



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 12 Iúil 2022*

*Tuesday, 12 July 2022*

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

*Paidir.*

*Prayer.*

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### **Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Bill 2022 without amendment.

### **Estimate for Public Services 2022: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Environment and Climate Action has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2022: Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications.

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

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Last month, President Michael D. Higgins described the housing crisis as a disaster. I believe that he gave voice to the hard realities faced by those desperately struggling to put an affordable roof over their heads because when people cannot afford a home, it does not just stop there; it has wide-reaching and deep consequences for our society.

Today we read that schools in Dublin report that teachers are leaving and seeking employment in other parts of the country due to extortionate rents and soaring house prices. Schools are finding it very difficult to recruit replacements. One school in Stillorgan, it is reported, recently wrote to parents advising them that six of its teachers were relocating outside Dublin. The teachers' unions are alarmed. They say that difficulties with teacher supply are made worse by the fact that teachers cannot set up home in this city. They say that teachers who commute to Dublin are now considering working elsewhere because of the soaring cost of fuel. The teachers' unions are worried because schools are struggling to get teachers in important subjects like maths and science. Many schools are forced to consider asking teachers who have Gaeilge but

who do not have a degree in Irish to teach the subject. The situation has become so bad that some schools may have to consider dropping optional subjects. We now face, therefore, the prospect of another serious problem rooted in the housing crisis. If left unchecked, it will have major knock-on effects. Being unable to afford a home impacts the quality of life of teachers, which then affects the ability of schools to deliver and, in turn, impacts the education of our children. It ripples through everything.

We should not be surprised that this problem is emerging. The average rent in Dublin is now more than €2,000. Average house prices range up to €600,000, which is truly off the wall. How could anyone build a life when facing those costs? By the time a teacher pays the rent or the mortgage repayment, a huge chunk of his or her wage is gone. Add in the spiralling cost of living, the relentless hikes in electricity and gas prices, childcare fees and the sharp increases in the price of food and life in the city has become literally unaffordable. We can see that teachers are left in an impossible situation, and why they are now voting with their feet. Tá múinteoirí ag fágáil Bhaile Átha Cliath mar gheall ar phraghsanna tithe atá ag ardú as cuimse agus ar chíosanna ríchostasacha. Tá scoileanna ag streachailt le múinteoirí eile a fháil. Ní mór don Rialtas gníomhú anois chun deireadh a chur leis an ngéarchéim atá mar thubaiste anois. Those caught up in the housing crisis, including teachers, are crying out for change. The Government cannot allow this problem to escalate and to become, in itself, another crisis.

What is the Government's assessment of this situation? Does the Taoiseach share the teachers' unions' alarm over the situation? What does his Government propose to do by way of response? Does he plan to meet the teachers' unions on this matter?

**The Taoiseach:** Admhaím go bhfuil géarchéim ann ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta. Is príomhaidhm an Rialtais é i bhfad níos mó tithe a thógáil agus a chur ar fáil. Níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil deacrachtaí faoi leith ag múinteoirí agus ag an-chuid daoine eile maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta. Tá plean cuimsitheach ag an Rialtas chun déileáil leis an ngéarchéim seo. Níl an Rialtas ann ach ar feadh dhá bhliain ach tá an-chuid bainte amach againn le linn an dá bhliain sin.

I have said consistently since being elected as Taoiseach that housing is the number one social issue facing this country. The Government has produced the most comprehensive housing policy, entitled Housing for All. I have not seen any alternative policy formulation either from the Deputies opposite or their party that has the same depth, breadth or detail to deal with a very serious issue concerning housing. Housing supply will be key regarding it. We simply need to build more houses and apartments across the board. The target is to get to 33,000 to 35,000 units per annum. This year the expectation is that we will be on target for approximately 24,600 new houses.

On commencements, 22,000 new units were completed in the year to March 2022. That is the highest number of home completions in any 12-month period since the series began in 2011. A total of 5,669 new homes were added to the national housing stock in quarter 1 this year, so progress is being made. A total of 43,000 planning permissions were granted in 2021, which is a sixfold increase on the number of units granted permission in 2014 and represents the highest number of planning permissions since 2007. More than 30,000 new homes were commenced in the year to May 2022. That is the highest number since records started.

In the EU, Ireland has gone from having the third lowest level of completions *per capita*, in 2013, to having the fifth highest, in 2020. Progress is being made, but it is not enough to deal with the huge demand that exists. We are looking at every possible avenue to increase housing

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supply and build up the capacity of the industry to build more, particularly through apprenticeships, for example. The number of construction apprenticeship registrations in 2021 increased by more than 40% compared with the number in 2019. We are working at every level, therefore, to ensure that the industry has greater capacity and that we build more houses.

On the rent side, we have brought in a series of Bills to protect renters, particularly in rent pressure zones, which will become more important now given the inflation rate of 9% odd. Rent increases have to be limited to 2% in these zones.

On the affordable housing front, the Croí Conaithe cities initiative has been launched. A further initiative will be launched this week in respect of Croí Conaithe towns, which will entail substantial support for prospective homeowners to renovate a house and live in it. Significant support will be given by the State in that regard. The Land Development Agency, established by legislation by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is working on a range of initiatives to produce more housing. He also launched the first home shared equity scheme. That will be a significant scheme that will help teachers, gardaí and those in a range of other occupations to access homes in an affordable manner. The number of applications has been significant since the scheme was launched. I know Deputy McDonald opposed it but it has been proving very attractive so far to people.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I set out for the Taoiseach a story that I think is very worrying. The teachers' unions are expressing alarm over the fact that teachers are relocating from Dublin because they cannot afford to live here. They cannot afford the rents. They cannot afford to get a mortgage. These are the facts on the ground. I asked the Taoiseach whether he shared concerns about this. I asked him what is the Government's assessment of this phenomenon. I asked furthermore whether he will meet the teaching unions on this matter. I asked him what he proposes to do to avert what could become a very difficult situation, particularly in Dublin, if teachers cannot afford to live here and if they are under pressure even in terms of the cost of the commute. The Taoiseach did not answer the questions. I ask him respectfully that when he takes to his feet he answers these questions. What is the Government's assessment of this? What will the Taoiseach do about it? Will the Taoiseach meet the teaching unions on this matter?

**The Taoiseach:** I did give my assessment. I have made it consistently clear that housing is the number one priority. The Government is two years in office. It has produced a very comprehensive Housing for All strategy designed to ramp up house construction in this country, particularly social housing. We will have a record number of social houses built in 2022.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is simply not true.

**The Taoiseach:** We will also provide additional affordable homes. The first home shared equity scheme will help teachers.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** When?

**The Taoiseach:** It will help many people in terms of affordability. The scheme has been launched. Many people are already applying to join the scheme. The help-to-buy scheme has also been very effective for many people who have genuine, challenging situations with regard to affordability. It is not just teachers. It is many other professions and workers as well.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Yes but I asked the Taoiseach about teachers.

**The Taoiseach:** I know you did but I am making the point. This is a broader issue.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I am well aware of that.

**The Taoiseach:** We have to solve an issue with housing.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** You are not going to solve it.

**The Taoiseach:** I know there are similar problems in the North.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** No delivery.

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin's housing Minister in the North said it would take ten years to resolve it.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Fine Gael has been in government for 11 years.

**The Taoiseach:** That was Sinn Féin's position in charge of housing.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Well done Taoiseach. You avoided it again.

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

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Some words jump out from the study published today on unplanned pregnancy support and abortion care conducted by Dr. Catherine Conlon and her colleagues at Trinity College Dublin. The purpose of the study was to discover the experiences of women who have sought to access abortion under our abortion legislation. The words expressed by women include “awful”, “draining”, “arduous”, “harrowing” and “distressing”. This really shows just how inadequate our current legislative structure is to meet the real needs of women in crisis pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy. These are the women we voted to support in 2018 in the repeal referendum when the people voted with a 66.4% majority to ensure women would have access to abortion services in Ireland. Yet what we see from the study published today is that the paternalistic shadow cast by the eighth amendment is still over our system of abortion care provision.

The National Women's Council points out that it is clear from the experiences of the women expressed through the study that significant systemic improvements are required. Women share the anguish and distress of being deemed ineligible for care on the grounds of fatal foetal anomalies, the disempowering impact of the three-day wait and the shock many women have had at the lack of GPs providing care in rural communities. We know that 13 counties in Ireland have fewer than ten GPs willing to provide abortion services. Many counties have no provision at all for women. Therefore they must travel outside the county to avail of services, twice in many cases because of the three-day wait period prescribed in the legislation which is not based on any medical necessity. We know that the three-day wait period in particular causes real hardship for those women who struggle to get off work, those on low incomes and those at the end of the first trimester.

We know that last year more than 200 women had to travel to Britain to obtain abortions because the law here does not meet their needs. The old Irish solution to an Irish problem phenomenon has not gone away. Every woman who takes that lonely journey represents a failure by the Government and the State to deliver on the mandate the people gave us in 2018. Will the Taoiseach confirm when the review of the abortion legislation will be published? Will the

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Taoiseach confirm that the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, and the Government will ensure the review will address the inadequacies in the legislation, as illustrated by the evidence gathered by the team at Trinity College and the experiences so graphically expressed in the report by women describing how they had fared in seeking to access abortion care here? We heard about awful scenarios relating to women who were awaiting diagnosis as to whether an anomaly was “fatal enough” to enable a termination after 12 weeks. Some of the definitions in the legislation are deeply problematic not only for women and their families, but also for doctors and medics who face criminalisation under this legislation if they do not get it right.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. The background is very clear, as she will be aware. In May 2018, the Irish people voted, overwhelmingly, to repeal the eighth amendment. The Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was introduced in December of that year, in line with the amendment and the debate. It is important to make that point. An all-party Oireachtas committee worked through the complexities of the legislation. There is a requirement under that Act to ensure a wide-ranging review to examine the effectiveness of the operation of the legislation. That is under way. Ms Marie O’Shea, BL, has been appointed as the independent chair of the review. The Unplanned Pregnancy Support and Abortion Care Study, which was conducted by Trinity College Dublin, is part of the review provided for in the legislation. That part of the review is being carried out by Dr. Catherine Conlon and is seeking to generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women who have accessed abortion care services since the commencement of the Act. It will be part and parcel of, and fed into, the review. It is expected to have the entire review completed by the end of the year.

The majority of terminations of pregnancy, up to nine weeks, take place in the community setting. There are approximately 413 termination-of-pregnancy providers in the community. This includes 403 GP contractors and ten women’s health contractors. The HSE is saying it is satisfied that there is a good geographic spread. We need to wait for the review to be fully satisfied with that analysis, but that is what the HSE is saying.

In terms of maternity services, I am not satisfied. Eleven of the 19 maternity hospitals provide termination of pregnancy services. A number of other maternity hospitals are expected to introduce these services before the end of 2022. The Minister has provided additional funding for women’s health and the national maternity strategy, to be fair. That is resulting in a significant increase in consultant posts in our maternity services, which is helping to overcome the barrier of conscientious objection in some locations. All 19 maternity hospitals offer a range of services with regard to termination of pregnancies, including supporting women with any post-termination complications, provision of ultrasound scanning, where required, and the management of fatal foetal anomaly cases. It is important that reviews of this kind happen. It is a significant and disturbing analysis. It will be fed into the overall review and then that will be brought to the House for decisions to be taken.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Taoiseach for confirming the date. He said the end of the year is when the review will be complete and that is useful to hear. I acknowledge that the legislation that we passed was, indeed, done on a cross-party basis and many of us banded together to facilitate the passing of that very important change in the law. However, as the Taoiseach acknowledged, there are still certain inadequacies, which could be addressed even pending the publication of the review. Geographic coverage and availability of services throughout the State, both through GPs and, indeed, hospitals, should be improved upon, even without awaiting the outcome of the review.

I welcome the announcement the Taoiseach has made today on safe access zones, but it is somewhat overdue, given that we had sought those back in 2018. They were promised in late 2018 by the then Minister and we have been awaiting them since because women are still being intimidated in seeking to access services. While inadequacies remain and women cannot access services, locally, in their own area, we know that the legislation is still inadequate to meet the real needs of women. We look forward to the publication of the review and the making of evidence-based changes necessary to improve women's access to services, but some things could be done now to ensure women get better access to service here.

**The Taoiseach:** It is important that we examine the review in its full context and take on board all of the research that will be undertaken to feed into the review. There is further work to be done. I am satisfied the Minister is bringing forward the general scheme of a Bill on safe access zones. That is important, but getting it legally right was also important, as was getting the template right from a legal perspective.

We should also be conscious that others who are perhaps not covered had different experiences with how the Act operated, which were not good either. Those views should be taken into account as well and have to feed into our considerations. I do not want to go through individual cases but a case I came across certainly left me concerned about the operation of the Act, especially in respect of fatal foetal abnormality. These are complex issues at the best of times. However, the law of the land should apply and should be adhered to, particularly through the HSE.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taoiseach has been scathing of those of use who intend to vote no confidence in the Government this evening, suggesting it is negative and cynical and asking why we do not concentrate on positive proposals. This week, the Government has an opportunity to prove it is interested in positive proposals. The reason I have no confidence in this Government is that as we head into the summer recess it has done nothing to take on board positive proposals to deal with the utterly dire housing and homelessness crisis and the rental crisis blighting hundreds of thousands of working families and ordinary householders.

Tomorrow, People Before Profit have a Bill to reduce rents to affordable levels and link rents to people's income and their ability to pay, in other words, to have real rent controls, which the Government has failed to introduce successfully. Will the Government support our rent reduction Bill to bring rents down to 25% of median income? Why do we need such a measure? We have 320,000 renters and average rents nationally are currently €1,400 per month, which is totally unaffordable for huge numbers of working families. In Dublin they are €2,000 per month on average. That is €24,000 per year for an ordinary family. That is absolutely unaffordable. In my area, the average rent in the past six months was €2,600. The consequence of the Government's failure to control these rents is that we now have record numbers of families in homelessness, including children, as we head into the summer recess, and it is getting worse every week.

As if all that is not bad enough, in a report by Killian Woods in the *Business Post* at the weekend we discovered who is benefiting from this misery and these extortionate, unaffordable rents. Of the 91 applications put in for strategic housing development build-to-rent apartment blocks, 21 were lodged by investment entities based in tax havens, including the Isle of Man, Guernsey and the Virgin Islands, where the identities of the investors and shareholders are not even disclosed to the local authorities. These are tax dodgers - corporate tax dodgers - benefiting off the misery of people who are paying these extortionate rents. If the Taoiseach is serious

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about wanting positive proposals, I have a simple question for him. Will the Government support our Bill tomorrow to set rents at affordable levels? This has recently been done in France and other countries, by the way. Is the Taoiseach serious about people suffering from the rental and housing crisis or is he just spoofing?

