.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputies for raising a very important issue. I have had engagement with people who live in Lough Funshinagh and the surrounding areas. I know the stress and strain that is on all the families in that local community. I am taking this Topical Issue matter on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, OPW, Deputy O'Donovan. He sends his apologies that due to prior engagements he is unfortunately not able to be here today.

The Minister of State is very aware of the significant impact, distress and anxiety that flooding, and the continued threat of flooding, has on communities. His thoughts and sympathies are with all in the area that are being affected by the flooding and the risk of flooding from Lough Funshinagh. He would like to pay tribute to the community for its resilience and strength. I assure all those affected that the Government is fully committed to finding an effective and sus-

tainable solution to address flooding on Lough Funshinagh.

As Deputies will be aware, Roscommon County Council is leading the response to the situation at Lough Funshinagh and is being supported by relevant Departments and agencies. In May 2021, the CEO of Roscommon County Council wrote to the OPW highlighting that he had exercised his powers under the Local Government (Works) Act 1949 to undertake urgent works at Lough Funshinagh, which involved a 3 km overflow pipe to the River Shannon. The decision to proceed with the works was based on an analysis that Roscommon County Council had commissioned, which indicated Lough Funshinagh was not draining as expected. As a turlough, the lake is expected to, and I understand typically did, fill and drain on a cyclical and seasonal basis. Since 2016, the lake has not been draining in a normal manner and was 2 m to 2.5 m higher in 2021 than it was in 2017. By early 2021, the lake levels posed a significant threat to eight properties, eight businesses and some 300 ha of farmland.

The OPW agreed to a request from the CEO of Roscommon County Council for funding and for the Office of Public Works to act as the contractor for these urgent works on the clear understanding that the council was responsible for meeting all of the regulatory and environmental requirements required for the completion of these works.

A number of legal challenges submitted by Friends of the Irish Environment halted the works in 2021. The High Court order of 23 March 2022 that concluded the legal challenge prohibited the use of the pipeline and associated manholes - some 60% of the total works - already constructed on site. The order confirmed that the pipeline laid could remain *in situ* and that the council was to complete remediation, or reinstatement, works at the site. These remediation works have commenced and will take some three months to complete.

Roscommon County Council's cathaoirleach and CEO have written to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, setting out a range of policy and legislative issues that they believe need to be addressed before the council can proceed with any further works at Lough Funshinagh. As these are matters for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Minister of State has referred these policy and legislative concerns to him for his consideration.

As the Deputies know, the Minister of State and his officials have met Roscommon County Council's management and its elected members and has assured them of the OPW's continued support. A further meeting between the OPW and Roscommon County Council is due to take place next week.

Deputy Denis Naughten: The Minister of State referenced two Departments, agencies and the local authority. Unless we establish a multi-agency task force and use the families around Lough Funshinagh as test cases, we will be setting in stone that the only climate mitigation measure that can be taken in any part of the country and has an impact of any kind on a European designated site is to have families relocated and the existing homes demolished. This has major implications across the country and has been highlighted in the correspondence from Roscommon County Council to the Department and the Minister.

In the midst of housing and climate emergencies, such a singular approach to climate adaptation compounds the already monumental challenge that this country faces. The State cannot turn its back on the families involved and must devise a co-ordinated national strategy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We welcome the Minister of State's statement that he fully

supports us and that he will try to resolve this situation. That said, while someone can support a team, winning the All-Ireland is a different matter. These people need a solution. They need dates and times as well as a clear pathway forward. First, they need a pathway for next winter because the pumps and so on will have to go, given that there will not be the various regulatory elements. Second, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, or the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke's planning section therein, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the OPW need to work together on finding a solution quickly, not only for Lough Funshinagh, but for all parts of the country. The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media should be able to take Lough Funshinagh out of designation under Articles 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4 of the habitats directive in order to clear the path and bring that solution forward.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputies for raising those specific points, which I will bring to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, and our colleagues in government. Be it a multi-agency task force or a co-ordinated national strategy, I will take the Deputies' suggestions on board.

This Topical Issue matter was directed to the OPW and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan's office. As I outlined, the OPW is effectively the contractor that physically gets the work done after other agencies, for example, local authorities or Departments, agree on how best to do so. We need everyone to work together. I assure the Deputies that we are working across the Government to find a solution for the people of Lough Funshinagh.

The OPW continues to work with Roscommon County Council, and is available to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in assisting the council in any way it can to find a viable solution to managing the flood risk at Lough Funshinagh. When the Minister of State last visited Roscommon, he called to the home of one of the affected residents to reassure him on behalf of the community of the OPW's continued support for the council. We hope that we will be able to find an effective resolution to the ongoing issues at Lough Funshinagh. I am mindful of the Deputies' comments that this situation has wider implications than for that community alone, which is why we are so determined to find a long-term solution. We will continue working on that across the Government.

Regeneration Projects

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The old iconic Ballymun shopping centre was the central hub of a thriving and vibrant community. It provided employment and was an important meeting and social gathering place for locals. Its redevelopment was central to the 1997 Ballymun regeneration plan. However, it became an eyesore and a monument to the largest failure of the regeneration project.

The site's redevelopment was beset by problems and delays from the start. It was to be the site of a new town centre and construction was to begin in 2005, but permission for the development was not awarded until 2009. Work was then scheduled to begin in 2010. Treasury Holdings presented a plan for the shopping centre, under which the new complex was to be the main shopping facility for the suburb's 18,000 residents. The plan was for the delivery of a development costing €800 million, which was to include an 11-screen cinema, a bowling alley, a public library, a crèche, restaurants and more than 70 shops, offices and apartments.

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This regeneration project was never completed due to a lack of investment. In 2013, Ballymun Regeneration Limited, BRL, was wound down. Many community facilities planned for the area were never built and the shopping centre fell into NAMA occupation. The majority of its retailers were gone by 2014. It suffered a major blow when it lost Tesco, its most important tenant. The shopping centre's derelict and dilapidated outward appearance was disheartening to the locals and an unpleasant site for those passing through Ballymun.

In 2016, Dublin City Council acquired the centre from NAMA under a compulsory purchase order. However, it was not until 2020 that demolition of the former shopping centre finally began. The demolition work was completed late last year.

In accordance with the 2017 Ballymun local area development plan, Dublin City Council has proposed to divide the shopping centre into three separate sites. The council is now the major stakeholder and has a great opportunity to revitalise the centre of Ballymun. Any development on this site should have at its core the idea that the site is crucial to making the area the heart of the community in Ballymun once again. There are plans to incorporate a MetroLink station on the site, but the MetroLink is not expected to be completed until 2034. We hope that that does not change. In the meantime, there are proposals for temporary use, with certain amenities, such as food and craft stalls, at the MetroLink site.

Regarding the other sections of the site, it is proposed to deliver a mix of residential and commercial use in accordance with the local area plan, LAP. It is expected that this will include amenities such as a public house, a children's play area, a crèche, a gym, a café, shops and so on.

The original social regeneration fund set up by BRL to address community needs amounted to €3.4 million per year. Year on year, however, that amount reduced. It is now just €1.7 million and will be provided by Dublin City Council. We need the Minister of State's intervention, as this reduction in funding is not sustainable. The fund needs to be restored to its previous level. Otherwise, we will have a collapse in essential community projects.

I am concerned that the site will be left vacant for years. Its development needs to start urgently. The Government needs to be proactive and ensure that the site, which has so much potential, is not left idle, as it was for many years. This is an important and visible site on the Ballymun Road up to the M50. People drive by it. I am sure the Minister of State is well aware of it.

5 o'clock

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Ellis for raising this important matter. While the redevelopment of Ballymun Shopping Centre is a matter for Dublin City Council, I welcome the opportunity to provide the Deputy with an update. The former shopping centre site is an eight-acre main street one, the development potential of which was reviewed as part of the Ballymun local area plan 2017. The site has been identified for mixed retail and residential use development in the local area plan. The front portion of the site will be affected by the metro north project and Dublin City Council's housing department and local area office intend to engage with the local area councillors to develop the best development strategy possible for the site, having regard to the proposed metro situation and the economic climate.

As the Deputy is aware, the Ballymun regeneration project has delivered substantial im-

provements throughout the area. With specific reference to the Ballymun Shopping Centre, I am advised that according to the Ballymun local area plan 2017, Dublin City Council has proposed dividing the land into two sites; site 1A and site 1B. The plans envisage two blocks that would contain 300 residential units facing Sillogue Road on site 1B, while site 1A would see the development of 41,000 sq. m commercial and mixed use buildings, in two blocks, that would face the main street. Dublin City Council has advised that the demolition of the former shopping centre is complete and it is exploring the optimum use for this site. The site is being used to facilitate temporary commercial activities. For example, a funfair was on-site for the May bank holiday weekend.