**The Taoiseach:** It is no surprise to me that Sinn Féin and People Before Profit together will work very hard to have a motion of no confidence passed. They are working hand in glove on many of these issues in opposition to the Government. I put it to the Deputy that People Before Profit's economic platform, and Sinn Féin's, is one that would undermine the capacity of many working people to afford a lot of things because-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Do the words "Celtic tiger" mean anything to anybody? Please.

**The Taoiseach:** -----the anti-enterprise agenda of Sinn Féin and People Before Profit will undermine workers' incomes.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Micheál Martin and the Celtic tiger.

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

**The Taoiseach:** The bottom line is this Government has delivered an exceptionally strong economic recovery.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We have rising homelessness, rising house prices and rising rents.

**The Taoiseach:** The truth hurts, Deputy Ó Broin. The Deputy is not the leader of his party and should allow Deputy Boyd Barrett to speak. I know Sinn Féin wants to take over and subsume People Before Profit into Sinn Féin but the least he can do now is to allow Deputy Boyd Barrett to have his say.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** There was a 40% rise in child homelessness last year.

**The Taoiseach:** The point I am making is that the Government has delivered an exceptionally strong economic recovery, with the fastest jobs growth in the European Union. The bottom line is that 2.5 million people are employed. That is significant in the context of people's capacity to deal with exceptional cost-of-living issues. Rent is too high in this country. Deputy Boyd Barrett's Bill would make matters worse.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Bringing down rents would make matters worse.

**The Taoiseach:** It is a simplistic response. It is classic People Before Profit to produce legislation that will not work. The Deputy knows it will not work but it is popular, populist and non-implementable.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** How would it make things worse?

**The Taoiseach:** There would be a complete flood of people out of the market.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That has been happening for four years due to the Government's policies.

**The Taoiseach:** There would not be a landlord left under the Deputy's proposals. The Bill is also ill-defined. It refers to nominal medium disposable income. Could the Deputy start to

define that?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The definition is in the Bill.

**The Taoiseach:** The Bill is technically illiterate in its propositions. It is also economically illiterate. There is no question that it is unworkable legislation. That does not bother the Deputy. His whole approach, coming from the far left, is destabilisation and keep producing and being popular. We have to work with real life, which is difficult for people. Rent is very high. Supply is key to resolving the matter. We will build a record number of social houses this year.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** That is important. We have significantly increased the discretion to local authorities, for example, with regard to the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme. It has increased by over 35%.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That has not been introduced or enacted.

**The Taoiseach:** It has been introduced. Deputy Ó Broin should stop with the mistruths and misleading.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** The work on HAP has been significant in terms of the response of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to the issues that were raised when people sought greater discretion for local authorities to apply to the scheme.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It has not been enacted. The Taoiseach should talk to his local authority.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I guess that is a "No". The Government will not be supporting a Bill to reduce rents to affordable levels. That is not overly surprising from parties that are dominated by a disproportionate number of landlords relative to the population. Approximately €13 billion has been spent through HAP, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and leasing since 2001. That money in various rent supports and rent allowance has gone into the pockets of landlords. We now discover - and I note the Taoiseach did not respond on this point - that entities based in tax havens offshore in the Virgin Islands and whose identities are undisclosed are benefiting from this crisis. The Taoiseach is saying it is unrealistic that we control rents. Of course, when we called on the Government to stop evictions, the Government said it could not do it. The Government then stopped evictions during the pandemic because it had to. What happened? The number of families going into homelessness reduced. As soon as the Government allowed evictions to restart, the numbers of families going into homelessness went up and are now at record proportions. The truth is that the Taoiseach has no solutions but tries to dismiss ours when all of his Government's have failed. When will he listen to the hardship and suffering that people are enduring and take on board some proposals that are aimed at ameliorating that suffering?

**The Taoiseach:** I will always take on board proposals once they are realistic. The Deputy is not tabling a motion on the basis of realism.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is a Bill.

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**The Taoiseach:** He is tabling the Bill on the basis of politics and to be popular. He proved that with his opening line when he asked who is against reducing rent. Nobody is against that.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Government is going to vote against the Bill.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy produces legislation, puts it up on the wall and then claims the Government is voting against reducing rents. The Deputy can claim his party is voting for it and they are, therefore, the virtuous ones. That completely ignores the reality on the ground in terms of the non-implementability, to coin a phrase, of the Bill. It is not doable. It is as simple as that. We have rent controls in the rent pressure zones. What is doable is to build the largest ever number of social houses this year, which we will. We will have to do that every year for the next five to ten years. We must build far more affordable and cost rental homes. We have to maintain HAP, which is a strong subsidy for people who are renting now.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Government is cutting people off HAP.

**The Taoiseach:** We cannot eliminate HAP right now because there would be thousands and thousands of people without homes if there was no HAP. It is a substantial rent subsidy to people on low incomes, which is as it should be right now.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up please.

**The Taoiseach:** That is the reality of where we are right now. We have to deal with that and build more houses. As we build more houses, we can reduce the dependency on HAP. However, we simply have to get far more supply. To be fair-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** Let us be honest. The Deputy's party and others on local councils up and down the country have opposed housing programmes and projects. The Deputy has opposed them because it did not fit his utopian ideal as what constitutes a housing development.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** My first day in Leinster House was 25 years ago when I was a member of the Defence Forces security detail charged with protecting the campus. I admit to spending a little bit too much time in the Visitors Gallery looking down at proceedings. Little did I know how events would transpire and I would actually end up here today.

It is on that basis that I want to welcome the additional funding that has been announced this morning for our military. It is very important because it is desperately needed. I welcome the increased funding for infrastructure and capability development but, particularly, I want to welcome the increased funding for military pay for the people who are on the lowest pay grade in our Defence Forces. Those are the people who have less than three years' service.

We all appreciate that our defence community has no access to the Workplace Relations Commission. It is denied access to the Labour Court and to any type of industrial action whatsoever. It is uniquely vulnerable from that perspective. Therefore, it is the Government's job to intervene regularly to ensure a level playing field from a military perspective. To be fair to the Opposition as well, it is also the Opposition's role. I want to put on record my gratitude to all Members of the House from all sides, both Government and Opposition benches, who have campaigned so passionately over this issue for the past number of years.

It is good to see at least a moderate increase and improvement announced this morning. Is

the plan perfect? Of course not. However, is it progress? Yes, for sure. It builds on progress that has already occurred this year, particularly allowing reservists to travel overseas and for PDFORRA and Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, to associate with Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU.

How will we know if the plan is working? There is only one metric that matters and that is headcount. The strength of our military is the lowest it has been for 50 years right now at fewer than 8,300 people. It has not been this low in half a century and we need to get that number up. There has been a net loss of 203 people already in the first five months of this year. That is ten people a week. That is not turnover; that is attrition. No organisation can put up with that level of attrition.

The focus now needs to shift on three other allowances. First, the specialised instructors allowance was taken away as result of the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, cuts that have yet to be returned. Also, the military service allowance needs to be done, but also the patrol duty allowance. Because it is in his constituency, the Taoiseach would be aware that there is a major problem with the Naval Service at the moment. We get many calls from Cork, which I am very happy to take of course. Strictly speaking, they may not be my constituents, but they certainly are my people.

Does the Taoiseach accept that there are unique industrial relations circumstances in our armed forces as part of our military community? As a result, it requires regular, direct intervention by the Cabinet to ensure there is a level playing field for our troops and their very important families.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. It is fair to say that since he was elected, he has been a very strong advocate for the Defence Forces. He has been advocating on its behalf to many Members in this House, including Members of Government. His advocacy has been consistent and genuine, obviously, given his own experience. I did not realise the vicarious influence, if I may say, of just being here looking after us many years ago had and the clear impact in ending up as a Member of the House through spending that time in the Gallery. The Deputy must have been attracted to what was going on to make him want to become a participant.

Today at the Cabinet meeting, the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, brought forward a memorandum. We met with the commission on a number of occasions. I have met with the commission and the commission chair. It is a high level action plan. It will entail multi-annual funding increases, commencing in 2023, to reach a defence budget of €1.5 billion by 2028. It will involve - the Deputy was correct when he said this is key metric - increasing the number of personnel, which will be an enormous challenge, by nearly 2,000 over the current establishment figure of 9,500.

The other key aspect of this is that there is an urgent need for human resources change and a cultural transformation of our Defence Forces. When I spoke to the chairperson, he was adamant about that. There are many practices that need dramatic transformation. It will take time. That is as important a part of the commission's recommendations as the ambition to go to a higher level of provision and defence capability. The report says we should go to level 2, as outlined in the report. I do not think we have any choice but to do that in terms of the level of ambition. It is a realistic level of ambition that we can get to. When we get to that level of ambition, we can review. We need radar systems and we need to have a greater understanding

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of the risks and so on, given our maritime size, and also in terms of how that relates to our naval strength and what is going on in the air around Ireland and so on. These are all issues on which we need to be stronger in terms of capability, intelligence and understanding.

In terms of the pay structures, there is a recommendation to provide immediate access to the seagoing service commitment scheme to direct-entry personnel in the Naval Service. We will follow through on the removal of the requirement for a private, three-star, or able seaman to mark time for the first three years at that rank. The payment of the full rate of military service allowance applicable to the rank of all private, three star, or able seamen personnel, replacement of the existing seagoing allowances with less complex seagoing duty measures and introduction of long-service increments to the pay scales of all ranks are all recommendations that have been made on the personnel front. It is something we are going to pursue. The Government will be keeping a hands-on approach through the Department and I, as Taoiseach, will be following through in terms of implementation with the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I thank the Taoiseach for his response. There is a supplementary matter I wish to raise, relating to the €1,000 pandemic bonus payment. Not a single member of the Defence Forces has been paid the bonus yet, even though hundreds of them are eligible, entitled to it and have been told it is coming. It still has not arrived, however. We have heard that, rightly, 75,000 people in the HSE have been paid the bonus. That is fantastic and I say “Well done” to the HSE for paying its own staff, but there are members of other organisations that looked after contact tracing, testing and vaccination who are eligible for this allowance yet still have not been paid. Not only has it not been paid, no member of the Defence Forces has applied for it because there is no mechanism in place to do so. I would be grateful if the Taoiseach were to take that up with his relevant line Ministers to see if he can ensure prompt payment for our troops.

**The Taoiseach:** I acknowledge that members of the Defence Forces played a crucial role in our testing, tracing and vaccination programmes. In recognition of their input and unique role during the pandemic, the Government announced that they would benefit from the Covid-19 recognition payment along with other front-line workers. It is disappointing that this payment has not yet been made to members of the Defence Forces. The HSE is managing the payments to all recipients of the payment. Some 90,000 healthcare workers have already received it. The Department of Health is due to meet formally with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform shortly to review this and see how we can accelerate payments to those who have yet to receive them.

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

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

Tuesday’s business shall be:

- Motion re Supplementary Estimate for Public Services [Vote 29] (back from Committee) (without debate)
- Motion re Sixteenth Report of the Committee of Selection (without debate)
- Motion re Orders of Reference of Select Committee on Finance, Public Expendi-

ture and Reform, and Taoiseach (without debate)

- Motion re Membership of the Joint Committee on Standing Orders (Private Business) (without debate)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of meeting of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on Bere Island (without debate)

- Motion re Confidence in the Government (to conclude within 145 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately and by means of roll-call)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No. 514/2014 laying down general provisions on the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund amending Regulation (EU) 514/2014 (to conclude within 55 minutes)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (to conclude within 55 minutes)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re Raise the Roof, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Instruction to Committee on the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 [Seanad] (to conclude within 60 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage of the Bill)

- Statements and Questions and Answers post European Council meeting of 23rd-24th June, pursuant to Standing Order 124 (not to exceed 125 minutes, including 20 minutes questions and answers)

- Sick Leave Bill 2022 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 30 minutes)

- Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 30 minutes)

- Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 30 minutes)

- Electoral Reform Bill 2022 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 45 minutes)

- Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 [Seanad] (deferred division on Second Stage, followed by Committee and remaining Stages) (Committee and remaining Stages to conclude within 2 hours and 30 minutes)

- Payment of Wages (Amendment) (Tips and Gratuities) Bill 2022 [Seanad] (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 45 minutes)

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Private Members' Business shall be Second Stage of the Rent Reduction Bill 2022, selected by People-Before-Profit Solidarity.

Thursday's business shall be Statements on Summer Economic Statement (not to exceed 210 minutes). Thursday evening business shall be Second Stage of the Green Hydrogen Strategy Bill 2022.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders is modified to the following extent:

(i) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Health and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil, which may be later than 10.30 p.m.; and

(ii) notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 37, topical issues shall not be taken and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Health pursuant to Standing Order 46(1);

2. the Motion re Supplementary Estimate for Public Services [Vote 29] shall be taken without debate;

3. the Motion re Sixteenth Report of the Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate;

4. the Motion re Orders of Reference of Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach shall be taken without debate;

5. the Motion re Membership of the Joint Committee on Standing Orders (Private Business) shall be taken without debate;

6. the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of meeting of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands on Bere Island shall be taken without debate;

7. the Motion re Confidence in the Government shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 145 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 135 minutes, following which a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, and members may share time;

8. the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No. 514/2014 laying down general provisions on the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund amending Regulation (EU) 514/2014 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclu-

sion after 55 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State - 10 minutes;
- speech by a representative of Sinn Féin - 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Independent Group - 5 minutes per party or group; and
- a speech in response by a Minister or Minister of State - 5 minutes; and

(ii) members may share time; and

9. the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 55 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State - 10 minutes;
- speech by a representative of Sinn Féin - 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group and the Independent Group - 5 minutes per party or group; and
- a speech in response by a Minister or Minister of State - 5 minutes; and

(ii) members may share time.

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

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

(i) the Dáil shall meet at 9.00 a.m. to take the Motion re Instruction to Committee on the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 [Seanad];

(ii) the SOS shall be taken on the conclusion of the Statements and Questions and Answers post European Council meeting of 23rd-24th June, pursuant to Standing Order 124, which shall be taken on the conclusion of Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1), with consequential effect on the time for the commencement of Government business;

(iii) the weekly division time may be taken later than 8.45 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Payment of Wages (Amendment) (Tips and Gratuities) Bill 2022 [Seanad], with consequential effect on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil, which may be later than 9.30 p.m.;

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(iv) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall not be taken as the first item of business but shall instead be taken as the last item of business and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion thereof; and

(v) notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 6th May, 2021, the deadline for submission of topical issues on Wednesday shall be 10.00 a.m.;

2. the Motion re Instruction to Committee on the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 [Seanad] shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes, and shall be confined to a single speaking round, with the contributions of a Minister and of a spokesperson for Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People-Before-Profit Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group (which shall be taken in that order) not exceeding 7.5 minutes each, and members may share time: Provided that any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage of the Bill;

3. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 170, the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Rent Reduction Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after two hours;

4. the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the Statements and Questions and Answers post European Council meeting of 23rd-24th June, pursuant to Standing Order 124:

(i) the statements shall consist of a single round, which shall not exceed 100 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for that time, immediately followed by questions and answers which shall not exceed 20 minutes;

(ii) following the questions and answers, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and

(iii) members may share time;

5. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Sick Leave Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment;

6. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one Question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform;

7. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Circular Economy, Waste Management (Amendment) and Minerals Development (Amendment) Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes and any

amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications;

8. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Electoral Reform Bill 2022 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 45 minutes and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage;

9. the proceedings on the Committee and remaining Stages of the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 [Seanad] shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours and 30 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and

10. the proceedings on the Committee and remaining Stages of the Payment of Wages (Amendment) (Tips and Gratuities) Bill 2022 [Seanad] shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 45 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

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

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

(i) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m., and shall, in any event, be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on the Summer Economic Statement, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the Green Hydrogen Strategy Bill 2022; and

(ii) notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 37, eight topical issues shall be taken;

2. the Dáil, on its rising, shall adjourn until 2.00 p.m. on Wednesday, 14th September, 2022; and

3. the Statements on the Summer Economic Statement shall not exceed 210 minutes, with arrangements in accordance with those agreed by Order of the Dáil of 30th July, 2020, for 200 minutes, following which a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, and members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Order of Business agreed?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is not agreed. The House has been given two and a half hours tomorrow to deal with the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, which is controversial legislation to which many Members have tabled detailed amendments. Late on Thursday, the Government submitted 48 pages of non-consequential amendments to what is an

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18-page Bill. There has been no Dáil scrutiny of many of the provisions. Some of them are not controversial; others, relating to judicial reviews, are deeply controversial. The idea that the Government would try to ram through 48 pages of technical legislation through amendments, many of which will not even be dealt with in the limited time allotted, is wholly unacceptable. In addition, the deputy chairman of An Bord Pleanála resigned on Friday, with all the implications that has for public confidence in that important body, and the fact that there is no mention of that being discussed this week is problematic. On that basis, I am opposing the Order of Business.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I too have serious concerns regarding the way the Order of Business has been scheduled. Last week, I criticised the Government for having shoehorned five Bills into five hours on Wednesday afternoon. It is now proposing that six Bills be shoehorned into six hours tomorrow. Even worse, there are significant numbers of amendments to some of those Bills, including significant numbers of Government amendments. There are 73 amendments to the Electoral Reform Bill alone, yet only 45 minutes of debate planned. Most seriously, six major new sections have been added to the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill, which will more than double the length of the Bill, from 18 pages to nearly 50, with 48 pages of amendments from the Minister. The Department of Housing under Fine Gael, supported by Fianna Fáil, created this crisis in An Bord Pleanála and the avalanche of judicial reviews when the strategic housing development process was brought in. Now, without pre-legislative scrutiny or the opportunity for Second Stage debate on these significant amendments to the judicial review process, we see all of these amendments coming into tomorrow's schedule when we have not had a chance for any scrutiny of these amendments in advance. We have serious questions about the process by which this Bill and these amendments in particular are being pushed through in tomorrow's schedule. We cannot support the Order of Business-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I advise Deputy Bacik that the Government Business tomorrow will include a motion regarding an instruction to committee on the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022. That might provide-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Yes, for 45 minutes in the morning.

**The Taoiseach:** Sixty minutes.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** At committee meetings I have been raising the plight of pig farmers. It seems Deputies do not want to discuss this. This beat all, however, introducing 67 new amendments to the planning and development Bill, which will change the whole type of the Bill. It is now a seriously different Bill from what we thought it was at first. We debated it here and the Minister told me he would have five different sets of amendments. He has six different sets of amendments, actually - 67 in total - and he is going to ram it through tomorrow in little more than two hours. This is shockingly bad. Rushed legislation is always bad but this is terrible. It will destroy the input of the local authorities into the legislation. It is a takeover, a power grab by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. There is no democracy anymore, not in this House nor in our local authorities. It is shocking. We in the Rural Independent Group are totally opposed to it.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** The Government is seeking to ram through amendments to the planning Bill this week that will severely curtail and restrict the ability of people to hold An Bord Pleanála to account. That is what the Government is doing this week. If these changes go through, they will severely restrict and curtail the ability of people to hold An Bord Pleanála to

account. These changes amount effectively to a get out of jail free card for An Bord Pleanála if it is found to have broken processes or indeed broken the law in making planning decisions. It is incredible that the Government is seeking to do that right now when An Bord Pleanála is under investigation regarding multiple allegations. Reports on those investigations have not yet been published. Will the Government not withdraw these amendments that seek to curtail people's ability to hold An Bord Pleanála to account and await the publication of those reports and indeed the publication of the review into planning?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I agree with the points that have been made. The Government's approach in regard to the planning Bill is an absolute scandal. It is an abuse of the most basic processes in terms of how Parliament should operate.

I also wish to make a more fundamental point. It is proposed that we rise on Thursday, 14 July and the Dáil will not sit again until Wednesday 14 September. That is more than eight weeks at a time when people's incomes are effectively being eroded, day after day, by inflation running at close to 10%, when one in three people now live in energy poverty with obscene profiteering by the energy companies and the big food companies. The Dáil should not rise until it addresses this crisis, until it imposes price controls on the essentials such as diesel, gas and electricity, until it imposes a windfall tax on the profiteering that is happening, and until it acts to protect people from this crisis.

**The Taoiseach:** First, in terms of the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2022 and the amendments the Minister is bringing in, we heard during Leader's Questions demands to increase housing supply, reduce the pressure on renters and so on. That is the full purpose of the amendments, essentially, in regard to short-term lettings, which I would have thought many people were calling for in this House. Many people were looking for this and the Minister is now endeavouring to provide for that. They are positive amendments that will provide greater supply. We just had people complaining about the absence of supply and the need for more supply.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Has the Taoiseach read the amendments?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Clearly not.

**The Taoiseach:** I have, indeed, in terms of the short-term lettings.

In addition, I would make the point that the Government has made it clear that there will be a very substantial cost-of-living package in tandem with the budget. A lot of work has to go into that and into the budget in terms of getting that right.

We have already, last week, introduced measures in terms of increasing the back-to-school allowance by €100. That will take effect in the next week or so. In addition, we are providing extensive meals to children in DEIS schools, particularly the new schools. We had the largest increase in DEIS schools ever this year, which was an outstanding measure taken by the Minister for Education. Now the school meals programme will be applied as a cost-of-living measure but also because it is the right thing to do for those attending those DEIS schools. School transport fees have been waived for the coming September period, again to reduce costs families would face as the children go back to school. These are reasonable measures.

We need a more comprehensive package at the end of September in terms of the cost of living. There is no doubt about that. We have to do it in a way that is not inflationary as best we

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can and we have to alleviate the pressures on households.

I understand there were briefings of the committee by Department officials yesterday in relation to these amendments. We need to continue to streamline our system to make sure we can increase supply of all forms of housing units.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Give the planning regulator quite a lot of power.

**The Taoiseach:** Certainly, there is no grab for power. In response to Deputy Cian O’Callaghan, I would take exception to the assertion that we are somehow resiling from holding An Bord Pleanála to account. The Minister has appointed a senior counsel on that core issue. That is a very serious review. Additional time was sought. It is important when we create a process that it is given time. As the Deputy will be aware, An Bord Pleanála is doing its review. The planning regulator is doing a review as well. There are three.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** Why not wait for that to make changes to the law?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time is up. I am obliged to put the question.

Question put: “That the proposed arrangements for this week’s business be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 77; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	

*Dáil Éireann*

<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ó Riordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	

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<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Jack Chambers and Brendan Griffin; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Mattie McGrath.

Question declared carried.

*3 o'clock*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We move on now to questions on promised legislation. We have just 20 minutes remaining. I ask those leaving the Chamber to do so quietly. Given the short time we have, would Members be agreeable to 30 seconds for questions and 30 seconds for answers?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Yes. Well, any answer, whether in 30 seconds or two seconds, would be great.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I have raised with the Taoiseach many times the real stress on families now with the costs of getting children back to school in September. I have also acknowledged that it is welcome that the back to school allowance has been increased by €100. We also ask that this allowance be extended. Many middle-income families are struggling badly, and they will not qualify for one red cent. I want the Taoiseach to reconsider this and to make the allowance available to those households. We reckon that 500,000 additional children ought to be covered. They come from middle-income families and they need a break.

**The Taoiseach:** The back to school allowance being increased is a good thing, as are the expansion of the schools meals programme and the elimination of school transport fees for the coming academic year for primary and second-level schools. Regarding the broader issues mentioned by the Deputy, €2.5 billion has so far been implemented in respect of cost-of-living measures. The forthcoming cost-of-living package at the end of September will deal with the group she referred to. It will have greater breadth altogether in helping them and reducing the stress.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Since this Government took office, rents have increased by 15%. Media reports last weekend showed that a legislative loophole in rent pressure zone laws has enabled cuckoo funds to contribute to this problem, charging exorbitant rents, for example, €2,140 per month for a one-bed apartment and up to €5,220 per month for a three-bed. Until the Government reins these funds in, it is difficult to see the situation resolving itself. While we are due to rise for the summer recess this week, struggling renters cannot afford to wait. Will the Government bring forward legislation to close this loophole and ensure some measures are taken to address the power of cuckoo funds in the market?

**The Taoiseach:** The Government is doing everything it possibly can to protect renters. They need to be protected and rent pressure zones are doing that. Some of the measures in the Bill to be taken tomorrow, which people have been objecting to, will also help facilitate the provision of more units for longer-term renters as opposed to short-term lets.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The Dáil is about to rise for the summer and as it does, the Government leaves a trail of housing misery in its wake. The Government has earned the dubious distinction of breaking a number of housing records. A record number of people are now homeless, including an increase of nearly 50% in the number of children who have become homeless in the past year. Rents are at record high and extortionate levels. House prices are at record high levels and are unaffordable for the vast majority of workers. Homeownership rates are at record low levels. Last year, a report by the ESRI stated that the current generation of young people would be the first to be worse off than their parents. This year, an ESRI report stated that Generation Rent faces an age of poverty going into old age. What exactly does treating the housing emergency like an emergency mean to the Government, because we are not seeing it at the minute?

**The Taoiseach:** There is another side to the story, which the Deputy did not articulate, in that 43,000 planning permission applications were granted in 2021 and 30,000 new homes had commenced in the year up to May 2022. As I said earlier, Ireland has gone from the third lowest level of completions *per capita* in 2011 to the fifth highest in 2020. Some 31,000 homes commenced in 2021, but we need to do more. There will be a record number of social houses in 2022 but we need to continue that trend for the next ten years.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Government likes to talk the talk when it comes to the climate crisis but it repeatedly fails to walk the walk. The 51% reduction in emissions target by 2030 does not match the science regarding what is required of developed countries, but we are already off track with that inadequate target. The Environmental Protection Agency stated: “The current pace of implementation will not achieve the change required.” We were meant to have sectoral ceilings by the end of June, according to the climate action plan. Clearly, we do not have them because of lobbying by big agribusiness and Ministers representing their interests within the Government.

Will the Government again bow down to the lobbying of big agribusiness with the consequence of more reductions for the rest of society or, more likely, simply missing the target, or will it implement the just transition, including for small farmers who would benefit from a transition based on the principles of food sovereignty?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not know what the Deputy means by “big agribusiness”. I think the farmers-----

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**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Greencore, Kerry Group, Glanbia; you know yourself.

**The Taoiseach:** But you know yourself as well. The Deputy just threw out the phrase “big agribusiness”-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I just named them.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and ignored farmers across the length and breadth of the country, be they suckler herd farmers or whatever. The bottom line is this: the Government is walking the walk in respect of climate change. The most comprehensive active travel funding and plans were put in place by this Government in the past two years, and we passed a climate action law we. Discussions on the sectoral emission targets and limits are under way between the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and the line Ministers for each sector. We have also brought in a carbon tax, the revenue from which will go towards environmental farming, retrofitting, and fuel poverty, but of course the Deputy opposes that.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** Will the Taoiseach outline the Government’s plan to deliver the infrastructure necessary to develop the Atlantic economic corridor as a counterbalance to the over development on the east coast? The provision of wastewater facilities, new modes of transport, broadband, and health facilities need to be planned and delivered so that we can cope with the existing and projected increases in population. They would also offer the opportunities for offshore energy development off the west coast. We must be ready to maximise the potential of further foreign direct investment. What does the Government plan to do in the short term?

**The Taoiseach:** I support the Deputy’s basic view about developing the Atlantic economic corridor, rebalancing economic development and ensuring that the western seaboard benefits from this, particularly in terms of offshore wind and infrastructure developments, such as the western rail corridor, which is part of the national strategic rail review. In my view, rail will play a very important part in underpinning economic development in the west in the future. We are marketing the west, Galway and Mayo in particular, very strongly in respect of industrial development right down to Clare. The combination of energy, industry and infrastructure means we are within reach of achieving the transformational shift required in rebalancing the economy of the island.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** With water outages now a daily occurrence in many rural towns and areas in Tipperary, will the Taoiseach’s Government continue the folly of bringing a pipe from the Shannon right up to Dublin when almost 50% of the water will leak out of those pipes? It is a matter not only of what leaks out but also of what leaks and seeps back in when the pipes are burst and open. Will the Government reconsider this daft plan? I cannot get over the Taoiseach’s Green Party colleagues who will allow for this huge construction and devastation of land and flora and fauna and everything else through our Premier County and all the other counties.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not know what the Deputy has against Dublin.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I have nothing against Dublin.

**The Taoiseach:** Will he allow Dublin people to drink water in 30 years’ time?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The pipes should be fixed. I have nothing against Dublin.

**The Taoiseach:** That is not a facetious question I ask; it is a very serious one. We met with

Irish Water yesterday. Going back to Deputy Canney's point, Irish Water is looking at wastewater treatment plants in towns and villages across the country. Irish Water also made the point to us that there is a real crisis facing us if we do not plan appropriately. That Shannon project is essential-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It will cost billions.

**The Taoiseach:** -----to Dublin's capacity to survive over the next three decades. We really need to get serious-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Okay, but we are running out of time.