As the Deputy knows, the Ballymun regeneration programme spanned several years, from 1999 to 2016, and the overall programme is estimated to have expended €972 million. Funding of over €775 million was provided via my Department to 24 projects that were completed. The Ballymun programme represents the largest regeneration initiative ever undertaken in the State. The State's investment resulted in almost 2,000 new replacement homes being constructed for the former residents of the original flat blocks and an additional 1,350 homes were provided via private sector investment. In recent years, regeneration activity has focused on improving the area's environmental performance with various green initiatives and new parks and playing pitches.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister of State says it is up to Dublin City Council and it is the owner but there is also an onus on the Department. We are talking about housing, apartments, building and looking for projects and this is a prime site on the Ballymun Road on the way to Dublin Airport. It is situated in a good spot to access the city and the airport and it is in a good position but it needs a push from the Department and it needs funding to be made available, as was made available under the regeneration carried out by Ballymun Regeneration Limited. This was the heart of Ballymun and I grew up around the area. I know what it is like and I know what it was like when we used to go into the shopping centre. There was a great atmosphere and mixing of the people in the area, which was fantastic. We want to see a village-style effect there. We have the metro coming, which will enhance the area and it will be a vital stop for people in Ballymun and the surrounding areas. It is close to the M50 and we know that further up, in Northwood, the metro will be anchored with its depot, from where it will be built. This area is being massively built up all along the Ballymun Road, on the Northwood side and on the Ballymun side at the shopping centre. As far as I know, my comrade, Deputy McAuliffe, has said the Taoiseach made a commitment to visit Ballymun. I am hoping he will fulfil that commitment because I would like to see him there and to show him the shopping centre and the damage that was done in losing it. It was vital to the community and I would like to press the urgency of this on him.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Ellis again for raising this matter. It is a matter for Dublin City Council, its members and the public to engage in the public consultation for the development of this site. Deputy McAuliffe, who is beside me, advises that the Taoiseach will be visiting on 11 July and I know from our work in the Department that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is familiar with the site and has visited it before.

On regeneration, the Department has record funding of over €2 billion available for urban regeneration and development in one funding stream in which Dublin City Council has prioritised certain projects to go through the application process. This year another call will come through the Department for that funding stream. We are willing to work with the local Depu-

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ties, the county councillors and the local authority to give them any support we can to redevelop the site. These are competitive calls and funding streams that go through the Department and are assessed. The money is there and record levels of funding have been provided. We have committed €1.3 billion already in the last call and we committed €300 million in the call before that. That might be a mechanism the local authority will look at. I am sure that offices higher than mine are on their way to view the site and I look forward to hearing back on that.

Water Services

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, which is of deep concern to residents in Ratoath, as the Minister of State might imagine. There are regular outages there; we had in the region of six significant outages this year and many more instances of low pressure and everything that goes with that in the return, dirty water and the service being unavailable for a period of time. Ratoath is a big and growing community with in the region of 10,000 to 12,000 people living there and with 18,000 people in the wider catchment area who are affected by these outages when they happen. The latest outage was on the bank holiday weekend and in the last 24 hours residents in a number of housing estates were reporting outages and a lack of supply and pressure. I remember that on the hottest day of the year last year there was an outage for the whole day.

The infrastructure is crumbling and creaking, which is acknowledged and not in dispute. There is a plan in place, which is welcome, for investment in the Windmill Hill reservoir and trunk water main. I would like to get an update from the Minister of State on that. My understanding is that works will not commence before the end of the year and that it will be quarter four of 2024 before they will be completed. The Minister of State knows that is a long time away with the current rate of in the region of one outage per month. The impact of these outages is significant. It is a densely populated area with a young and growing population. It has many families with small children and many people with disabilities, including children. It also has restaurants, businesses and venues, all of which are impacted when these outages happen. I ask the Minister of State to give us an update and I want to know if there is any way that works can be fast-tracked. I understand that there are statutory procedures for all of this but what are the pinch points and is there any way the works can be fast-tracked or sped up? What options are being explored in that regard?

At this rate it looks like there could be 30 more outages before these works are completed, based on past performance. We hope this work can be fast-tracked but we need to prepare for that scenario. If that is the case, there needs to be an improvement in communications. The nature of the communications is not comprehensive, detailed or responsive enough. It needs to happen in real-time, it needs to be immediate and it needs to be more than a tweet or an email to local county councillors. I had to argue to be included on those notices. In addition to that, there needs to be contingency. This is a recognised problem. Can we get tankers on site? Can we have rapid response and bespoke solutions for a list of vulnerable customers who would be contacted and supported? That is the type of response we need.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and allowing me the opportunity to outline the position in relation to Irish Water's responsibility on this matter. The Water Services Acts 2007-2017 set out the arrangements in place for the delivery of water and waste water services by Irish Water, and for the scrutiny and oversight provisions that apply in respect

of these arrangements. As the Deputy will understand, the provision of facilities in Meath is a matter for Irish Water in the first instance. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Irish Water takes a strategic nationwide approach to asset planning and investment, and to meeting customer requirements. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects and programmes is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

My Department has made inquiries with Irish Water on the issue mentioned by the Deputy, and I am informed as follows. Irish Water is progressing plans to increase the storage capacity at Windmill Hill reservoir and replace the existing water main between the reservoir and Ratoath, improving security of supply for residents and businesses in Ratoath and Ashbourne. Irish Water, working in partnership with Meath County Council, is replacing more than 7 km of problematic, old water mains in Ratoath that were prone to frequent bursts and caused water supply disruptions for customers in Ratoath and Ashbourne. The old water mains are being replaced by high density polyethylene plastic pipes which will address low water pressure, particularly in Ratoath, which is encountered during periods of peak demand, and will enable long-term growth in Ratoath and Ashbourne

Irish Water plans to construct an additional storage reservoir at Windmill Hill. This additional infrastructure will mitigate the impact of bursts in the existing water main that supplies Windmill Hill reservoir from Staleen water treatment plant, which is located between Donore and Duleek. Irish Water also proposes to improve the energy efficiency and reduce the carbon footprint of the reservoir by installing 212 solar panels to generate clean, renewable electricity. This investment will benefit the local community by improving the performance of the plant and making it more resilient in the event of power outages.

I understand Irish Water has submitted a planning application to Meath County Council for the proposed reservoir and is progressing the procurement process for the construction of the new reservoir and water main. The Government is aware that significant and sustained investment is needed to ensure the continued operation, upgrade and repair of the country's water and waste water infrastructure and to support economic growth in the years to come. In this regard, as part of budget 2022, my Department has secured funding of over €1.5 billion to support water services nationally, including €1.459 billion in respect of domestic services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements to our public water and waste water services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I will leave the following with the Minister of State. He did not come back to me on the opportunity, if any, to speed these things up and move more quickly. To bring that Q4 of 2024 back to mid 2024 or late 2023 would make a significant difference. I made points on the contingency, the response, the supports for vulnerable customers and users and the quality of the communications.

I will situate the frustration for residents of Ratoath in the context of it being an area identified for significant residential development. There is an strategic housing development, SHD, application in for 452 units that is being considered. There is a local information housing activation fund, LIHAF, strip. I will leave that with the Minister of State as well. Significant taxpayers' money was put into a LIHAF road that the units have not been developed on. The road is not open in Ratoath but there is planning there for in excess of 300 units. That is a significant

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development and there is deep concern. We want to see units developed and we are in the middle of the housing crisis, but there is concern that our infrastructure is not fit at the minute and we face the prospect of units on top of an already creaking infrastructure. It is a sequencing matter and lends to the argument for prioritisation and that the works be expedited for delivery of that water infrastructure to facilitate the residential developments in a timely fashion, so that residents are not added to the list of people frustrated to be left without water.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy again for raising this important issue and outlining the significant growth that has taken place in Ratoath. I will follow up with Irish Water on the contingency issue, which can be frustrating for citizens and residents when there is an outage, in terms of the mitigation measures put in place for that period, as well as in terms of communications. It is active on social media but not everyone is on social media and, especially in rural areas, it can be difficult for citizens to have that access. I will raise that with Irish Water.

On fast-tracking projects, we are bound by statutory processes when it comes to planning permission. One is unaware whether there will be objections, etc., as it goes through the finalisation process. Procurement is a significant process nowadays, as well as the fact that when the preferred tenderer is awarded, there has to be a cooling period and it may be challenged. It can be difficult for a Minister to give a commitment to bring projects forward because so many items are out of our control, unfortunately. I will raise the issues with Irish Water.

One of the biggest challenges in this country is our waste water infrastructure. As I travel around the country, I encounter towns and villages that have problems delivering the potential development because the infrastructure is not up to speed. A key factor is that every year as we approach the budget, we are competing for Irish Water with the Departments with responsibility for health, children and transport. All those key issues are now competing and that is difficult for Irish Water. We will do our best and have secured a significant budget, as well as €6 billion in the capital investment programme from 2021 to 2025.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.18 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ag 5.22 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.18 p.m. and resumed at 5.22 p.m.