**The Taoiseach:** -----in the Houses of the Oireachtas and not just oppose everything-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We do not oppose everything. This project is nonsensical.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because it might be locally popular and ranting and raving about the place.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Last week, during Leaders' Questions to the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, I raised the issue of the continuation of notices to quit. The difference now is that the family support unit of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive states that it is at capacity, there are no available hub spaces and hotels and bed and breakfasts have little availability. I gave the Minister the example of a couple being charged €460 for one room. At the weekend the Simon Communities came out with its Locked out of the Market report, which states that there is not a single property to rent for a family with one child identified anywhere in the country under the standard HAP rate and that just 12 were available within the discretionary rate. We need to move immediately to a reinstatement of the eviction ban and to a rent freeze.

**The Taoiseach:** There are huge pressures on the rental sector. That is why the Minister's amendments tomorrow is not the full story but it is part of the agenda to try to create greater opportunities for supply.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Simon states that there will be record numbers in the next two months, while Members will be away.

**The Taoiseach:** I know, and I have read the summary of the Simon report and that is exactly why the Minister will do what he will do tomorrow in legislation and amendments.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Not for these families.

**Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan:** We all know somebody with Parkinson's disease. Unfortunately, in County Cork many people have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease but, incredibly, we have zero Parkinson's nurses in Cork. That cannot continue. It has been proven with Parkinson's disease that early intervention is key. The Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, in fairness, met campaigners last week outside the gates of the Dáil. Their ask is simple. In the last budget we promised 20 neurology nurses. All we ask is that six of those neurology nurses go to Cork and that two of those nurses are Parkinson's disease nurses. It is a small ask and would make a massive difference to people with the disease.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. I will work with the Minister for Health and the HSE nationally and regionally to see if we can improve the

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availability of Parkinson's nurses in the Cork region.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The programme for Government commits to delivering insurance reform to reduce premiums and to increase the availability of insurance in Ireland. While I welcome the Government's ongoing efforts on the implementation of the action plan for insurance reform, I was contacted recently by Delphi Resort and the Health Hub gym, in Swinford, which have excellent safety records but have seen their premiums increase by 300% since 2019. Insurers are simply not passing on the benefits of recent reform to liability insurance policyholders. To restore faith in the process, we need to do everything in our power to ensure that incumbent insurers pass on the benefits and, ultimately, drive liability insurance premiums down to an affordable level.

**The Taoiseach:** I think the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, announced something recently that may impact positively the situation to which Deputy Dillon referred and the people to whom he referred. That should help. According to the CSO consumer price index data for May 2022, the price of motor insurance is 10.9% lower than in May 2021. No one in the Dáil has raised that. Members have raised all the increases, but no one has raised that fact. The last time motor insurance prices were at that level was in October-November 2013. There we are.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** Nitrous oxide is a gas that has medical and industrial uses. Increasingly, however, it is used as a recreational drug. It is known colloquially as hippy crack. Doctors see young people present to emergency departments showing progressive disorders affecting nerves in their arms and legs related to the illicit use of nitrous oxide. Doctors now warn that the use of nitrous oxide canisters has become a public health issue. Is the Taoiseach aware that large piles of discarded canisters of this gas are being found in our parks, on our roads and streets and around our estates? Will the Government consider introducing a law to regulate the sale, distribution and use of nitrous oxide gas canisters?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy raises a very serious issue that is potentially very damaging to many people, in particular young people. We will certainly work with the Deputy on any proposal. I will talk to the relevant Ministers and get feedback from the Garda Síochána as to what legislative template might be the most optimal to deal with this very serious issue.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** The Taoiseach will be aware of the recent HIQA report on University Hospital Limerick, which makes for grim reading. The bad news is that the situation has deteriorated further since the report was published. The Taoiseach did indicate to me here, on 1 February, that he was in principle very much in favour of the idea of an elective-only hospital in the region to alleviate the situation. Has the Government taken any decision on that yet? If not, when will a decision be taken? We are suffering from discrimination in the mid-west. The medical facilities and the bed capacity available are insufficient to cater to the needs of the population.

**The Taoiseach:** Immediate work is needed in University Hospital Limerick, and it needs to continue. I know that certain governance measures are being taken and that a team from the HSE has visited the hospital. A formal decision has not yet come to the Cabinet, but we are positively orientated towards it. The new Government, when coming into office, inherited proposals in respect of Cork and Galway, which had not really been advanced to any great degree. They are now being advanced. The elective route is an essential one, particularly where acute hospitals like UHL are under unacceptable pressures and cannot cope.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** The programme for Government commits to a pensions solution for carers. The Taoiseach will know that the Commission on Pensions in its report put forward a number of recommendations as to how that can be done. While I appreciate there are different views on the pension age, there should be no delay in providing a full State pension to family carers, and that needs to include foster carers. I ask that this be looked at ahead of the budget, the plan being to introduce it in the budget. Family carers have waited this long for a State pension; they deserve no less and it should be included in this year's budget.

**The Taoiseach:** The report of the Commission on Pensions is being considered by the Government. There is a broad range of proposals in that regard. Any improvements in respect of carer's allowance or broader supports for carers will be considered in the context of the budget.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** Yesterday the Taoiseach will have seen that the futures price of natural gas hit its highest, at €175 per megawatt hour, since the start of the war in Ukraine. Germany is talking about potential rationing and emergency gas storage. France is talking about a massive efficiency drive. Where is our energy security review, which is now long overdue? Will we address some of these challenges now clearly emerging in the rest of Europe?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes. That work is still on the way. I do not have an exact timeline yet, but I will engage again with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications on that. A comprehensive review is due this year, but I think we need a more focused and immediate assessment of the situation because of the war on Ukraine and Russian actions. Russia, clearly, has weaponised energy, weaponised food and weaponised migration-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, a Thaoisigh. I call Deputy Bríd Smith.

**Deputy Bríd Smith:** The Unplanned Pregnancy and Abortion Care, UnPAC, study commissioned by the HSE is welcome and confirms concerns that many of us have about abortion access in this country. In particular, UnPAC states, "Conditions put in place ... are anything but compassionate." This has to be of particular concern regarding fatal foetal anomalies. Here we have a problem in that abortion is criminalised. Does the Taoiseach agree that abortion care is a health issue and not a crime?

**The Taoiseach:** The review is an important one. It will feed into the broader review under way regarding the termination of pregnancy legislation. We should have it completed by the end of this year. That will then inform our approach to the Act, and we will see where we take it from there.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Listry Bridge is on the regional road from Killarney to Milltown, Castlemaine and Dingle. It services all of mid-Kerry. It was built more than 200 years ago.

**The Taoiseach:** What is the name of the bridge?

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Listry Bridge. It was built more than 200 years ago for horses and cars. It is now unable to carry single-lane traffic. Indeed, Deputy Griffin goes over this bridge. I do not know whether he knows the name of it or not. It is very unfair on all the people of mid-Kerry, and on Deputy Griffin, that the bridge is reduced to a single lane. There are plans on file somewhere-----

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

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**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** -----detailing the need for this bridge. I ask the Taoiseach to dust down the files and provide money to make a proper bridge out of it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's concern for Deputy Griffin is most moving and touching.

**The Taoiseach:** It is indeed. In fairness to Deputy Griffin, we should do everything we possibly can to identify the issues here. I presume it is a matter for the county council.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The county council is in charge of it but the money has to come from here.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy has great access to the county council. Surely-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Johnny and Maura and Jack Healy-Rae have it raised.

**The Taoiseach:** I would have thought the Deputy, as a public representative, would have persuaded the council at this stage to get it done. Anyway, we will dust down the digital files and see where the bridge is.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Good stuff.

**The Taoiseach:** There are quite a number of projects like that across the country that need to be done, so we will see will see what the story is.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** The day Deputy Micheál Martin was elected as Taoiseach, I raised the issue of Shannon Heritage sites with him and the need to take them out of Shannon Group, which does not want them, and give them a new lease of life. I have raised it several times since. The last time, the Taoiseach said Clare County Council just needs to get on with it. I understand the council very much wants to get on with it but the proposal is being bounced around Government Buildings. At the moment, it is between the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Transport and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Can the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, tell me when a decision will be made? If he cannot tell me today, will he tell me in writing before the Dáil rises?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes. I will follow that up for the Deputy. He is saying it is bouncing around between the Departments responsible for transport, housing-----

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** Public expenditure. However, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform says it is not. He may have a decision made on the matter.

**The Taoiseach:** He tends to be more decisive-----

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** He might wish to brief us.

**The Taoiseach:** He tends to be decisive, which could mean it is bouncing back somewhere again. The Government made a decision to take Shannon Heritage out of Shannon Group. It was to go to local authorities.

**Deputy Michael McNamara:** We are in the third tourism season since so there needs to be movement.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies. We can have the conversation again.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** No doubt the Taoiseach is aware that the Fleadh Cheoil will return to Mullingar at the end of July. There is great excitement, and preparations are under way the length and breadth of the town and beyond. One of the issues that arises relates specifically to the first responders and the ask that will be placed on them for the duration of the event. For almost a year, the Order of Malta in Mullingar has repeatedly sought engagement with the HSE and Department of Health. Applications have been sent, calls have been made and emails have been sent but not a single one of them has been responded to. The Order of Malta will have 36 units in Mullingar and 80 volunteers will provide 24-hour coverage across four medical posts. Those involved will be sleeping on the floor of a hall, with no access to showers and bathrooms. I ask for the Taoiseach's personal intervention. It is not too late for something to be put in place to ensure the individuals have a proper base to work out of, somewhere safe-----

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** What is the event?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** -----and fit for them to do their job and for the town to be able to benefit from their expertise.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy for raising that important matter.

**The Taoiseach:** That would appear to be something that the county council, with the organisers of the fleadh and the local HSE officials, should resolve. I was not aware of this. Normally, those kinds of operational issues are sorted out and organised in advance of such a big event. It will be a very big event. We are always very grateful to the Order of Malta and other such organisations for the work they do voluntarily to enable these festivals to take place, so they should be looked after. I will follow it up.

## **Estimates for Public Services 2022**

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I move the following Supplementary Estimate:

### **Vote 29 - Office of the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Second Supplementary Estimate)**

That a second supplementary sum not exceeding €110,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2022, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote put and agreed to.

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

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the Sixteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selec-

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tion in accordance with Standing Order 34, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 7th July, 2022, and appoints members to Committees accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

**Orders of Reference of Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach: Motion**

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

That the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach shall have the power to send for persons, papers and records included in its Orders of Reference for the sole and exclusive purpose of the examination of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform's policies and procedures relating to the secondments of public servants.

Question put and agreed to.

**Membership of Joint Committee on Standing Orders (Private Business): Motion**

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

That, pursuant to Standing Order 5 of the Standing Orders of the Dáil and Seanad relative to Private Business, the following members be appointed to be members of the Joint Committee on Standing Orders (Private Business): Deputies Cormac Devlin, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Matt Shanahan and Seán Sherlock.

Question put and agreed to.

**Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands: Motion**

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

That Dáil Éireann, in accordance with Article 15.1.3° of the Constitution, hereby determines that the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands may meet on Bere Island, County Cork, on a date in September decided by the Committee, in connection with the challenges facing Islanders on the operation of national Islands policies: provided that, pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), Members may participate in such meeting from within the parliamentary precincts by means of the video-conferencing platform approved and provided by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** A little bit of history being made.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We could all meet on Bere Island.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Well, we are making a little bit of history anyway in dispatching the committee to Bere Island.

Question put and agreed to.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions**

### **Departmental Functions**

1. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [24326/22]

2. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [30714/22]

3. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [25827/22]

4. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [27832/22]

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [30840/22]

6. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [30843/22]

7. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic policy unit of his Department. [32511/22]

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [34038/22]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [34041/22]

10. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of his Department’s economic policy unit. [34618/22]

11. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic policy unit of his Department. [35587/22]

12. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the economic policy unit of his Department. [35906/22]

13. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [34569/22]

14. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the economic policy unit of his Department. [36168/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 14, inclusive together.

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The economic policy unit is part of the economic division of my Department. The unit supports me, as Taoiseach, in delivering sustainable and balanced economic growth and in advancing the Government's economic priorities. The unit also advises me on a broad range of economic policy areas and issues and provides me with briefing and speech material on economic and related policy issues. It supports the delivery of the Government's economic commitments, as outlined in the programme for Government, especially where these are cross-cutting issues affecting multiple Departments. In particular, it supports the work of the Cabinet committee on economic recovery and investment and a number of related senior officials' groups, as well as the Cabinet committee sub-group on insurance reform.

The unit is also responsible for co-ordinating Ireland's participation in the European Semester process, the annual cycle of economic and fiscal policy co-ordination among EU member states. This includes preparing each year the national reform programme for submission to the European Commission. The national reform programme provides an overview of economic reforms and policy actions under way in Ireland, including in response to country-specific recommendations received.

The unit is also responsible for liaison with the Central Statistics Office.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have a lot of questions in this group. Can we keep the supplementaries to one minute?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The horrific outcomes of sub-standard Celtic-tiger building practices and the widespread use of blocks and backfill with deleterious materials such as pyrite, mica and pyrrhotite remain with us today. Last week, we witnessed in the Chamber the heartbreak and devastation of families let down by the Government's substandard defective blocks legislation, but today I want to raise the issue of a large apartment development in my constituency called Ivy Exchange. It was built during a time of reckless building practices. Residents are still living with significant fire safety and structural defects - defects that will cost homeowners more than €9 million to remedy. The owners' management company is taking the only course of action open to it, which is to pursue the developer through the courts. Much has been reported in the media, setting out the very aggressive and costly litigation of the developer, Cosgrave, against the management committee in an effort to shut down the residents' only avenue of redress. Residents, of course, should not be left to the mercy of Cosgrave or, indeed, the courts. The State should have protections in place. Where it has failed to deliver these protections, there should be a mechanism of redress. What action does the Government propose to take to support the Ivy Exchange residents?