Emissions in the Transport Sector Report: Motion

Deputy Brian Leddin: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action entitled “Report on Reducing Emissions in the Transport Sector by 51% by 2030”, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 11th June, 2021.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Heydon, for joining us here today for this very important debate. The report we are discussing in the House today was published a year ago. I had a query from a journalist as to why it is being debated in the Dáil now and what is new with the report. While I do not claim to understand the dark arts of Dáil scheduling and what gets selected for debate and what does not, I can say that this report is more relevant now than it was a year ago and that it is likely to be more relevant still in a year’s time because, until such time as we cut emissions in the transport sector by a full 50% or more, this report will have immense

value and can be our guiding light on that journey.

At the beginning of last year, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, which had just finished pre-legislative scrutiny of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 and proposed that a target of a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030 be knitted into the new law, decided to undertake a methodical examination of the big emitting sectors in the Irish economy, those being transport, agriculture, energy generation and heat. We are here today to discuss the result of one segment of that portfolio of work, that on emissions in the transport sector.

Before I begin to lay out what is in this report and why it is important, I will thank the members of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action for their hard work and for their efforts in putting together the report. In time, it will be seen as a landmark report that helped our State to undertake the systemic change in transport that was required to meet our climate targets and to meaningfully contribute to the immense global effort to reduce all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, in doing so saving this precious ecosystem called earth for our children and their children and making it a better and fairer place to live.

I also thank the expert witnesses and guests who appeared before our committee: Dr Tadhg O'Mahony, Finland Futures Research Centre; Mr. Niall Cussen, the Planning Regulator; Mr. Andrew Murphy of Transport and Environment; Ms Anne Graham, the chief executive of the National Transport Authority; Mr. Hugh Creegan, also of the National Transport Authority; Dr. Brian Caulfield of Trinity College; Dr. Diarmuid Torney of Dublin City University; Dr. Lynn Sloam of Transport for Quality of Life in Wales; Dr. Elisabeth Windisch of the International Transport Forum at the OECD; and Professor Alan McKinnon of Kühne Logistics University in Hamburg. We held one of those sessions in this Chamber during the Covid lockdown and I had a chance to sit in the Acting Chair's seat and play at being Ceann Comhairle for a few hours. That was certainly one of the highlights of my political career to date.

The committee's report makes 47 recommendations and points the way towards achieving the necessary reduction in transport emissions through a fundamental change in how we plan and manage the transport system in Ireland. Over the course of the engagements, it was made abundantly clear that to do this the "avoid, shift, improve" approach must be embedded in our transport and mobility infrastructure planning. Reducing transport demand must be the first and key priority, followed by shifting carbon-intensive journeys to zero-carbon modes such as walking and cycling and providing sustainable public transport in both rural and urban areas. The electrification of our public transport and freight fleet is the necessary third step, followed by the electrification of private vehicles. This report challenges the conventional "predict and provide" approach and the legacy of poor planning that has induced traffic and car dependency and driven road construction and high greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in adverse consequences for our economy, our health, our society and our environment.

In the following few minutes, I will address some of the key findings and recommendations of our report. We heard that we have enough road space in all of our urban areas but that we use it very poorly, which has had a disastrous effect on many of our towns, particularly those in rural Ireland. It has also led to a society that is car-dependent, which results in high levels of carbon emissions. While it is tempting to give space to private cars for access to shops and for parking and while it is counterintuitive to do otherwise, this tends to be a very inefficient way of enabling the movement of a lot of people. In other words, a small number of cars carrying a small number of people will clog up a street, having the effect of putting a low limit on the

number of people who can and will use it. For social, health and economic reasons, road space should be prioritised for modes of transport that are cleaner and that more people use such as public transport, walking and cycling. If we design our streets for cars, we will get cars. This is what has been happening for the past 60 or 70 years. However, if we design our streets for people and for more efficient and cleaner modes of transport, this is what we will get.

What flows from road space reallocation, as challenging and unpopular as it might be, is an effective reduction in the capacity of our roads to carry private cars. We need to do this if we are to achieve the necessary cut in emissions, while also availing of a plethora of co-benefits. The approach of the past that economic growth, population growth and traffic congestion demand the development of more roads was mistaken and must be thrown out. In this regard, the committee recommends a review of current and planned road projects.

At this point, I will make a personal observation. This is not something the committee has said. We seem to have an absurd system whereby State transport agencies have tens, if not hundreds, of road projects in the early stages of planning at any one time. Hundreds of millions are spent every year to keep this project pipeline ticking over. Many of them will ultimately fall at the planning stage, will not be prioritised for further funding at a later stage in the process or will be required to be scrapped by our climate obligations. The bill for this pipeline of fantasy roads will come to many billions of euros. It is my view that we should stop now, as our near neighbour Wales has done. We should stand up to the highway industrial complex, save ourselves vast amounts of resources and redirect those resources and our energies towards more meaningful and beneficial infrastructural projects and services.

If we agree that we must reallocate road space and, in so doing, reduce the car-carrying capacity of our roads, a good way to get the ball rolling would be to introduce a car mileage reduction target. Such a target is proposed in last October's climate action plan but it is a low target of just 10% and only applies to fossil fuel-powered cars. Not applying the target to all cars means that we are implicitly accepting that we could end up with more cars on our roads driving more kilometres in 2030 than is currently the case. If we are to be consistent with an approach of avoid, shift and improve and with the policies of modal shifting, reallocating road space and reducing the car-carrying capacity of the network, we should apply this target to the total number of vehicles, including electric vehicles, as Scotland has done in the last 18 months or so.

The approach of avoid, shift and improve, which transport policy should follow, does not present electric vehicles as a panacea to the issue of emissions in the transport sector. There are still a lot of emissions associated with electric vehicles, including greenhouse gas emissions, very harmful particulates and other pollutants. EV supports should primarily help those caught in forced car dependency. Accordingly, the committee recommends that a car mileage reduction target be introduced. We have intentionally not been prescriptive in saying that it should just apply to fossil fuels. Additionally, the committee recommends that incentives and supports for EV uptake should be reviewed and targeted, with a particular focus on forced car usage.

We need to look at how we make investment cases for infrastructure. We need to tackle three flaws in the public investment process as it relates to climate change, namely, how we calculate benefits, the data we collect to demonstrate potential benefits, and our post-approval assessment procedures. On the benefits, for too long we have relied on easy-to-calculate benefits such as travel time for roads projects, yet we have ignored the social cost of dispersed housing, polluted air and greenhouse gas emissions. We have been making investment cases based on

flawed assumptions from the 1970s that ignore climate change, combat growth and the potential for transit-oriented development, and ignore everything that we have learned in the past 50 years. The data we collect and model when we propose new infrastructure is also flawed, in my opinion. For the past 30 years we have proposed motorway projects that have consistently underestimated the volume of traffic that will be removed from bypass roads and the induced demand of new traffic that occurs when a new road is built. We could fix some of this relatively easily by adopting a practice from the UK of post-approval assessments examining its impact after infrastructure has been built and how the impact compares to projections. This is done routinely in the UK. A witness who appeared before the committee, Dr. Lynn Sloman, was able to use the data to prove a significant carbon impact from greenhouse gas emissions is caused by the UK's road-building programme. Another witness, Dr. Tadhg O'Mahony, sent some follow-up information to the committee after appearing before it. He stated

For projects with long-term environmental effects, such as those related to air pollution, climate change and ecosystem damages, it is recommended to use timescales of 100+ years for economic evaluation of the impact. Failing to fully capture these long-term welfare gains and losses will distort analysis with a bias towards those projects that are more carbon-intensive, or environmentally damaging. Such a bias would undermine not only the evaluation, but welfare and sustainable development in general.

The committee has set out strong recommendations in respect of how infrastructure projects are appraised.

We need to give our rural communities a transport guarantee. The essence of the “every village, every hour” approach is that every community has a bus service that operates every hour, from early morning until late at night, connecting in with services on the rail network where they exist. This level of service has been proven to work in rural Switzerland, in parts of Germany and in the UK. If rural communities are provided with good services, they will make the switch. In small rural towns such as Schaffhausen in Switzerland, more than 40% of journeys are taken by public transport. That compares with just 5% in my home city of Limerick, despite the fact that Schaffhausen is smaller and has a lower population density than Limerick. It is not just a climate issue, but a social justice issue. A significant number of people in rural Ireland do not own a car. Many more experience what research from Dr. Páraic Carroll of University College Dublin and Dr. Brian Caulfield and Dr. Rodolfo Benevenuto of Trinity College Dublin call forced car dependency, where people in rural areas are forced to own a car, even though they cannot afford one. Research done in my own office indicates that serving all 850 settlements in Ireland seven days a week, 16 times a day would cost approximately €500 million a year without taking into account fare revenue. In Schaffhausen in Switzerland, fare revenue contributes to half the cost of providing the service.

Private cars in Ireland drove a total of 35 billion km in 2019. If we levied a small charge of just 1.5 cent per kilometre on both fossil fuel and electric private cars, it would fund the every village, every hour service in its entirety. Even if all these new buses were diesel buses, the greenhouse gas emissions would still be very small. We could offer rural communities a real alternative to the car and give people a real opportunity to reduce their transport emissions, no matter where they live. A recent study from University College Cork, UCC, showed that 37% of all our transport emissions are caused by private cars that are undertaking short journeys within the 0 km to 8 km range. There is no doubt that many, or even most, of those car journeys can be displaced by the use of bikes, particularly electric bikes. However, it cannot, and will not, happen until we have full connected, cohesive and safe cycling networks in and between

all our urban areas. If we are serious about tackling the 37% of emissions caused by private cars, we will quickly roll out such networks. We can do this at very low cost as we have seen with successful projects in Dublin along the quays and in Dún Laoghaire on the coastal mobility route. The report strongly recommended that the NTA's regional transport strategies align with the national ambition to cut emissions by 50% within a decade. It is with regret that a year after the report's publication, we see that the draft strategies for Dublin, Limerick and Waterford fall well short of this ambition. The potential for electric bikes to fulfil our mobility needs has not been adequately modelled in the development of these strategies. If it was done, the shortfall in emissions reductions could be made up.

Lastly, on climate action, the members of the joint committee have noticed that we are very good at talking about climate action among ourselves, and the necessary policies, regulations and legislation that are required. We are good at talking about it as politicians, as sectoral interests and as academics. However, we still need to bring the people with us on this hugely challenging that journey that we are on. The committee has worked very collaboratively and I pay tribute to all members for their work. We have set very high and ambitious targets. However, it is increasingly clear that even modest climate action measures such as the development of cycle lanes, the removal of electricity pylons or the improvement of waste policy, let alone any of the recommendations of the report, are easily politicised and exploited. In this regard, the committee recommends that a concerted public awareness campaign is undertaken to inform the public on climate action and address concerns. We feel that this would neutralise the opportunity of some individuals to play politics.

I could go on and I could talk at length about the contents of the committee's report. I encourage all Members of the Houses to read it. It contains some very interesting testimony from the witnesses who appeared before the committee on how we can reduce our transport emissions in Ireland by 51% by 2030, and how we can do it in way that is fair, that fulfils the needs of everybody to get around in a timely fashion and in a healthy and a safe way. I am just about out of time, so I will leave it at that. I look forward to the debate and listening to the views of colleagues across the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications sends his apologies as he is unable to be with us today. On his behalf, I wish to thank and express an appreciation to Deputy Leddin, members of the committee and the various stakeholders who met with the committee, for their work and leadership in developing this comprehensive report. This report is an important distillation of complex analysis that both sets out the scale of the challenge in transport succinctly and points the way to how we can together achieve a reduction in transport emissions.

It is clear that the scale of the decarbonisation challenge for transport is not to be underestimated and will involve fundamental behavioural changes to how we all live and travel. In emissions terms, the climate action plan has outlined a reduction range of 42% to 50% for the transport sector, a reduction of up to 6 megatonnes from the current level of 12 megatonnes. As legislators and public representatives, we have a responsibility to provide the leadership that will be required to deliver on the climate action that we have committed to. I understand that the Minister's Department is addressing many of the key themes and recommendations from the committee's report, which I will go through in turn, but I will first note some key points of progress since the publication of this report last June.

In the past year, there has been strong progress on climate action. The Government has put in place robust new governance structures, underpinned by the signing into law of the Climate and Low-Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 last July, and which have since been followed by the adoption of the carbon budget programme by the Houses of the Oireachtas in April of this year. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications is currently in discussion with all relevant Departments regarding the setting of forthcoming sectoral emissions ceilings that will be required to deliver on our carbon budget programme, and expects to be able to bring proposals to Government in the near future. These sectoral ceilings will set a maximum limit on emissions for each sector of the economy in each of the two five-year periods to 2030, and this year's update to our climate action plan will be the first that will take these mandatory sectoral emissions ceilings into account. Last week, the Government also published its progress report on the delivery status of the 423 climate action plan measures that were due for delivery in quarter 4 of 2021 and quarter 1 of 2022. Transport accounted for 54 of these measures and had an "on schedule" delivery rate of 69%, demonstrating that while good progress has been made on key impactful actions, we can still further accelerate the delivery of measures with real abatement impact. Returning to the content and key themes of the committee's report, which I note adopted the key avoid, shift, improve framework to transport decarbonisation, likewise, I can provide the following update on the behalf of the Minister and the Department.

The first of the key themes highlighted in the committee's report is the importance of avoiding the need for travel and reducing transport. Delivery of the national planning framework, NPF, objectives is being supported through better transport planning and investment. The revised national development plan published in October 2021 and the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, subsequently published by the Department in December 2021, set out the key principles and the lens through which further transport projects will be assessed. Through NIFTI, the Department has established its priorities for transport investment and has set out modal and intervention hierarchies that project sponsors will be required to consider, prioritising active travel and public transport over the use of private vehicles. These principles and hierarchies are intended to support the delivery of the NPF objectives and avoid urban sprawl, and instead deliver compact growth through more targeted investments, such as supporting smaller bypasses of regional town centres, prioritising space for active travel and public transport, and by providing proper integration of transport and planning.

I note that we have also seen as a result of the pandemic the potential role for remote working in reducing the overall need for transport and the benefits of a place-based approach to development that prioritises well-being.

Committing to these measures and ensuring that our metropolitan area transport strategies incorporate these transport-oriented and place-based principles will bring real benefits both in the rejuvenation of our urban and rural centres and also in the delivery of real emissions impact through reducing transport demand. This also ties in crucially with the shift principle in getting people to shift to more suitable and sustainable alternatives.

Key developments in sustainable mobility here since the committee's report include the publication of the new national sustainable mobility policy, SMP, in April of this year, and its associated suite of actions, which aim to deliver at least 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys. This includes our programme for Government commitment on the reallocation of capital funding, with a 2:1 ratio of new spending for sustainable transport schemes to roads and an unprecedented €360 million annually for active travel projects. These

commitments have been complemented by the recent 50% reduction in public transport fares for young people and the wider 20% reduction in public transport fares that will help to make public transport more attractive.

The SMP covers a wide range of areas encompassing infrastructural delivery, enhancements to public transport services, integration with planning and development policies and a host of other initiatives that will support the toolkit of demand management measures that were identified in the Five Cities Demand Management report and help achieve a minimum 10% reduction in kilometres driven by fossil fuelled cars by 2030.

To oversee and accelerate delivery of these actions, a leadership group has been established which includes representatives from the National Transport Authority, NTA, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, the regional assemblies, the City and County Management Association and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. In addition, the leadership group has made nominations to a delivery team whose role is to identify and oversee the delivery of a series of pathfinder projects and initiatives which can serve as exemplars for sustainable mobility projects across the country.

Other key sustainable transport projects, beyond the headline projects of BusConnects, DART+ and Metrolink that colleagues will be aware of, include, for example, significant improvements to the Cork area commuter rail programme. This is a €185 million investment in Cork's rail infrastructure to enable the later electrification of the network. On a national and all-island basis, the ongoing strategic rail review is also examining the potential future role and use of our rail network.

We are also very conscious of the need to connect people and places in rural areas and are continuing to expand public transport measures for dispersed communities to an appropriate level of service. Funding for Local Link services has been increased to €28.3 million in 2022 and has enabled the introduction of 90 new routes, improvements to demand responsive services and several evening services.

Our Connecting Ireland rural mobility programme also aims to increase public transport connectivity for people living outside the major cities and towns, increasing service levels by 25% and providing 70% of people in rural Ireland with access to public transport. Some of these routes are already being accelerated as part of Government's response to increased pressures on services where the local population has grown in response to the Ukrainian crisis. This acceleration of works will include additional stops, route modifications and more services with the aim of increasing connectivity. Turning to the improve principle, electrification and biofuels, we are looking to the electrification of our private, commercial and public transport fleets and the use of renewable fuels in transport. In terms of electric vehicles, EVs, our climate action plan targets are ambitious with a target of 195,000 private and light goods EVs on the road by 2025 and 940,000 by 2030. As of the end of May 2022, we currently have just over 60,000 battery or plug-in hybrid EVs registered on Irish roads, of which 30,000 are fully electric. Unfortunately, I note there have been shocks and headwinds arising in the supply of EVs as a result of global supply issues with certain components and because of the Russian war in Ukraine. The Department is closely monitoring these delays for potential impact on our CAP targets.

Following on from the recent public consultation on our EV charging infrastructure strategy, the Department of Transport will also establish Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland, ZEVI, as a new office based within Department of Transport in the coming weeks. ZEVI will bring a number

of policy and delivery functions together in one office with a single focus to enable delivery of EV targets for CAP. It will draw on skills and experience from the Department, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and TII, with input from the NTA and the ESB, further developing our policy and strategy for EVs in Ireland, providing grants and supports for EV purchases and supporting the installation of EV charging infrastructure.

On Monday, the Minister and the NTA also announced the signing of a framework agreement for the purchase and manufacture of 800 electric buses which will initially be rolled out in Dublin and Limerick and work is continuing to electrify commuter rail lines.