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** As we know, the summer economic statement was published last week in a context in which we are seeing the living standards of hundreds of thousands of people fall because of prices rising beyond their control and the soaring inflation rate, which was nearly 10% in June. Will the Taoiseach confirm whether the budget will increase social welfare payments in line with the rate of inflation? Will he introduce a windfall tax on the profits of energy companies at a time when, according to the ESRI, one third of households are in energy poverty? We believe a windfall tax would fund more targeted measures to address this. We also know that when announcing the summer economic statement the Minister said there would be scope for additional one-off measures on budget day that would not result in a long-term increase in Government spending. How much exactly has the Government planned for these cost-of-living measures? Will the Taoiseach commit to a windfall tax on energy profits and increase social welfare in line with the cost of living as part of the budget?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** Recently, the Tánaiste made references to the possible introduction of Uber to this country. Over the weekend, *The Irish Times* detailed that the origin of this was John Moran, the former Secretary General of the Department of Finance, lobbying a former Minister to put Uber's plans into the election manifesto of Fine Gael. What is the attitude of the Taoiseach to all of this? We had taxi drivers absolutely hammered during Covid. It is still unclear whether the Government will meet their demand to do away with the ten-year rule. It is a big problem for them given all of the lost income. The last thing they need now is Uber coming in and completely undermining the taxi industry in this country at the behest of corporate lobbyists.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I also want to ask the Taoiseach about what seems to be an incredible case of corporate capture of politics. We have a situation where, on 7 January 2016, John Moran told Uber executives he had made proposals to the economic adviser of the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, to include supportive language about the sharing economy in the Fine Gael manifesto. Five weeks later, the manifesto included a reference that "New platforms are being developed that allow everyone to earn extra income in this sharing economy". John Moran was able to say to Uber that it would recognise the text. It is quite incredible what has been revealed. These are the Taoiseach's coalition partners. It has also been reported that political lobbying meetings in 2015 and 2016 for Uber with Enda Kenny, Cabinet Ministers and a senior civil servant were not declared in John Moran's returns to the lobbying register, even though records of the lobbying feature in the leaked Uber files.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I want to ask the Taoiseach about the ending of many local employment services and job clubs throughout the State. The Taoiseach knows there was a commitment in the programme for Government to increase the availability of activation services. It specifically stated it would include those run by local employment services. Unfortunately since then, as the Taoiseach knows, there has been a tender. It will move away from the community not-for-profit base and towards a for-profit model. There are 26 local employment services and 40 job clubs throughout the State. Just under 400 staff have no idea whether they will have a job from 1 September. The announcement on phase 2 of the tender was due in June. We are now in July. Staff have no idea whether they have a job. Some services have had to issue termination notices. Nobody has any idea what is going on. Some of these staff, including in the Taoiseach's constituency, have given 20 or 25 years of service to their local communities. They are being treated appallingly by the Government to move from the community not-for-profit base that worked very well to a for-profit model that we saw fail abysmally in JobPath.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I have previously raised with the Taoiseach in the House the particular challenges facing the central Border region should there be adverse impacts from Brexit in future. We are the most vulnerable part of the Border region. We are very dependent, as the Taoiseach knows, on the agrifood sector, engineering and construction and construction products. I have asked that the National Economic and Social Council, NESC, do a specific report on the opportunities and challenges for the central Border region, North and South. I am thinking of Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh.

In this context, I very much welcome the decision of the Taoiseach to allocate €40 million from the shared island fund for the restoration of the Ulster Canal. It is a very welcome and extremely important decision. It will be a wonderful cross-Border project adding to the tourism potential of the Border region and the northern half of the country. It will enhance considerably the tourism product for our island. This builds on the success of the Shannon-Erne waterway undertaken by the Fianna Fáil Party in government in the 1990s. That was a very far-sighted,

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innovative and forward thinking project. At that time, every political grouping in the country said it was not possible. It has turned out to be a marvellous success. It is great to see a follow-on project that will enhance considerably our tourism infrastructure. In the context of the shared island we need more investment like this to build on the natural strengths of the Border area and other areas for the benefit of the all-Ireland economy.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for their contributions. Deputy McDonald raised the issue of the Ivy Exchange residents and the general issue of poor building and defective blocks. Those builders have responsibilities. Councils have responsibilities. Authorities also have responsibilities and insurance should have a role in all of this. In a unique response the Government has decided in respect of mica, because of the humanitarian crisis with people having their houses effectively destroyed in many cases and compromised and undermined in others, to provide well over €2 million to deal with the issue. There are clearly knock-on effects. There was an earlier scheme for pyrite. There is a report coming to the Minister in respect of the defective building of apartments. It is a huge challenge for the Exchequer overall. It is an issue on which I will come back to the Deputy. I will speak to the Minister with responsibility for housing to get the most up-to-date position.

To respond to Deputy Bacik, there are several issues with regard to the cost of living. We should not lose sight of the economic recovery that has occurred. I am concerned about what may happen in 2023 with Russian gas and the energy crisis. There has been an incredible bounceback in the economy since Covid-19. There are 2.5 million people now working in the economy. We now have the highest participation rate ever in our economy. It is substantially higher than it was last year or pre-pandemic. All of this is positive. In respect of cost-of-living measures, approximately €2.5 billion has been allocated to date. We took measures last week that will increase the back-to-school allowance, deal with transport costs and provide school meals for those in DEIS schools. There will be some once-off measures, as the Deputy identified. I do not have the specific sum total yet of how much will be involved but it will be comprehensive. We are looking at the issue of a windfall tax. We will keep it under review. There are pluses and minuses. The ESB is a State company and we take a dividend from it.

We will look at welfare increases and pensions. We will look at families and children, targeting children in particular because families have higher costs. This is why we have already taken measures to reduce healthcare costs for families with children. The back-to-school allowance will help low-income families with children. Transport measures will help families. We will keep this theme going in the once-off cost-of-living package and budgetary measures. Childcare is an issue that has been identified by many in the House. It is something we would like to do more on compared with what we did last year.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of Uber. I read the articles and I commend *The Irish Times* and all of the media concerned on the articles and revelations. They are important for public discourse. What is also important to keep in mind when we read it is that lobbying is a fact of life. It happens in all shapes. It does not have to be done by corporations. It can be done by NGOs or individuals. It can relate to anything in life from sport to economics. Very often companies feel the need to employ people to gain access to the political system. Many of us have had clinics for years and people walked in the door to see us. The system is robust on this one, which is kind of important. People can lobby. It does not mean they get their way or that policy changes. The National Transport Authority, NTA, did not move. The Government of the day did not take a decision to grant access to Uber. That is an important point. There should always be full transparency. If people are lobbying, they should register the fact that they are

lobbying. That is an important point with regard to the issue.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is bringing in new legislation to update our lobbying laws and register in terms of garden leave and so on. There should be a reasonable distance between people being in very senior positions and going into a lobbying role, immediately after their role in such senior positions. There are competing rights and so on in terms of the individual and the right to earn a livelihood. It is not simple but transparency is a very important way of dealing with it. The system proved itself robust if not in resisting, then at least in not acceding to the requests made by those who were doing the lobbying. That should be acknowledged as well. There was not a corporate capture of politics, as Deputy Murphy called it, in terms of-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Uber wrote the manifesto.

**The Taoiseach:** -----the policymaking or decision-making side of it in government and so on.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Fine Gael did not win a majority in the election. It did not get a chance to implement its manifesto.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not talking about manifestos specifically. I am talking about the move to try to transform what would have been the framework for governing taxis and so on. That did not happen, notwithstanding all of the lobbying, which is an important point.

In terms of the funding of local employment services, we cannot pre-empt what has happened in terms of the tendering process. The Minister updated us this morning at Cabinet and she will make an announcement in respect of that in the coming weeks. It will deal with many of the issues the Deputy raised.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I asked about the central Border region.

**The Taoiseach:** I will give consideration to asking NESC to do some work on the central Border region, if it is in a position to do so, and the opportunities for it. The Deputy is correct that the Ulster Canal is a very significant piece of work. I look forward to its completion and I hope we can go to tender on the Narrow Water bridge. We have allocated the money in order that we can go the full distance and complete the entire project.

### **Commissions of Investigation**

15. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the investigation being carried out by the Secretary General of his Department into the leaking of details of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation. [25802/22]

16. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the investigation being carried out by the Secretary General of his Department into the leaking of details of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation. [32076/22]

17. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the investigation being carried out by the Secretary General of his Department into the leaking of details of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation. [32140/22]

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**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 15 to 17, inclusive, together.

Prior to the consideration by the Government of the final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, certain information with regard to matters in the report was disclosed in a newspaper report. In that context, I requested that an investigation be carried out. This investigation is being done in the context of a broader consideration of the arrangements in place for the management of documents for Government meetings as this bears directly on the protection of their confidentiality. The investigation is being undertaken by a senior official in my Department and the process is ongoing.

The House will be aware that in January 2021, I apologised on behalf of the Government to those who spent time in a mother and baby home or county home. The Government published a comprehensive action plan for survivors and former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions in November 2021 and we are very clearly focused on advancing the action plan. The 22 actions set out in the plan have been arranged into central themes, which have emerged as fundamental in how the Government responds. Those themes are a survivor-centred approach; a formal State apology; access to personal information; enduring archive and database development; education and research; memorialisation; restorative recognition and dignified burial. Detailed and sustained engagement with survivors and their families has been central to the development of each of these actions and very significant progress has been made in giving effect to them.

The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 was signed into law on 30 June. This provides for a full and clear right of access to birth certificates, birth and early-life information for all persons who were adopted, boarded out, the subject of an illegal birth registration or who otherwise have questions with regard to their origins. On 1 July, the provisions of the Act to establish the contact preference register and give effect to statutory public information campaign were commenced, which paves the way for the release of birth and early-life information from October 2022.

The Institutional Burials Bill 2022, which provided a legal basis for recovery and identification of those who died in residential institutions and were buried in a manifestly inappropriate manner, has passed both Houses and is with the President for his signature. Subject to that, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, plans to commence it immediately and seek the Government’s approval to make an order for an intervention at the site of the former mother and baby home in Tuam.

As part of the supports available to survivors and former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions, the HSE national counselling service is available for individuals who feel they need this support. Those who identify themselves as former residents of the institutions will be prioritised for the service. The HSE also operates a dedicated freephone information line for former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions. The Department of Health, in partnership with the HSE, is currently working on establishing a patient advocacy liaison service for all survivors and former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions. A business case for this initiative has been developed by the HSE and has been approved by the Department of Health.

The general scheme of a mother and baby institutions payment scheme Bill was published on 29 March. It is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny and, in parallel, is the subject of priority drafting by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. This legislation will provide

financial payments and an enhanced medical card to defined groups, in acknowledgement of suffering they experienced. An implementation group has been established to oversee preparations for the scheme and project planning work is under way.

On 29 March, the Government approved proposals for a national centre for research and remembrance. The centre will stand as a site of conscience and will be a national memorial to honour, equally, all those who were resident in mother and baby homes, industrial schools, reformatories, Magdalen laundries and related institutions. The centre will be located on the site of the former Magdalen laundry on Seán McDermott Street in Dublin city centre and will comprise a museum and exhibition space, a research centre and repository of records and a place for reflection and remembrance. The centre will also make a significant contribution to the long-term social and economic regeneration of Dublin's north-east inner city by encompassing social housing, local community facilities and an educational and early-learning facility.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth first contacted the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach seeking an investigation into the leaking of details of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation report in January 2021. We have subsequently raised the outcome of this investigation on a number of occasions but to no avail. The Taoiseach has, in fact, accepted our concerns with regard to the Government's protection of such sensitive documentation and information. In January, we were told that new mechanisms had been requested to ensure the protection of material that comes before the Government. What are these protections in practical terms? What reassurance can the Taoiseach give to survivors who are still waiting on a formal conclusion from him on this matter?

I will briefly raise Ms Margaret Donovan's search for her twin siblings who died in the Bessborough mother and baby home, but for whom there are no burial records. Some 923 children died at Bessborough, or in hospital shortly after being transferred from the institution, but there are burial records for just 64 of these children. When this matter is raised with the Minister he passes the buck to Cork City Council, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and An Bord Pleanála in terms of future development of the site. The passing of the Institutional Burials Bill 2022 is welcome but related matters remain outstanding. Does the Taoiseach accept and agree that relatives such as Margaret Donovan should not be abandoned to navigate the very complex State bureaucracy alone?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** In January 2021, parts of the final report of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation were leaked to the media prior to the survivors being furnished with the information. This was an enormous slap in the face to many survivors of those mother and baby homes. The Taoiseach verified the leak by giving a comment to the same journalist who ran the particular story. An internal Department investigation into the leak has been going on for the past 19 months. It must be an incredibly in-depth investigation given the length of time it is taking. When will that investigation be complete?

Will the Taoiseach indicate to the Dáil whether he knows who leaked the final parts of the report of the mother and baby homes investigation? It is very important that we have clarity on whether the Taoiseach knows who that individual was. We also know, because the Taoiseach confirmed it to me in writing, that there is another separate investigation taking place into a separate leak in his Department. What does this investigation relate to?

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The premature leaking of aspects of the final report of the Commis-

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sion of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes caused great anger and distress for survivors of those homes. It is 19 months since an investigation was launched into that leaking and all of us want to know when we will see the outcome. Will the Taoiseach indicate whether the legislation for the payments scheme will be passed in the autumn?

I raise the separate matter of the case of thalidomide survivors in light of a number of reports over the weekend. Just last week, the Scottish Government guaranteed lifelong support for thalidomide survivors there. In 2013, it committed over £14 million to help survivors with health and living costs but it is now extending assistance to survivors on a needs basis. Finola Cassidy, who is the spokesperson for thalidomide survivors here, has asked for the Government to put in place similar measures. I have raised this before in the House and ask whether a similar approach to that adopted in Scotland would be adopted here in respect of this small group of survivors who really need this support from the Government.

**The Taoiseach:** The report is still working on the mechanism in terms of Cabinet confidentiality and more general Cabinet documents and also the degree to which, in the modern era, many documents or many proposals are aired well in advance. There is, therefore, a fairly complex piece of work required to come up to pace with where we are today in terms of what happens with the briefing of a whole variety of proposals and policies. Given the more open approach to policy development in the current era, it is timely to update that entire area.

Deputy McDonald raised the individual case of Margaret Donovan. Ms Donovan should not have to navigate this on her own. I referenced earlier the survivor advocacy liaison services in the HSE. Assistance should be given to people in Ms Donovan's situation to navigate to get the truth. I have met the residents of Bessborough who have views on that site. They have a view as to where the site is located and that housing development should not take place on that site. I agree with the survivors in that respect. They are not objecting to other developments in the vicinity of the site, it has to be said. I hope Cork City Council will work with the survivors who have taken a very reasonable approach to the matter. The future development of that site is important. I would have preferred it if the council had purchased the entire site because some of the services there are State services and amenities, and also maybe some social housing, could have been provided there as well.

On Deputy Tóibín's point, I do not know but I will come back to him on the separate investigation. The scheme of the mother and baby institutions payment scheme Bill was published on 29 March. It is undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny but is, in parallel, being drafted by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, so that when the pre-legislative scrutiny is over we may be in a position to get the legislation published faster. I would like to see it published in the autumn and enacted in the autumn session. That will need co-operation across the House because we need to start the process of payment in respect of this. It is an important issue. An implementation group has been established to oversee preparations for the scheme. Project planning work is under way on the scheme itself. It will provide financial payments and an enhanced medical card but, again, much will depend on its progress through pre-legislative scrutiny.