On completion of the DART+ programme, the amount of electrified track in the greater Dublin area will be trebled. In December 2021, the Government approved the preliminary business case for the DART+ programme and specifically approved the purchase of 95 new carriages, 65 of which are battery-electric and 30 of which are electric units. These new carriages are expected to enter service in 2025.

I note that the Department published its policy statement on renewable fuels for transport in November of last year and has recently concluded a public consultation on the policy statement. As a transitional measure, biofuels are expected to deliver in excess of 1 Mt of emissions abatement by 2030 and the policy statement sets out a clear trajectory for the use of bioethanol and biodiesel to 2030.

As part of the annual climate action plan process, the Department will continue to look to identify additional measures to meet the transport sector's gap to target and at how any additional measures can be introduced in a manner that supports a just transition. While we now have the key policies and strategies in place, we must now start to address the scale of transformation required. There have been some exemplary schemes that demonstrate the potential and vision we are trying to achieve, such as the coastal mobility route in Dún Laoghaire and recent pedestrianisation of Capel Street, but we recognise change is not easy. All of us need to ensure that we communicate the benefits of these schemes to our communities so that we can achieve the behavioural shift and improved well-being I think we all want to see.

I concur with the points made earlier by Deputy Leddin about the importance of bringing people with us and having a clear communication strategy. In our ambition to bring about significant change, we must consult with the people. We must explain to people the ideas and strategies behind the intention and show them the benefits of it, where we can. We must also be mindful that without the people with us, we will not deliver on the ambitions we want to.

I again thank the committee for its work and for tabling this motion. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and report. I thank the previous speakers, the Chair and the Minister of State for being here. I also thank the witnesses, the committee secretariat and the committee members for their input to the process.

We know that the current emissions situation is not good. After a fall in emissions in 2020, we are back to business as usual and our national emissions are rising. Total greenhouse gas emissions are estimated to have increased by 6% in 2021. They did not decrease as is required in the carbon budgets. The head of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has said those emissions are not likely to fall this year either. In fact, they are more likely to increase.

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Transport has been cited by the Minister as one of the more difficult areas in which to reduce emissions. That is why I think this report is particularly important. It touches on many areas. There are many opportunities if the right approach is taken.

I welcome the reduction in public transport fares that were introduced earlier this year. This report examined public transport in detail and explored what else we could do to get people out of private cars and onto buses and trains.

Recommendation 22 proposes that a free public transport system should be costed as an option to encourage the uptake of public transport in Ireland. In response to this recommendation, I asked the Minister in January if he would examine it. He referred the matter to the NTA. The response from the authority was that it does not have a work programme for examining the provision of free public transport because this is not currently an objective of the Government's public transport policy.

There is a balance to be struck in respect of these issues in terms of the capital and current investment in the delivery of services and a reduction in fares. Obviously, in any comprehensive and attractive public transport system, availability and affordability are very important factors. We need to continue on the road of expanding services while also ensuring that fares are not driving people away. We need to continue the expansion of services and BusConnects was mentioned in that context. At the very least, in light of the current cost-of-living crisis, we need to see a continuation of the 20% fare reduction and examine how that might be expanded. Is there anything more that could be done on the youth travel card? Perhaps we could build on that because we are beginning to see the benefits of those reduced fares. We also need to include private operators in these schemes. The reality is that we have a blended mix of public transport provision and I am concerned that we might run ourselves off the edge of a cliff by not adequately supporting private operators.

The climate action plan sets out a target of 1 million EVs on our roads by 2030. The transition away from diesel and petrol cars will deliver significant emissions reductions. EVs are not the solution everywhere. There are more attractive alternatives, especially in urban areas. We have to be realistic about our spatial distribution of settlements, however, and EVs will have an important role to play. That said, the EV schemes that this State has designed and delivered over the years are offensive. They represent a massive transfer of wealth. In terms of the policy objective, what we want to achieve in the first instance is getting those people who are dependent on cars or vans into EVs. They are the people we want in these vehicles but they are the last people who will be in them. The Government's EV subsidy scheme is a massive transfer of wealth, with very expensive vehicles being bought. That has decreased somewhat but has not gone far enough. The figures for the EVs bought under the scheme in the last year reveal that 5,391 vehicles purchased cost in excess of €50,000. In contrast, just 53 grants were provided for vehicles costing less than €30,000. One does not need to be a genius to work out who is availing of these grant and the sort of advantage they already have before any transaction takes place.

I will again make the case that the Government needs to explore the opportunity of a second-hand EV market. Brexit is a factor in this in terms of the impact of the British market being closed off. There are ideas within the second-hand EV market in Ireland to address that and they need to be considered. We also need to consider the commercial sector, in particular the van market. People are going to be driving vans into the future because they do not have a public transport alternative so we need an EV scheme for them too. The Department is con-

sidering options in that regard but it needs to move quickly. The fundamental piece involves bringing people with us. People can see the current scheme for exactly what is, which is one that advantages the already advantaged and that understandably annoys them.

I also want to raise the issue of taxis, which are an essential part of our transport network. Again, I am deeply concerned that we are at risk of running off the edge of a cliff at the end of this year with the ten-year rule. It is a massive problem for taxi drivers. The rule means that older cars have to be replaced when they get to a certain age. A total of 5,344 vehicles in the taxi fleet will reach their maximum age in 2023. There is a real risk that those vehicles will be taken out of the system and we will have a crisis within the taxi sector. There is also a risk that the taxi drivers who are in a position to change their cars will replace them with petrol and diesel cars, even though those vehicles do not really need to be replaced, because they cannot get EVs because of the supply chain issues. The transition to an electric taxi fleet could be managed better if we extend the ten-year rule.

I have already referred to rural transport. On transport infrastructure projects, the Navan rail line needs to be delivered, as does MetroLink and the western rail corridor. These are significant investments. School transport is a low-hanging fruit opportunity. That the State is denying children the opportunity to take public transport to school outside of 5 km or outside of walking distance is unforgivable. The school bus scheme needs to be expanded.

In haulage, there is an impasse and it is frustrating to watch. It is really important that the Minister engage with the industry and listens to its views on the types of solutions that can and will work. I get frustrated when I hear about impasses and a lack of willingness to engage. That needs to be addressed. I know there is an ongoing review of our ports policy. We need to avail of opportunities to maximise the potential of our ports in the context of the green economy more broadly. We must also reduce emissions in our ports.

Active travel presents significant opportunities. In response to a point made by Deputy Leddin, this is a politically contested arena and we need to recognise that. Of course some people will play games with it and for a lot of people this is not priority number one. In that context, it is about showing leadership and showing people how this stuff works. It is about designing schemes that are not inherently inequitable and that do not put people's noses out of joint straight away. People need to see the opportunities in active travel. They need to see that it will work for them. We need to show them positive examples, and the Minister of State mentioned a number of them earlier.

Time is of the essence. We need to look at rolling this stuff out rapidly and at scale. We need to look at the planning system and how to do that but, ultimately, we must engage with people and design schemes that work for them. It can be done.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I commend the committee and the members of it who are in the Chamber on another excellent report. The output from the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, chaired by Deputy Leddin, is exceptional. We each have ten minutes to talk about transport and planning but we would need hours. In fact, Deputy Leddin and I have spent hours talking about transport planning. We have often ruined a good social occasion for many people by spending hours talking about how we are going to fix the transport problems in this country.

We cannot talk about transport without talking about the planning system. We have had

decades of urban sprawl and it is really difficult to retrofit our transport system to meet decades of sprawling development which has locked people into car dependency. In the early days of the BusConnects programme, councillors, roads engineers, local authority staff, community groups and others were invited by the NTA to an information session in the Royal Marine Hotel in Dún Laoghaire.

6 o'clock

We were broken into break-out groups and provided with maps of a sprawling urban district. We were given a limited number of buses and a limited number of drivers, and we were told to design a public transport system for that city with its sprawl. It could not be done. No matter what way one tried to jig it, some people were going to be left unserved by public transport. That is the real challenge we have. How do we provide public transport that is viable and competitive, and especially when we have spent 40 or 50 years just providing for cars? Planning policy has created that.

Page 8 of the report refers to the Office of the Planning Regulator: "...the OPR does not currently have adequate tools to monitor and assess the progress of developments on brownfield and infill sites and urged the Committee to recommend the establishment of a Brownfield Register in order to address this issue." I will take this recommendation back to the housing committee because I believe this is something we need to look at under the planning system. How do we know that the objectives of our national planning framework are being met if we cannot really measure and monitor properly? This then feeds into how we provide transport systems.

With regard to vacancy and dereliction, while we sprawled in how we built, we took our eye off the towns. We have let the towns die a little bit and become hollowed out. We need to refocus that. I believe there is general consensus that we need to look at those vacant and derelict buildings. By revitalising the towns and bringing buildings back to residential use, it allows us to provide those public transport systems. It is not only about public transport systems to the towns, but it is also about how people circulate and get around the towns. These are the active travel measures that Deputy O'Rourke referred to.

We still design in a way that puts priority on the car. This creates hostile streets. Even in the way we design housing estates now, one must get into a car to get out of the estate. There are really easy ways to knock a hole through a wall and put in a pedestrian linkage through with safe routes to schools where people can cycle and walk and meet their friends from the other has estates quite easily. There are, however, massive objections from people when one tries to go back and retrofit this measure. I was dealing with one such situation in my constituency recently where people on one side of the wall wanted it and those on the other side of the wall did not. It is always contentious. We must start building this type of measure into how we design.

We have a load of roads in this country. One could build a really good political career just on a love of roads. We have often seen political careers built on this, where one could spend five years lobbying for a road, another five to ten years funding it and getting it built. Then one would get another five years out of widening it, and in the intervening 20 years it would also need to be fixed multiple times. We must get away from that. Building a big, brand-new shiny road is not development. It is 1990s transport planning thinking and it shows that we do not understand the climate emergency and how much of the emissions are due to transport because of the way that we designed and built our developments. It can definitely be done, but we must develop a different love for the road and embrace a design that is safer for children and pedes-

trains, where our towns and villages welcome people walking or cycling to school and where parents and guardians can bring children to school in a safe manner and not have to make the decision as to whether they should load the kids into the car because there is no other safe way to get there. It is fine for urban areas, and I realise that there are problems in rural areas, but we can manage that as well. The school bus system really needs to be revamped and built up. There are so many more children. One can see how the roads are empty in the summer months during the school holidays. This is because we are not all dropping our kids to school. There are solutions to it.

If we build the public transport, it will work. There are examples of that. There was a link put in between Heuston Station and Connolly Station which brought that Newbridge train up into Grand Canal Dock. That track lay idle for years. The track was there and there was connectivity but there were no passenger services on it. They built it. Irish Rail did it in-house and it is now full and being used the whole time. We have all of this rail network system there which is underutilised. In my constituency, in south Greystones, which is also in Deputy Whitmore's constituency, we have a perfectly good rail line but we just do not have trains on it. We have a perfectly good signalling system on it but we do not need it because there are no trains on it. There are only two or three trains a day. This is to be addressed. Electrification can do that. The Minister of State referred to electrification. We can do a hell of a lot more on electrification in the State. Ireland has probably some of the lowest penetration of electric rail services in Europe. It does not all have to be continuous overhead systems. In Germany they use the discontinuous conveyor overhead systems. A train is in contact with the overhead for 60 km where it charges up, and then it can go the next 60 km without being in contact. A line built from Dublin to Cork does not have to be a continuous overhead system. It could be three discontinuous systems. That is the level of thinking we need to be at.

When I heard about battery-powered DART I had my doubts about it and I looked into it, but they work and they will work. We will see them coming into service within the next 18 months to two years, including the Drogheda line. We are hoping to get one also down to Wicklow town. I believe it is possible. The population and the service demand would support such a measure. It is not just about the electrification of the service. It also provides a much better service for people, we can move quicker, there are lighter trains, there is better acceleration, there is better braking, and they are cleaner, quieter, and easier to service. They just make a whole lot of sense.

Rail freight is an area we rarely look at in the State. The western rail corridor is ideal for electrification. The West=On=Track group will be coming into the Oireachtas next week to state its case for the western rail corridor extension, ultimately up to Sligo. Western rail would bring all of the offshore energy in. Given the development and industry out there, it will bring it all the way to Rosslare Port also, which makes perfect sense. It would take the pressure off the east coast. Our national development plan is also looking at this to relieve all of the concentration on the east coast and spread it in the regions. To do that, we need a spine of rail network through it. The track is there. Consider the 1907 map of the railways in Ireland. It was a huge number of railways. I do not believe we would ever need to go back to that level - we have our cars and good roads - but we could do a lot of work in that regard with small amounts of investment. Consider the investment going into Cork now with the Cork rail system. This will transform Cork with electrified rail systems. Limerick is also perfectly designed to have a really good urban electrified system. We cannot call it the DART when it goes to Limerick or Cork. We will have to come up with a different acronym for it.

Electric buses have also been launched, which is another innovation. Many of these things are happening, but it is slow. Investment in transport is expensive but if one invests in a railway, it is investment in a 100-year asset that would never need to be widened. Yes, it would need constant maintenance and bits of upgrades now and again but when more frequency is needed on it, we would just do a signalling upgrade. It is not like a road where one must keep widening it. Then there may be reduced demand and the road is useless for everybody. If there are three lanes on a road, instead of being in traffic in two lanes, one is stuck in the middle lane with a traffic jam on both sides. It does not make sense and I am glad we are getting away from it. Building big wide roads is not progress.

My last point is on SUVs. Deputy O'Rourke referred to the low penetration of electric vehicles, EVs. Why is there such a large uptake of SUVs? Last year 55% of car sales were SUVs. What is it about SUVs? It is the slick marketing and slick advertising that makes people think that they want to go out and drive an SUV. They are just stuck in traffic like everybody else. I have spoken to some people, not judgmentally, about why they bought an SUV. They say they like the seat position in it as they are a little bit higher in it. I ask them if they could not have bought a cushion and saved themselves about €25,000. Anyway, we must look at that. They are getting disproportionately large. There are the crossover models, which I understand are used by families who need that kind of bigger vehicle, but those massive big urban utility vehicles are too wide for parking spaces, are too wide for lanes, are too heavy and visually one cannot see out the front of them. If you are hit by an SUV at 30 km, 40 km, or 60 km, you are dead. That is the end of the story. The bottom line is that we need to cut emissions. Transport is one of those tough ones to crack, but I believe we have the solutions and the will of this Government to do it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I too am a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. I commend Deputy Leddin on his chairing of that committee and I also commend the other members. It is a very active and committed committee.

It has been quite a while since we looked at this report on transport and quite a while since we discussed it. I looked through it last night and remembered all of the discussions we had. It was very inspirational listening to the experts coming in to talk to us about free public transport systems, or about the projects in Germany or in Wales where they have really managed to deal with the issue. We heard of cycling superhighways and green networks, how it could actually work with public transport and our school transport system and concepts such as every village-every hour, which is really the ideal on where we need to get to. As I read it and remembered the discussion, it seemed further and further away. The reality that many people and communities, particularly rural communities, face when it comes to public transport is a world away from what we have envisaged here. We need the pathway for getting from the current situation to the ideal. I do not believe it is impossible. It is not particularly complex. It will involve political will and a lot of funding and investment but getting the messaging right on public transport will be key. If it is built, people will use it. The messaging around climate change might not necessarily encourage the majority of people to use it but if the messaging was more about the benefits and if it was a reliable, regular and reasonably priced service, people would use it because it would be much easier for them. That is what we need to be working towards.

I will use my county as an example of the current situation because it has a mix of rural and urban areas. However, we are in the commuter belt so there are many rural counties in a much worse situation. To go from Arklow to Greystones, which is the nearest DART station, is a car journey of 35 minutes. There are only two morning services on the train that will get people

there in time for work. There are no buses. That is twice in the morning that people can get public transport. Similarly, if someone is going from Wicklow town to Greystones, it is very limited. The bus would take one hour and ten minutes and that would involve two buses and a transfer. It is 24 minutes by car. There is no way we will be able to encourage people to take two buses and travel for an hour and ten minutes if they could just get in their car and drive. That is where we need to be looking. To go from Blessington to Baltinglass, in west Wicklow, is a 24-minute journey by car. There is one bus in the morning at 10.30 a.m., so there is no opportunity to get in for a 9 a.m. start. There is one more bus in the afternoon and two in the evening. Again, there is a very limited service available to people. That is without even looking at the many other towns and villages across the county where there is no or very limited public transport. In Roundwood, Aughrim, Glenealy or Hollywood, it is very limited. Avoca has a train line going through it and a station but that station is closed. That should be a relatively simple upgrade and yet the investment is not being made.

In some areas in the north of the county, such as Bray, there is a better public transport system but there are still issues with how regular it is. Reliability is a major issue for many. I have been dealing with many people over the last few months regarding the 45A and the 185, which are both Go-Ahead services. There are problems with the buses not turning up, being late and not being there at night. If you are trying to get home late at night you need to know that bus is going to bring you home. If people are left in the dark at an empty train station waiting for that bus, that shows it is not safe. We have to acknowledge that safety on public transport is a major disincentive, particularly for women. That is something we need to be looking at. Similarly, the 133 has been causing problems since I was elected. There have been constant issues with that bus service that have never been resolved. I even heard a story about a bus driver who had to ring his wife to get her to come down with cash so he could fill the bus up with diesel while *en route*. He had to pull in and get diesel, then ring the wife and get her to come down as he had no cash on him, because the bus had not been filled up the night before. These are the kinds of stories we hear. That is the reality for people and what we need to be moving away from.