To be fair to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, if we go through all the areas, we can see he has made very significant progress in respect of the entire action plan. The Birth Information and Tracing Act is the most complex legislation of its kind and has been groundbreaking in terms of what it will provide. It is far superior to earlier iterations in previous Dáileanna. Also, the Institutional Burials Bill is very important legislation and the Minister stands ready to intervene immediately in relation to that. The HSE national counselling service is also available.

The payments scheme is key and a very important part of the action plan is the memorialisation centre. We were hoping we would have that at Cabinet today but I am anticipating we will have it at Cabinet in the next number of weeks so we can give effect to it. That would be a very significant issue in itself.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I asked three questions.

**The Taoiseach:** In relation to the thalidomide issue, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, has met the thalidomide organisation, as have I in the context of the parliamentary party. We are anxious but again there is a whole range of issues there. It is also the subject matter, I understand, of litigation but we would like to resolve this with the thalidomide organisation on a range of issues it has raised with us. I intend to pursue that with the Minister for Health.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I asked the Taoiseach three questions. The first was when the investigation would be complete, the second was whether he knows who leaked it and the third was to indicate to what the other leak was related. I only have one answer, which was “I don’t know”, and I do not know what it related to.

**The Taoiseach:** What I said on the Deputy’s second question was that I did not know. On the third question, I said I would come back to him in respect of the separate investigation and the details of that.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** When will the investigation be completed?

**The Taoiseach:** On completion, I do not have a date or timeline but I hope it is soon, certainly before the end of the year.

### **Taoiseach’s Meetings and Engagements**

18. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Taoiseach his views on his recent engagements at the World Economic Forum. [27389/22]

19. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his trip to the World Economic Forum. [27628/22]

20. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum. [29327/22]

21. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the World Economic Forum in Davos. [29332/22]

22. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach his views on his recent engagements at the World Economic Forum. [30715/22]

23. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Taoiseach the actions that he has taken to raise and highlight the ongoing record energy and food prices which are further compounding the tragic inequalities caused by the pandemic in view of his attendance at the 2022 World Economic Forum in Davos [30981/22]

24. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Taoiseach if he is satisfied that he attended the 2022

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World Economic Forum in Davos. [30983/22]

25. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his trip to the World Economic Forum. [34039/22]

26. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his trip to the World Economic Forum. [34042/22]

27. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his trip to the World Economic Forum. [35581/22]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 to 27, inclusive, together.

I attended the World Economic Forum in Davos on 25 May. During my visit, I participated in a panel discussion, attended a lunch hosted by *The Washington Post*, had a number of political and economic meetings, and attended a dinner hosted by IDA Ireland. The panel discussion I participated in was on the theme of European unity in a disordered world, and was chaired by Børge Brende, president of the World Economic Forum. Fellow panellists included the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, Eduard Heger, and President of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde. Russia's war on Ukraine was a major theme in our discussions, with a focus on the response by the European Union. Speakers observed that despite Putin's attempts to divide, the EU had shown great unity and strength. I raised the question of food security, which Russia is deliberately undermining, and stressed the impact this was likely to have on already vulnerable countries. The panel also considered the question of enlargement of the Union, including Ukraine's wish to join, and the implications that would have for the effective functioning of the Union. I expressed my view that much reform was possible within the framework of the existing treaties, but that I was open to considering treaty change if it proved necessary for what we are aiming to achieve together. I also took the opportunity to set out Ireland's distinct experience through our 50 years as a member state.

I attended a lunchtime event hosted by *The Washington Post* where I had the opportunity to meet and engage with a wide range of other leaders, including the Prime Minister of Moldova and my colleagues at the European Council, the Prime Ministers of Greece and Croatia and the Chancellor of Austria, as well as a number of other European, Middle East, African and Latin American leaders.

I had a bilateral meeting with the Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, who briefed me on the conduct of the war, in particular the devastation being visited on the eastern part of the country. I conveyed Ireland's support for Ukraine's application for EU membership and undertook to advocate for the granting of candidate status with my EU colleagues. I also met briefly with the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko.

At his request, I had a bilateral meeting with the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog. At our meeting, we recalled the president's family connections to Ireland and we agreed our shared interest in deepening bilateral relations. I underlined that the occupation remains a priority for me, the Government and the people of Ireland. Recent events have demonstrated the urgent need to maintain a political horizon for peace. I expressed my deep concern at continued expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, including recent announcements, as well as evictions and demolitions. I also expressed my concern that these actions and policies would only escalate further an already tense situation.

*4 o'clock*

I raised the shocking death of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and the appalling scenes in Jerusalem during her funeral procession.

I had meetings with senior executives of a number of multinational firms with operations in Ireland and addressed a dinner hosted by IDA Ireland that was attended by representatives of 30 multinational companies with significant operations or interests in Ireland. These meetings are typically an opportunity for company executives to update me on progress with their operations in Ireland and their future development plans. For my part, it was an opportunity to emphasise again Ireland's foreign direct investment proposition and our core competitive strengths, namely, talent, stability and a proven track record.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** As was recognised at the World Economic Forum, the world is facing an unprecedented energy crisis. In reality, we have yet to experience the full impact of Russia's entrenched aggression against Ukraine on Europe's energy supply. Collectively, we face a massive challenge to counter climate change, forge a new path in energy production and secure a cleaner future for our island. The cornerstones of our strategy can and must be energy independence, security and affordability. The State has to be the driver of the strategy, but that is not where we are today. Earlier this year, the wind energy sector told the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, that it has absolutely no confidence in key State agencies' ability to deliver major infrastructural projects. Planning decisions are taking anything up to 12 or 24 months and not the 18 weeks provided for in law. Restoring confidence in the board will not only require significant investment in skilled personnel and restructuring. We need to see the organisation's profound cultural and governance issues addressed in full. The board's failures have major implications for major projects throughout the country. I include in that Hamer'son's disastrous plan for Moore Street that the Taoiseach has championed. Will the Government publish the independent senior counsel report on receipt and set out the actions it will take to address the systemic problems at An Bord Pleanála?

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** As we know, Davos is the world's most exclusive lobbying forum. Yesterday, *The Irish Times* published a series of extraordinary articles about how Uber apparently went about trying to tear up regulations covering the taxi sector in Ireland and did not disclose contact with the then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, at Davos 2016 in its own lobbying returns. Will the Taoiseach tell us what companies were lobbying him at Davos this year?

Looking further at the Uber reports, it appears that what Uber wanted was a race to the bottom on the terms and conditions for drivers dressed up as a new economic model, and an extraordinary level of detailed lobbying went on across multiple Ministers, Departments and agencies. We know this because of the whistleblower, former EU lobbyist for Uber, Mark MacGann. We have learned that a former head of the Department of Finance was central to many of these engagements. Does the Taoiseach think it is appropriate for someone who is representing Ireland on a public board, or indeed on the European Investment Bank, to be involved also in lobbying officials on other issues at the same time? Is the Taoiseach aware of any other public appointees who are also engaged in separate lobbying activity? Will he bring forward new guidelines to address any conflict of interest that might arise as a result?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. I asked him in the Chamber before he went there if he was he going and he told me he was not but he was there the day after. Sin scéal eile.

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**The Taoiseach:** What was that?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I asked the Taoiseach before he attended whether he would be attending and he said he did not intend to.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy asked if I would be attending what?

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** The World Economic Forum, which is what my question refers to. The Taoiseach explained to the House about all his meetings and engagements with multinationals. They are all fine and dandy, but did he mention to anyone that we have a proud record of neutrality in this country? Did he think that was worthwhile mentioning or has he abandoned that idea completely?

I expect and hope the Taoiseach raised the hardship our citizens are facing because of issues coming from the World Economic Forum, what it is deciding and its plans, which the Taoiseach seems gung-ho to sign up to rather than looking after our people who cannot put food on the table or fuel in their cars and cannot educate their children. I would hope the Taoiseach would have raised those issues when he was at that high-powered meeting.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The cost-of-living and inflation crises were key issues at Davos. Did the Taoiseach talk to any representatives from France when he was there? This morning, he pooh-poohed efforts to control rents. He has similarly pooh-poohed our proposal that we should control energy prices. It may be of note to the Taoiseach that the French Government has limited energy price increases to a maximum of 4%. The French Government can do that. It has also introduced a new regime of rent controls. It recently nationalised one of the major energy-producing companies to keep prices down. Those are all things the Taoiseach refuses to do as the cost-of-living crisis absolutely crushes people and will do even more extremely as we head into the winter months. Does the Taoiseach not think he might learn something from what the French are doing to control rents and energy prices and, indeed, take over energy companies to operate them on a not-for-profit basis?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** There is no economy on a dead planet and yet the European Commission has proposed, and scandalously, the European Council and European Parliament have agreed to, simply labelling fossil gas and nuclear power as green, as if calling them green somehow makes them green. It is a consequence of extensive lobbying by the fossil fuel and nuclear power industries. Another example of that is the agreement between the European Commission and the US to import liquefied natural gas, that is, fracked gas, for the coming decades, thereby doubling down on fossil fuels. The consequence is more private investment into unsustainable fossil fuel infrastructure, potentially locking us in for decades.

The science is crystal clear. We cannot have any more investment in fossil fuel infrastructure. That is incompatible with civilised, sustainable human life on Earth. Does the Taoiseach agree with the decision? Why did the Government not object by yesterday's deadline?

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** As we have heard, those attending the World Economic Forum in Davos had a lot to discuss. Hunger and food shortages are just two of a number of challenges facing the world at this time. What are the Taoiseach's views on the famine currently being experienced in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya in the Horn of Africa? In these three countries, more than 23 million people are experiencing extreme hunger. They have now had their fourth successive dry rainy season. The United Nations has stated that €4.2 billion is needed to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in the region. Dóchas has made a number of recommendations

in this regard in its pre-budget 2023 submission, including the need for an increase in Irish aid. It is clear a global response is now needed. I call on the Taoiseach to give this issue serious consideration in the coming weeks with a view to Ireland taking the initiative and helping to co-ordinate an effective response in this regard.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for raising these issues. I do not think Deputy McDonald raised any issue around the Davos meeting but instead raised an issue about An Bord Pleanála and the energy issues. Energy is a big issue at European Union level at the moment, as it is globally, across the board. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has initiated an inquiry into An Bord Pleanála. He has commissioned a senior counsel to look at those issues. The planning regulator is also doing a review of its processes. An Bord Pleanála itself has done an internal review. It is the Government's intention to hold An Bord Pleanála to account in respect of these issues, to get clarity and transparency without prejudice, and to act subsequently by introducing any legislative improvements that might be required and considering its approach to ensure An Bord Pleanála is fit for purpose.

In terms of offshore wind energy, the maritime legislation that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, piloted through the House last year was a major breakthrough. We now must establish the maritime area regulatory authority, MARA, administratively, get it up and running as fast as we can, and get the necessary consents in place, because the key issue for the future of this country will be that we accelerate offshore wind energy and floating technology in particular. The European Union has made it clear that it wishes to create a new regulatory framework that would facilitate faster permitting of offshore wind developments. It will create an overriding public interest clause, namely, climate change, as the basis to override other planning objections to offshore wind platforms and floating technology so that we can shorten the timeline between the conception of a wind energy project and completion. At the moment it is about eight years, but we do not have eight years to wait. We have to move faster.

I can anticipate what will happen, of course. That regulation will come and everyone will then come around it, scrum and say, "Actually, you should not be doing that. Can we go back to life as normal?" We have to have that debate, anyway.

Deputy Bacik described Davos as the most exclusive lobbying club around and asked what companies were lobbying me. I am fairly embarrassed to say we were doing the lobbying in terms of some of the companies. I attended a dinner, hosted by IDA Ireland, with 30 companies that are in Ireland and have interests in Ireland. We took the opportunity to suggest they could invest more in Ireland. We use those occasions to identify what they feel the needs are within Ireland and how best Ireland can progress. These are companies in life sciences, technology and other areas. It is a very useful occasion for Ireland to advance its cause to advocate for workers and jobs in our economy and society. Equally, then, there is a very strong political element to it as well.

Around the war in Ukraine, I met the Mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko, and the foreign minister. Again, one was struck by the enormous dedication of these officials and political representatives of Ukraine. They looked exhausted at that particular meeting that day, given the round of meetings they had to engage in on behalf their people. People can have a go at Davos, but when you see a country such as Ukraine that is under enormous pressure, Davos was extremely useful for them to be able to advocate for their people in terms of a whole range of issues. Their diplomacy was very impressive. It led actually as well to the European Union granting Ukraine candidate status for European Union membership.

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I say to Deputy Boyd Barrett that we can learn from France. I know Deputy Murphy was anxious that Deputy Boyd Barrett might learn on the nuclear front as well because he suggested it. Nuclear energy is one the ways France is keeping its energy prices down. Is Deputy Boyd Barrett advocating that we go nuclear like France?

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I am certainly not.

**The Taoiseach:** I see, but the Deputy does want me to learn from France in respect of issues.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** That said, we have brought in many measures in terms of rent protection zones, including the 2% limit. We brought in six pieces of legislation to protect renters and we will have to continue to do more in that regard.

Deputy Murphy is probably one of the more anti-European Union Members of this House. He has a consistent negativity about Europe and the LNG coming in. They have no choice; Russia is cutting off the gas.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Renewables.

**The Taoiseach:** Russia has caused a crisis, and the Deputy ignored the fact the European Union has brought forward a timetable for renewables.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It has called fossil and gas renewables. Are fossil and gas green? Is nuclear green?

**The Taoiseach:** The European Commission is driving on renewables. However, People Before Profit, Sinn Féin and others just constantly have to have a go at the European Union - always attacking.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are actually over time, please.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Haughey raised a very important point and he is absolutely correct. There is a real crisis emerging in the Horn of Africa. Deputy Haughey highlighted that. We will take steps for working with the European Union to see what we can do. I am extremely worried about it. It is a combination of the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis along with four successive years of drought. It is a very major problem that will occur.

I apologise sincerely to Deputy McGrath. The issues were economic or political. As I said, we did everything we could to point to multinational companies that we met that it would be worth their while to continue to invest in Ireland and even add to it.

That would be most of issues. Neutrality was not raised at all in Davos. We are not members of any military alliance and there are no plans in Government to propose that we will join any military alliance.

### **Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Health (Miscellaneous Pro-

visions) (No. 2) Bill 2022 without amendment.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2022: Message from Select Committee**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Environment and Climate Action has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2022: Vote 29.

### **Confidence in Government: Motion**

**The Taoiseach:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann reaffirms its confidence in the Government.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion that Dáil Éireann has confidence in the Government and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Government's record and our plans for the rest of our mandate.