There is one thing we should do and it should be simple. We need a Local Link that goes around every village in this country and between villages and towns. That would be a game changer. These would be small community buses. There are many private operators keen to get involved. It is a matter of financing it. Those community buses would be lifelines for small rural villages from an economic, social and tourism perspective. There is no downside to it. I am sure everyone has heard of Brittas Bay. I am probably biased but I think it is the most beautiful beach in the country. It is also one of the most popular and most used because it is so close to Dublin. Over the last number of years on fine days, it has become increasingly dangerous to go down there because the traffic is so bad. At one stage last year I was stuck in traffic for 20 minutes and an ambulance trying to get to someone who needed emergency care on the beach could not get through. The traffic is unbelievable, with people parking on both sides of the road. Some remediation measures have been put in place to try to address that, and hopefully this summer will not be as bad, but there is no public transport at all to Brittas Bay or Magheramore. For the past three years, I have been asking the NTA to provide a Local Link seasonal bus service that would go from Greystones through Newcastle, Kilcoole and Wicklow town to Brittas Bay and Arklow. That coastal route could be a huge service in the summer but it would also be a very good service in winter for people going between those towns. Not having a bus connection between those coastal towns is a missed opportunity. I will be raising it again with the NTA this year to see if it can fund that service. There are private operators that would be very keen to get involved in that project if the NTA is not in a position to put a bus on itself.

The work we did on the committee was good in that it paints a picture of what we could have and what we need to have. We need to focus on the here and now and make sure the investment happens. That is primarily a financial investment at this point in time. The Connecting Ireland plan is looking at expanding the Local Link. However, it only got €5 million in this year's budget for the entire country, which is a paltry amount considering the job we expect it to do. When the Minister of State is having those discussions with his Cabinet colleagues around the upcoming budget, I ask that he advocate a strong investment in Local Link. It would make a huge difference. I also ask that the Government invest in the school service. We need a national school scheme, not one that is based on how far away someone is from the school or how many other children are getting it. We need one that all children can access. Not only would that help with traffic and emissions, it would also set a cultural precedent where children would get used to using buses. They will bring that culture into their adulthood and will hopefully remain committed to using public transport into the future.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I am struck by a number of things about this report. First, let us look around us. This is supposed to be the burning issue of our times and of this Government. I am one of three Opposition Members here, along with the Minister of State from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Deputies Matthews and Leddin. I have no doubt that a huge amount of work went into preparing this report. I have been on committees over the years. I read through the report, albeit not in as much detail as I would have liked, and it is very clear that a lot of time and work went into it. There was much discussion in the Chamber about battery trains, buses and cars. We should save a thought for the battery chickens working down in the committee rooms, in the darkness with a lack of natural light. The work they do down there should be feeding into what the Dáil does and into policy. I am a little longer in the Dáil than Deputy Leddin but not very long. I have formed the view that what happens in committees tends to be pretty irrelevant to policy in this State. He will soon get a response to his report, and once he does, he will know it is done and that nobody will ever look at the report again. It will be finished, *finito*. That is a pity because this report is about a very important issue, namely, the need to reduce emissions, especially in the transport sector.

The premise of the report related to how to reduce emissions by 51% by 2030 but I disagree with that target. Our transport sector has the third or fourth highest emissions *per capita* in the EU generally. That being the case, it seems we need to reduce our emissions in the transport sector by a lot more than 51%. This has been approached with the premise that we will reduce emissions in every sector by 51%, and I disagree with that because we have to strategise on how to reduce emissions. Every sector is going to have share the burden, with which I have no problem, and reduce emissions a great deal, but there is going to have to be a difference between the sectors because, simply put, that will be required in any budget where we have to trim spending. Sinn Féin is talking about increasing taxation and never talks about trimming spending. It will be in government pretty soon, I think, and it seems the current Government is afraid Sinn Féin will break the country when it gets into power. In fact, it is so afraid that it is going to break the country to prevent Sinn Féin from getting into government in case it breaks the country. In any event, by the time Sinn Féin gets into power, the country will be broke. There will be very little money and it will have to find money in the way the Government I supported had to find money.

The options are pretty horrible, ranging from bad to worse, and it is a little bit like that with reducing emissions. When faced with the options bad and worse, you have to be strategic, protect what you think is most important and trim where you think there are excesses. You cannot just take the same amount from everybody because that is not how it works with taxation.

Some people are in a position to pay more than others, and some sectors are in a position to be reduced by more than others. In that regard, some taxation measures were introduced when the country was on its knees in 2011, 2012 and 2013, but corporation tax was not targeted. There was a view, rightly or wrongly, that it was in our strategic interest to maintain corporation tax at a certain level that resulted in inward investment in the country, and we needed to protect that and, most important, the jobs created from that investment. There were also certain taxation measures relating to agriculture because there was a view agriculture was one area that could reinvigorate our economy. Some bad decisions were made by that Government but, in general, the economy recovered.

We need to be strategic in setting our carbon and sectoral targets. We cannot have every Department or every sector take the same amount because that is not strategic. I am not saying we should depart from our overall goals, but we have to be strategic in how we set them. The Dáil has to have a proper debate and vote on this because if this is really the burning issue of our time, there are only five of us Deputies, including the Ceann Comhairle, debating it before we finish for the week. That is simply not reflective of it being the burning issue of our times. Equally, there has to be a proper debate on the sectoral targets as they are set. I am a farmer from an agricultural community and I represent Clare, where agriculture is an important facet of the economy, so perhaps I am biased. Nevertheless, if we stop generating agricultural produce, there will be a degree of displacement and we will import more agricultural produce. I am not saying farmers should not reduce where possible, but we have to keep in sight the possibility Brazil, Argentina and other countries will ramp up production to replace ours. Farmers and agriculture do need to reduce, but not by the same level of transport. Our highest emissions come from our transport sector and there are very high emissions from our agriculture sector too - higher than that in most other EU countries - but most other EU other countries eat food produced in Ireland. Conversely, while we drive cars produced in Germany, the manufacturer of the car is not included in our emissions but rather in Germany's emissions, whereas just the emissions from the driving of it are. We should be more ambitious in our scope in reducing transport emissions.

On the avoid, shift and improve idea, I completely agree but I did not necessarily hear that in Deputy Leddin's contribution. Our approach in Ireland is one of penalising people who drive cars and making it difficult for them without putting an alternative in place. I would love to go to Heuston Station, hop on a train to Ballybrophy and drive not all the way to Clare but only halfway, but the last train to Ballybrophy today has left. I used to get the train from Birdhill. Deputy Leddin will know this line well because it goes through Castleconnell and into Limerick. I would have to get the train at 7 a.m. in Birdhill to get to Dublin for 10 a.m. It used to be 8 a.m. but that was affected by speed limits on the line and so on. There was even a change whereby it was like the Trans-Siberian Railway when they lifted off the thing and changed the gauge. There was something not quite as dramatic as that but not so different in Nenagh to make it even less attractive to get the train in Birdhill if someone wanted to go on to Dublin. Instead of taking the train in Birdhill, which would involve me driving a car empty apart from me, I had to drive to Ballybrophy, halfway to Dublin. Even at that, the service on that line is wholly inadequate, and it is not just about Birdhill but also about Nenagh, Roscrea and Castleconnell and, ultimately, about having a proper train service.

If we want to shift people from cars into trains and buses, we need to provide the alternative, but we are not doing it. Moreover, we need to subsidise it heavily and perhaps even make it free. I am not the first to suggest that; far from it. My former constituency colleague and

current fellow Oireachtas Member, Senator Dooley, also suggested it and it is a very good idea because we need to make it attractive to get people into the idea of public transport, build up the number of people using public transport and then make the case for further investment in public transport. Merely penalising people is not the solution. One contributor to this debate earlier derided people who have made a political career out of roads. The Acting Chairman is indicating with her bell that I am using up more valuable emissions than I had anticipated, so I will conclude presently. People argue to have the road built, get the road built, repair it and whatever: if only as much effort went into getting more buses and trains from those who believe in buses and trains as goes into deriding those arguing for roads.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Verona Murphy): They are the worst kinds of emissions.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Are they? I think there are worse but perhaps there are not. That is not for me to judge but rather for the Acting Chairman. I thank her for her time.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): Deputy McNamara proves that with the best of good intentions, it is difficult for us to control our emissions and to keep them in check as much as we would like. I respectfully disagree with his point about the report being finito as soon as it has been compiled. In my opening address, I clearly outlined the progress made since the report's publication and how it is very much a living document. As for his concerns about emissions, our programme for Government clearly refers to the different approaches to different sectors and the different ranges set for different sectors. He mentioned agriculture. There is a lower range, from 22% to 30%, for that sector because the programme for Government intrinsically recognises the societal importance of agriculture to our rural economies in particular and to our overall economy. We have a shared overall ambition but there are different targets for different areas for very good reasons. Key strategies have been put in place over the last couple of years. We now have a focus on moving to delivery. I talked earlier about bringing people with us. For us to have credibility as a Government, we must also remove anomalies and there are anomalies. Deputy Whitmore touched on some of them.

In my own experience, we have a burning issue in Kildare South in respect of the short-hop zone for rail users. The differentiation between rail users in Sallins and those seven or eight minutes down the track in Newbridge is colossal in terms of the difference in fares and the ability to use the Leap card in a short-hop zone. It is a really significant source of contention and annoyance to south Kildare commuters that there is a €6 difference between Newbridge and Sallins for an adult single ticket for such a small area. A monthly adult ticket costs nearly €90 and a monthly student ticket is €60. We must remove these anomalies. The commuters in Kildare South who commute to Dublin should have fairer fares. It is something my colleagues and I have continuously raised and something on which I will continue to work as a representative for Kildare. This is a burning issue for me.

If we want to bring people with us in terms of this change, we must address these anomalies. We must see a situation where the short-hop zone is extended. People must enjoy the benefits of a more graduated system, whereby the cliff edge between an area that is inside the short-hop zone and an area that is not is addressed. In recent years, the Department of Transport has had to invest significantly in a new car park for Sallins train station because the people of Kildare South are driving to Sallins in Kildare North for cheaper fares, which is understandable when one sees the price difference. This is not about pushing the people of Newbridge, Kildare town, Monasterevin and Portarlinton into their cars to drive and move away from public transport.

We need to do the opposite. We need to incentivise the use of public transport by having fairer fares for these commuters. They will get back on the train if it is more equitable in terms of the cost incurred by them. That is something on which we will continue to work. The benefit of extending the short-hop zone and use of the Leap card across Kildare South, as well as other areas like counties Meath and Wicklow, is absolutely critical. That sensible approach is what people can see and they will respond positively.

Deputy Whitmore touched on Local Link. As chairman of Fine Gael in the previous Dáil term, I was proud to lead a campaign with my colleagues that sought to extend Local Link services to Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. I made the proposal to the then Minister, Shane Ross, who responded favourably. At the time, it was derided in the media, which called it the “drink link”. There was great merriment at the idea that we were putting on these buses in the evening. It was hugely successful, however. The Local Link companies adopted and embraced it. There were examples in Kildare South, County Kerry and different areas. Local groups like the Irish Countrywomen’s Association put on events in the evening because they knew local people would be able to get a Local Link service into the village. The Local Link bus service led to the development and further roll-out of community engagement activity. Whatever people want to do when they get to their destination is their own option, but putting on those transport services and linkages in rural Ireland is absolutely critical. We have people living in dispersed areas all around the country. Everything we do needs to be about balanced regional development. The Acting Chairman knows that all too well in her constituency. We must have these linkages in our rural areas so that when we talk about battery trains and buses and all the rest, people do not just think it is a Dublin-centric or urban-centric approach. This must be for everybody living in this country. We have more people living in rural Ireland now than ever before. They have a good quality of life but we need to make sure transport links fit in with the overall strategy. They are the bits that will bring people with us and make those changes in local areas.

My final point relates to the school transport issue, on which Deputy Whitmore also touched. The change from the nearest school to the second nearest school will address an awful lot of our issues in school transport. The synergies that exist between Local Link, rural transport and our school transport system is an area that has to be extended further.

Returning to the report, I commend Deputy Leddin and his committee on their work. I look forward to seeing its ongoing roll-out as part of Government policy in the years ahead.

Deputy Brian Leddin: I thank the Minister of State for standing in for the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, who was not available, and for giving us a very thorough response to the report. I am really happy to hear that he and his colleagues across Government consider it a living document. I firmly believe that it has to be a living document and that it will become more relevant as we continue to try to overcome this enormous challenge. There were very positive comments around the national investment framework for transport in Ireland sustainability policy, Connecting Ireland and the electric buses that were announced during the week. I am glad to say that the first 20 buses are going to my home city of Limerick and I believe 100 are going to Dublin. Athlone will be ahead of both Limerick and Dublin. It will be the first the town to get the electric buses. The new carriages that are on order are extremely important, particularly with the reduction in public transport fares, which is very positive. We are seeing that this measure is putting pressure on the system. Now that fares are more affordable, more people are using public transport services and trains so we need more of them. We need to invest in that system very significantly.

16 June 2022

I will respond to the other speakers, beginning with Deputy McNamara. I was very happy to hear him say that we should go further than 51% in transport if we can. I think we should do so. He is absolutely correct to say we should not treat all sectors equally.

Deputy O'Rourke is the only member of the committee who is with me in the Chamber at present. When we approached this, we did not know what the sectoral emissions targets were going to be. We have a better sense of that since the provisional climate action plan was published in October of last year. The exercise we undertook was to take the 51% and apply it in one particular sector, transport, to begin with. We did not do a numerical analysis. We did a qualitative analysis of what can be done to reduce emissions. It may be the case that we can actually go way beyond 51%.

Deputy McNamara is correct when he says we are a farming nation and a food-producing nation. It is inevitable that agriculture will not have the same target as the other sectors. As the Deputy knows, County Clare will play a huge role in the offshore renewable sector in the coming decades. That will probably do most of the heavy lifting for Ireland.

I am not speaking as Chairman of the committee but certainly as a Limerick Deputy in the context of the Ballybrophy line, about which the Deputy made some very strong comments. There is actual investment happening in that at the moment, which we are very glad to see. The campaign groups have been very vocal about that and they have been pushing us. I think we are going to see that line saved alongside Nenagh, Cloughjordan, Ballybrophy, Castleconnell, Birdhill and Lisnagry. We will probably see a new station at Lisnagry with the development of the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy. This is all very positive.

I will turn to Deputy Whitmore's comments. The Deputy is a very valued member of our committee who works very hard and pushes us, certainly. She outlined a number of deficiencies in the public transport system in County Wicklow. I do not know Wicklow as well as Deputy Whitmore does, of course. I believe the issues they have there are very real.

That brings me to the kernel of my opening remarks, during which I addressed the issue of roads. Whatever about maintaining the roads we have, in this country we have this thing about pushing new road development all the time. If we are doing that, we should consider the capital expenditure involved in keeping that pipeline, which I call the fantasy pipeline as most of these roads will never be built. We are spending hundreds of millions of euros annually on that pipeline. Because we are spending that money, we are not spending it on the services that are required across rural Ireland particularly. Urban Ireland is certainly better served by public transport. I firmly believe we need to be looking at this seriously, as the Welsh did when they said, "No more roads". It did not make sense because they have a road network. The governments of the 2000s invested very heavily in the road network. Maybe there are still some gaps there; that is fair enough. We cannot keep building roads and expect that we will reduce emissions, however, and certainly not by 51% or anything higher than 51% if we continue to build all these new roads. We can do things differently and save a lot of money. We can move from Connecting Ireland.

The Minister of State mentioned Local Link. It really is an excellent service and it can be expanded and rolled out everywhere. It has proven its worth and the doubters have been proved wrong. However, with Local Link we have to go from a service that provides transport to people who do not have cars to a service that provides transport for people who could afford cars. Unless we get even wealthy people out of cars, we will not hit anything like a 51% cut in

emissions. We need to go from a Connecting Ireland type of programme, which is very positive, to every village, every hour. Certainly, if we address that lost expenditure in road building, we can do that and provide a meaningful, attractive and appealing service for people across rural Ireland.

I agree with my colleague on the committee, Deputy O'Rourke, regarding electric vehicles. The grant structure and putting everything in the electric vehicle basket, which was the policy of the previous Government, are a legacy of the thinking that we can tinker around the edges and do little things here and solve the challenges we have. The reality is that we can do a great deal more. We can be a lot more creative about how to solve the transport issue and I certainly agree that how we approach supports for electric vehicles should be examined. We should not be supporting wealthy people to buy electric vehicles when they will buy them anyway. We should not be giving them extensive grants. We should support people who cannot afford electric vehicles and who have no other choice. They are primarily in rural Ireland, where there are no public transport services. Dr. Caulfield appeared before the committee last year and he was particularly clear about this. He outlined the issue of forced car dependency and strongly encouraged us to direct support for electric vehicles towards those people who are in forced car dependency. I agree with him.

Deputy Matthews mentioned SUVs. The way the market has gone is absolutely crazy, with 55% of all new vehicles being SUVs. Many of them are electric SUVs. We have to move away from the big, heavy diesel and petrol guzzling car to the smaller and lighter electric vehicle, primarily, where electric vehicles are required. In the forthcoming budget, I would like to see the Government introduce supports to encourage people towards the smaller and lighter vehicle. As I said earlier, nearly 40% of our transport emissions are caused by car journeys in the zero to 8 km range. Many of those journeys can be done by walking, cycling and certainly with electric bicycles. Many of them can be done by smaller electric vehicles as well. There is no need for a big SUV or Range Rover for these short journeys. Many of the journeys are in urban areas or they begin outside urban areas and end up in the town or city centre.

I am almost out of time so I will make a final comment on rail, which was mentioned by Deputy Matthews. We have an incredible opportunity to turn the tide of investment in rail. The climate and environmental agenda will turn that tide. We can do it for both passengers and freight. In my home city of Limerick there are four under-utilised rail lines. We can link the upgrade and investment in these rail lines with transit oriented development. We can locate hundreds and thousands of new homes, which we desperately need, around new train stations. There is an ambitious plan in Limerick to do that. I believe we must advance that, expedite it and deliver it as quickly as possible.

I will conclude with that. I thank the Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.45 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 21 Meitheamh 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 21 June 2022.