This is a good time to take stock of the past two years. More importantly, it is also a good time to start having an honest debate between two very different views about how we can serve the people and address their concerns. Fundamentally, this is a debate between those who believe in tackling problems and those who believe in exploiting them. It is between those who have an honest and ambitious programme based on what can be achieved and those who have taken cynical and populist politics to a new level in our country. It is a debate between those who understand and respect diversity in politics and those who have introduced legal threats and online abuse as weapons to silence other Members of the Oireachtas and the media.

Today we are being told the Government has supposedly failed because it has not implemented its full programme in just two years. In contrast, last week Deputy McDonald insisted that Sinn Féin should only be judged after ten years and two full terms of office. As always, double standards are the watchword of this cynical Opposition. Ireland is a modern, diverse and dynamic country. It has problems and challenges to overcome of course, but those who deny its successes are simply showing they have no interest in honest debate. They are proving that the progress of our country and the future of our people is not actually their core concern. Shouting "Not enough", "More" and "What about" represents an approach to politics that is, at its heart, deeply dishonest.

In my first speech after being nominated by this House for appointment as Taoiseach, I explained both how I intended to approach the task of holding this office and the priorities of the then new Government. The two most urgent crises we faced were an historic pandemic and the fastest moving recession ever recorded. It was a time of deep uncertainty and much fear. I promised then that I, as Taoiseach, and we, as a Government, would do everything possible to mitigate the terrible toll of the pandemic and to work to achieve as fast a recovery as possible.

By any fair judgement of our performance on these measures this Government has served the people well on these critical challenges. The truth is Ireland has been assessed as one of the top three in the world for the resilience of its Covid response. We have the second highest vaccination rate in Europe. Most importantly, the fact is this Government's actions in respond-

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ing to the greatest public health crisis of our times protected public health and saved lives. Of course, we did not get everything right, but we got more right than the great majority of governments. If Ireland had performed simply at the average level of the European Union, there would have been over 4,500 more deaths. If we had performed at the same level as the United Kingdom, there would have been 5,500 more deaths. How often did we have to read and listen to attacks on our vaccine roll-out as being supposedly a shambles? It was the largest public health mobilisation in Irish history and, frankly, the glitches it had were minor.

In attacking the Government, the Opposition likes to ignore or dismiss actions that dramatically reduced the impact of Covid here versus other countries, reinforcing the equally strong fact of its cynicism. So too, it will ignore the fact that sustained Government action has helped our country emerge from recession faster and more successfully than most countries. Within weeks of taking office, we published new policies to limit job losses, help companies and help families. Initiatives were designed, agreed and implemented at a record speed and with very clear success.

The hard yards of working to ensure high levels of employment and a strong economy is something which appears to bore the Opposition. These issues have basically disappeared from its daily agenda, and every time a journalist has the temerity to report good news, they get accused of being a hack. However, Ireland today has the lowest youth unemployment in Europe. The economy is strong and it is not just supporting employment; it is providing the resources to deliver essential social investments. This Government understands the fact that a strong economy is needed to support social services and investment. We are proud of the fact that we have led Ireland so quickly out of recession and that this enables us to help people when world affairs are having such a direct impact. That gives us capacity. The economic recovery enables us to be in a position to help people going through the cost-of-living situation arising from the war in Ukraine.

Two years ago, I told the Dáil that the three parties that had agreed to form a Government understood that we had to work constructively together. The members of Fianna Fáil participated in the largest party vote ever recorded in Ireland and expressed clearly their desire to take on a daunting agenda. As a Government, we have disagreements but we work hard to overcome them and to honour the ambitious and achievable programme. We each have our priorities and remain separate parties. This is how successful coalition governments across Europe work. I thank members of each of the parties for their work and their constructive approach. While the Opposition acts as if the pandemic had no impact on the Government, it was in fact profound in placing great pressure on individuals.

Due to the limited time available, I cannot cover all of the areas of the Government's work but I want to address broadly what we have been working to achieve in the past two years and what we aim to achieve in the next two. I have been determined that we address the great unmet challenge of the Good Friday Agreement to build stronger links and understanding on this island. I immediately launched the first sustained effort to develop these links through the shared island initiative. This is supporting a wide agenda of investments, dialogues and essential studies. For the first time, we are preparing vital, rigorous and independent work on key services and policies on both sides of the Border. I thank the National Economic and Social Council and the Economic and Social Research Institute for the extensive systematic research they have undertaken in terms of the services economy on the island, education outcomes on the island and the climate opportunities on the island. That is very important work in underpinning, in an evidence-based way, our approach to the all-island economy and developing strong linkages,

as manifested in the extraordinary research programmes that we have already funded and that are now under way between third level institutions in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. It is a striking fact that the party that is today telling us how our country is a basket case where everything has been wrong for 100 years is, at the same time, claiming that country is so successful that it should be irresistible to the North. As a Government, we continue to work to force all who have responsibility for the agreement to make it work and we have been resolute in demanding that both the text and the spirit of the agreement be honoured, and also that the outcome of the recent elections be fulfilled and realised.

The strength of our relations with other European countries and with the Commission has been a vital support for Ireland in opposing the legal and political vandalism directed against the Northern Ireland protocol and the progress it protects. In contrast to the Opposition's consistent anti-European Union stands, we see the European Union as a forum for enabling countries to prosper, protecting democracy from the extremes and solidarity such as the recovery funding which we negotiated. We took a clear leadership position in terms of advocating for that breakthrough fund to enable European recovery from Covid-19. There is a significant difference in terms of the Government's approach to the European Union and the approach of most of the Opposition to the European Union. I identified Deputy Paul Murphy earlier in this regard but Sinn Féin has a similar attitude of never-ending criticism and anti-European Union positions.

My party went into this Government eager to embrace the hardest challenges. We understood that they were never going to be areas which could be solved quickly but we were determined to deliver sustained action that would show real results over the full course of the mandate of the Dáil and the Government. Part of that, and part of the approach Fianna Fáil brings into Government, is a strong pro-European approach. We led Ireland into the European Union. We are proud of our record of support for democracy, particularly now in the context of the cause of Ukraine, something that we promoted actively with our government colleagues in Europe and at the United Nations Security Council.

The challenge of ensuring housing for a rapidly rising population is one of the most important facing Irish politics. Of all areas, this is one of those that is least open to overnight change. However, it can be done a lot faster than the target of 15 years set out in a proposed housing strategy for Northern Ireland published by Deputy McDonald's hand-picked housing Minister in Belfast. There is now in place an ambitious, funded and comprehensive plan for expanding housing provision for the benefit of all sectors. Housing for All is still in its early stages but the facts show that planning applications are up, housing construction is up and housing completion is up, and this is in spite of the thousands of homes that one party has sought to block - more interested in talking about a crisis than allowing it to be addressed. Most important, however, this Government has in two years put in place the largest social housing programme in our history.

Home ownership matters as well. The new affordable housing scheme launched last week is an example of a plan directed at those most in need. In its first 24 hours, nearly 400 pre-applications were received and thousands more looked for information. The sustainable way of controlling prices and rents is to increase supply. The latest 12-monthly figures recorded 35,000 commencements, the highest figure since records began. Only the most cynical could claim that is a failure. There is no doubt that when our mandate finishes, we will have delivered a sustained and significant increase in housing of all types, especially social housing.

We will also deliver a sustained improvement in key health services and, in particular, those where the pressures are being felt the most. The pandemic was a dramatic challenge for health

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services and everyone who works within them. It led to many thousands of treatments being cancelled and lengthened nearly all waiting lists and waiting times. However, in spite of the pandemic and the recession, the past two years have seen vital improvements. Lessons will be learned from our experiences during the pandemic and we will embed some of those lessons in terms of the reform programme in respect of health. I pay tribute to all in our health services for the work they did throughout the pandemic and continue to do. The pandemic has not gone away and the aftershocks are still to be seen in our health service and other sectors of our economy in terms of isolation protocols, waiting times and so forth. That said, there are already an extra 850 permanent new hospital beds. New diagnostic facilities are being put in place. A major increase in staff and investment in the ambulance service is under way. Mental health services are expanding and a range of initiatives are under way to support wider mental health challenges. I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on her extraordinarily diligent and dedicated work in that area. New services are being rolled out. A comprehensive women's health programme led by the Minister for Health and including the first national programmes on endometritis and menopause has been developed and funded and is now under way. Access and fairness are being extended with an extension of medical cards, the abolition of hospital charges for under-16s and other measures. Yes, there are many more issues to tackle. There are many who do not have access to the services they need when they need them, but one helps these people by delivering credible, sustained and secure services, not by the cynical politics of refusing to acknowledge any progress. This year, 469,000 people currently on waiting lists will benefit from this progress and many more will benefit during the rest of our term.

Education has been and remains a core priority for us. A new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is in place. That has been overseen by the Minister, Deputy Harris. That is a significant policy development that is already having an impact in terms of education policy. For our schools, I am proud that in the past two years we have begun an ambitious programme to increase resources, reform provision and develop facilities. As a result of this Government, Irish children are benefitting from smaller class sizes, with disadvantaged schools benefiting the most. Guidance provision is available in every school. There are 300 new school building projects on site and many more being advanced. The most significant reform of the senior cycle in 50 years has begun.

Having been the Minister who gave the first recognition to special needs as a national concern, supporting students with special needs has always been a deep priority for me and it is a priority for this Government. The number of special needs teachers and assistants is up 10% in only two years and action is being taken on a range of support issues. When we have finished our mandate, we will deliver a significant and sustained improvement in special needs education, and this will take a lot less time than the ten years Deputy McDonald has promised. We will do more in respect of disability in the coming period, particularly in the context of therapies and supports for special schools. We have also ensured with our colleagues in government that the budgets we have implemented support an expansion of public services, have helped our country through a recession, underpin a new national development programme and have given the most help to those most in need. Every single analysis has confirmed that our budgets have been progressive and have given the greatest benefit to those on lowest and fixed incomes such as pensioners and families facing back to school costs. Over the past year we have faced a new international challenge, dramatic pressures on prices, and the impact of these pressures on people. It is fair to say that the Irish people have led in regard to our response to Ukraine and the Government has led in terms of the first major war on our Continent since the Second World War and the worst humanitarian crisis on the European Continent since 1942. We have

led from the front on the humanitarian side of that but it has had an impact on the cost of living and on inflation.

We cannot start chasing our tails on inflation, making things ever worse with massive compensation for everyone. We can and we are prioritising those under the most pressure. We will prepare and implement a budget that does as much as possible to protect the economy, protect public services and above all reduce and relieve the cost-of-living pressures on working families and those on low incomes. We will also continue to focus on the existential challenge of climate change and the loss of our island's biodiversity. We reject the posturing of those who claim they want to save the planet but oppose everything difficult required to achieve this objective. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, developed, published and has brought into law is both transformative and challenging and it has the support of the entire Government. Let there be no doubt that it will leave a lasting legacy. There is no going back from that legislation. It will govern future Governments as well.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Apologies, I do not wish to interrupt, but the Taoiseach has two colleagues speaking as well.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not realise, apologies.

Addressing climate change and protecting our biodiversity is not about any one sector.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That is constituency rivalry.

**The Taoiseach:** I thought the Leas-Cheann Comhairle said I had 20 minutes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is a 20-minute slot. The Taoiseach is sharing time.

**The Taoiseach:** My apologies.

In this and in every element of government, in spite of unprecedented challenges because of the pandemic, the Government has worked to implement the programme that will over our full mandate deliver real and sustained progress for the Irish people. When we hear the loud and aggressive speeches of the Opposition that nothing is being done, that the people are being ignored, that everything is miserable, that we live in a failed State, it is not hard to understand what is going on. It is the same aggressive populist politics we are seeing in much of the world at the moment. I am proud of what my party and our partners in government have together helped our country to overcome in the past two years and the policies we have put in place for sustained, long-term progress. We believe in a politics that works for the long-term interests of our country, not one that looks for issues to exploit.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** There are two minutes left.

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As we gather here in our national Parliament today, we have war in Europe, resulting in the largest forced-displacement of people since the Second World War, levels of inflation not seen in four decades and concerns that Europe could be facing an energy crisis. The outlook for the global economy is being downgraded, we have no government in Northern Ireland and we have witnessed political turmoil in London. The full impact of Brexit on our island remains unresolved and Covid-19 is on the rise again.

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Sinn Féin's answer is to call for a general election. Sinn Féin's approach to opposition is very simple: promise everything to everyone, say whatever has to be said to get into government and worry about the consequences afterwards. Delivering the promises being made by Sinn Féin would amount to billions and billions of euro. Sinn Féin is building a level of expectation of what it can deliver in government that is utterly unrealistic and unrealisable. In its heart of hearts it must know this and it is a deeply cynical approach to politics. Some of those who will support Sinn Féin today have had not one, but two, opportunities to enter government in recent years but chose the safe and comfortable Opposition benches where it is easy to have all the answers and none of the responsibility. No one on this side of the House has denied that our country faces many challenges, not least the imperative to build more homes quickly, to reform our health service and to address the cost-of-living pressures that many face. The Government has managed our economy and our public finances well. Our economy is now close to full employment. At times the House and certainly the Opposition seem to take those fundamental achievements for granted but it is a successful economy with well-managed public finances that give us the resources to intervene and support people who are genuinely under pressure from the rising cost of living. Our focus now is on the budget. It will be a cost-of-living budget with €6.7 billion and a separate package of one-off measures to help people who face real challenges.

We have a strong and stable Government that does not claim to get everything right. It is a Government of three parties that accepted the responsibility of office-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** It is a three-legged stool and it is bockety.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** -----and that are working well together. With the support of this House, which I hope is affirmed today, the Government will continue to be honest and do our best for the people of this country.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We have run out of time.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** So has the Government.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As it was partly my fault, if the Minister for Education wants a minute, she is in this slot but the time is up. I will give her one minute because there was a misunderstanding. I did not make it clear.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** We will be here all day.

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As Minister for Education, I welcome the opportunity to provide a brief outline of the key initiatives that have marked two years in education and indeed two years in government. In that time my Department has presided over an ambitious programme of delivery across myriad areas, including more than €1.5 billion invested in a proactive schools building programme; in excess of €600 million in funding to support schools through Covid-19; an overall budget in excess of €2 billion per year on special education for the first time; the most significant expansion of the DEIS programme which seeks to deliver equality of opportunity in schools at an additional cost of €32 million, bringing the total investment to more than €180 million; a reduction in the primary school pupil-teacher ratio in every budget since the formation of this Government to 24:1, which is the lowest in the history of the State; an historic, innovative and student-centred reform of senior cycle that will empower students to meet the challenges of the 21st century-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Norma Foley:** -----a €67 million package to support families as they prepare for the return to school, which includes the waiving of all school transport fees for the 2022-23 school year and the work continues.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Well said Deputy Foley.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Sinn Féin, which has a 15-minute slot, so that there is no misunderstanding.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is a 15-minute slot. Sinn Féin tabled its motion of no confidence in the Government opposite because we believe that change is needed now more than ever. The Government in those benches is out of touch, clearly out of ideas and now out of time - a Government that is unravelling before our very eyes, which has lost the support of the people, if indeed it ever had it. Last week it lost its Dáil majority. Now the Taoiseach scrambles to get the votes to win a confidence motion. The writing is on the wall for him. This failed Government should go, it should go now and make way for a Government that will finally put workers and families first. Tá an Rialtas ag titim as a chéile díreach os ár gcomhair. Theip air tabhairt faoi na rudaí atá fíorthábhachtach do dhaoine. Tá tacaíocht na ndaoine cailte agus tá tromlach na Dála cailte. Tá sé in am ag an Rialtas neamhchúiseach seo an bealach a fhágáil. It is not hard to see why this coalition is coming apart at the seams. It is a Government that has presided over two years of utter and abject failure. Not only has the Government failed to make improvements in the areas that really matter to people, but it has, in fact, managed to make a bad situation so much worse. This is especially true in housing, in healthcare and in dealing with the cost-of-living crisis that has literally pushed households to the brink. The Government has no urgency, no vision and no capacity to grasp the severity of these problems in the lives of ordinary people. By any fair judgment, the Taoiseach is failing.

Far too often the message from Government to the people looking to it for solutions has been, “Suck it up, get on with it, shop around, you are on your own”. Well, that is just not good enough. People expect so much more from those they elect and those who they pay very handsomely to get the job done. Strike one against this failed Government is without question housing. Let us not forget the coalition came to office declaring that it would fix housing. This was a very bold statement that has not aged well. On its watch, the housing crisis has escalated to a housing disaster. So many of our people now struggle to put and keep a secure roof over their heads. House prices continue to soar beyond the reach of ordinary workers and families. The dream of owning a home has become an impossibility for an entire generation. Rents keep going up and up. Renters are being ripped off every month, robbed of their money but also robbed of their futures. Young people, in particular, watch on as international funds build fancy apartment blocks in their neighbourhoods and they get to look at them because they never will be able to afford to live in them. Generation Rent is exploited in the here and now and they face a difficult and uncertain future. A new Government on the side of renters would take action now to cut rents through a tax credit and legislate to ban rent increases for three years but the Taoiseach’s do-nothing Government sits on its hands and turns a blind eye; worse than that, and he is at it again this afternoon, the Taoiseach bragged about the Government’s new shared equity scheme. It is a vintage Fianna Fáil move if ever there was one.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** What is Sinn Féin doing in the North?

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**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** It is one designed to prop up extortionate house prices and to saddle people with additional debt, and the Taoiseach boasts that people in desperation will reach for that measure. That is nauseating.

The scourge of homelessness is back to record levels. People in families who never thought that they would ever be in such an horrific situation find themselves in emergency accommodation, if they can get emergency accommodation. Children still grow up in hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation robbed of a decent childhood. For any state that calls itself a republic, one child in homelessness is a scandal but hundreds of children homeless is a damning indictment of those in power. All the while, thousands of households continue to languish on social housing waiting lists desperate for the home in which they can build their lives and they watch on as thousands of homes are left vacant throughout the State.

This housing disaster is an affront to the message of equality contained in the Proclamation that hangs outside this Chamber. Rather than lining up to vote confidence in themselves, Government Members might, for once, do some self-reflection because this housing disaster was created by them and it is sustained by them, and yet they remain wedded to the housing policies that created this mess in the first place and feathered the nests of well-got developers, wealthy investors and big landlords at the expense of ordinary people in housing need. The dogs on the street know and can see that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has failed abysmally.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Will they stop objecting?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Let me suggest that the Minister be at the front of the queue when this Government packs its bags to go. It is time now for a housing Minister who will implement policies that turn the tide with a housing strategy that really matches the scale of the challenge because housing can be fixed. There is no doubt about that-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** We are.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----but it will require a new Government with the right priorities-----

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Fewer objectors.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----making the right choices. Simply put, we need a government that builds public homes on public land at a massive scale and these must be homes-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Stop objecting.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----that ordinary people can afford to rent or buy.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Supported by councillors.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Strike two against this failed Government relates to health. Under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, so many are denied the medical care that they badly need. Our hospitals are chronically overcrowded and we have a never-ending trolley crisis. Waiting lists have ballooned to record levels. Children with conditions, such as scoliosis or spina bifida, wait years for life-changing surgery. Mental health and disability services are on the floor as families and communities cry out for help. Despite all the promises of change, our front-line health staff continue to endure unacceptable working conditions. The message from the Government to ordinary people is clear: "Do not get sick, do not need an operation or a treatment, and, for

God's sake, do not need support services." Bad Government policy ensures that they are not guaranteed the care they need when they need it. When so many are denied vital healthcare and when a government, indeed, asks so many to live in agony and stress, how can anybody come into the Dáil and argue that the Government is doing a good job, let alone vote confidence in it? The truth is that the Government persists with policies that hollow out our public health system and prop up an at times inefficient, inequitable, unjust two-tier health service.

People are sick and tired, by the way, of Government telling them that healthcare cannot be fixed or solved. I do not accept that for a second and I never will. A new Government can deliver a health service that works for everyone - a single-tier national public health service where treatment is accessed based on medical need, not on how much you earn. That is what people deserve. That is worth working for; that is worth fighting for.

Strike three against the Government is on the cost-of-living crisis. Households across the country are at breaking point and the threat of poverty is now very real, not only for those on low and fixed incomes, but for middle-income households too. People simply do not know where they will find the money to pay soaring energy bills and put food on the table and fuel in the car, and the massive cost involved in getting children back to school in September has become a household crisis for many. Families struggle to afford the basics but the Government refuses to do what needs to be done. With a bull-headed stubbornness, it refused to introduce an emergency budget with measures to bring relief. It seems one-upmanship and facing down the Opposition were more important to the Government than helping people.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is trying to dissolve the Dáil.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Government will instead wait for 12 weeks before intervening. Ministers are quick to homilise and to tell those of us in opposition that we do not have a monopoly on empathy for people who are suffering.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I agree with that, but a government does not get to stop at empathy. The Government does not get to empathise and then do nothing for people who are overwhelmed by a cost-of-living crisis, the likes of which we have not seen since the 1980s. It is the responsibility of Government to act because empathy without help or action is pity. Workers and families do not want the pity of Government; they want solutions and relief. They want a government that is fit and capable of doing its job.

Individually, each of these failures - a housing disaster, a never-ending health crisis and a refusal to fully tackle the unprecedented cost-of-living crisis - would warrant the sacking of the lot of them but these are three serious strikes against the Government. Three strikes and you are out - done, dusted, time to go.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It is an elongated way of getting to the sound bite.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I speak directly to the Independent Deputies whose support keeps this week an ineffective Government in power. We have all had ringside seats to witness the repeated incompetence of this coalition. These parties have failed the people of the Independent Deputies' constituencies and all they get from them are shrugs of the shoulders, excuses, alibis and heckling - they are good at that. Let me ask the Independent Deputies in all sincerity: is that good enough for the people they represent? Can they honestly look their

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constituents in the eye and say to them that this confused directionless Government is the one to lead the country over the next two years? That is the question. Independent Deputies have a chance to stand up and make a difference, and the ball is in their court. Will they stand with the workers and families they represent or will they back a Government that consistently lets them down?

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Have they Deputy Wynne's vote?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** With their eyes wide open, that is the question each of the Independent Deputies will answer with his or her vote today.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Where is Deputy Wynne? They lost her.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Two years ago, people voted for change in massive numbers.

**A Deputy:** They let them down badly.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** They voted for a new direction, for a fresh start and for a better future. Workers and families backed Sinn Féin and others who promised change-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Why did they not form a Government?

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----and they wanted a party and people at Cabinet who would speak for them and govern for them, but Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens could not stomach that and could not stand the thought of a Government led by a party that would prioritise the well-being of ordinary people-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** They did not have the numbers.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----over vested interests, the insiders and the golden circles.

**Deputy Paul Kehoe:** Sinn Féin did not show Máiría Cahill much sympathy.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What did they do? They clubbed together to stop change. In doing that, they planted the seeds of their own demise and the Government's failure because, make no mistake about it: this is a Government that was born out of necessity, not ambition; formed out of a self-serving desire to keep things the same, rather than to drive progress-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----and cobbled together to defend the interests of those at the top, rather than ordinary people, the very definition of cynicism, cynical politics and a cynical Government.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Pot and kettle.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** What about themselves?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies, please.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** They are giddy before the holidays.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** And so, it is farcical that the Taoiseach proposes to hand the keys of his office back to the Tánaiste in December to carry on as normal, because it is very clear that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in power for far too long and, by God, families and workers throughout the land have paid a heavy price for that.

More and more people see that we need a change of Government, not just a change of Taoiseach. The coalition is stuck in the past, a Government that is unable to respond to the progressive, positive, modern demand for change that is sweeping across Ireland. I am an optimist. I do not believe that Ireland is a basket case; far from it.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy said it is a failed state.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I believe we have everything we need to build a new Ireland. We can house our people.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** We can have first-class public health and education services. We can create and drive prosperity. We can also unite our country.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. The time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** You gave leeway to the Government.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** No, I-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** You gave a minute to the Government. Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

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

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Let her finish. We would like to hear it. We might hear the plan.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I will finish on this. Here is what I know for sure and without a shadow of a doubt. A Government led by Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael will never allow that fair and equal Ireland to be born.

**A Deputy:** Rubbish.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** They have shown us that time and again. Workers and families deserve better and now is the moment for change.

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

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Time for a trip to Australia.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The Taoiseach's time is up. The people have had enough. He and his Ministers must go and make way-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Send them our best in Australia. Tell them we are asking for them down under, at €3,000 a dinner.

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**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** -----for a new Government that will roll up their sleeves, get the job done with energy, with creativity, and create that stronger, fairer Ireland.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear. Well said.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are way over time. I ask that we would now go back to a little co-operation.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Stop the hecklers.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It was at my discretion to increase the time because there was a misunderstanding, partly on my part and partly on the Government side. That was not a precedent for going over time. Táim ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí an Páirtí an Lucht Oibre agus Teachta Bacik.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** This afternoon, the Government is asking us to vote confidence in it. We in Labour cannot do that. We have never had confidence in the Government to address the housing disaster, the childcare crisis, the spiralling cost of living or the climate catastrophe. In 2020, we did not support the election of the Taoiseach and we now believe in the need for a change of Government. We believe the project of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party has been unsuccessful. Despite their stated aims, they are simply not delivering the desired and necessary outcomes or results.

Fianna Fáil has long professed itself the party of home ownership and of house building. Yet, since the Government took office, the housing crisis has deteriorated, rents have increased by 15%, house prices by 22% and homelessness by 19%, with more than 3,000 children and 1,300 families now homeless. That is without mentioning those who have homes but fear they will collapse due to mica, pyrite or construction defects. As the Fianna Fáil Minister for Health grapples with the two-tier health system his party ushered in alongside the Progressive Democrats, the promise of Sláintecare remains distant and, indeed, waiting lists remain unforgivably long for many basic services for many adults and children.

Fine Gael finds itself similarly unequipped to deal with the challenges of its own portfolios. In the midst of an enormous cost-of-living crisis, the best the party can promise is a five-year wait for a living wage. After the trauma of the pandemic, it has produced a sick pay scheme that will cost lower-income workers money, and so-called flexible working legislation that empowers employers to say “No” - a right to refuse, not a right to remote work.

The Green Party, a party that shares many policies and aspirations of my own, has managed to pass some climate legislation, which we have supported, but it appears it is incapable of pushing its Government colleagues to meet those legally-binding targets. We, therefore, see a stand-off on agriculture emissions and on peat and, all the while, the countdown to climate catastrophe keeps ticking.

On childcare, the Government is bound to examine the introduction of a universal public scheme by the First 5 funding model, which is welcome, but that does not appear to be on the horizon, despite ongoing poverty wages for those working in the sector and exorbitant costs for parents. Inequality in Ireland starts the day a baby is born and that should not be how it is in a republic.

This country deserves a Government with the imagination to do better; a Government that

can be relied on to act in the common good for all its people, that will build affordable homes on public land, lead the charge on climate justice and a just transition, and bring about a new Donogh O'Malley moment to ensure universal public childcare and early years education for our youngest citizens and people; a Government that will ensure that nobody languishes on waiting lists for CAMHS, medical intervention, special classes or autism assessments; and a Government that treats care work with the respect it deserves and that will work for the unity of the island in the spirit of John and Pat Hume. Unfortunately, I remain unconvinced that the Government can deliver on any of that.

We acknowledge the many challenges that the Government has and that we all have - the brutal war in Ukraine, the ongoing effects of the Covid pandemic and, of course, the spiralling cost of living. As inflation has skyrocketed, we know that individuals and families are struggling to put food in their mouths and roofs over their heads, but we also know that there are solutions to these complex problems and there is a way to address these challenges. We believe in a Labour vision, a constructive and alternative vision for change based on a centre-left, social democratic philosophy and set of principles, based on the introduction of key measures, such as genuinely free education, genuinely free childcare and early years education, windfall profit taxes on energy companies, immediate increases in the minimum wage and social welfare rates, a rent freeze and new measures to drastically reduce rents, and ensuring the building of more homes as a matter of urgency.

We offer that alternative vision and we also offer a vision on climate justice and on just transition. Something that is notably absent from the no-confidence motion tabled by Sinn Féin is a mention of climate, and it is a strange omission. As climate spokesperson, I have certainly given the Green Party its due for the measures it has sought to introduce in government but we know its coalition partners are simply not willing to do what is necessary to ensure we address the real, existential climate crisis in climate and in biodiversity.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** That is not true.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** We need a Government that will integrate economic planning with a stronger climate response to take us to net zero as quickly as possible, to make Ireland the renewables superpower that it can be and to support the creation of decent jobs through a just transition.

There is a pressing case for change. The reality is that younger generations in Ireland are now growing up worse off than their parents who came before them. Young people are locked out, with no prospect of secure, affordable homes. Workers on low pay and in precarious conditions are struggling to get by, rather than getting on. We know Ireland needs a pay rise and we know the State can and must deliver a new social contract, with real change offered on housing, care, climate and more. We need to build an equal, sustainable island, contributing proudly to our European and international future, but we can only do this if those holding the levers of power understand that change cannot wait and if they are ambitious enough to do more and do better in delivering tangible results.

The tone of too much of this debate has been one of mock outrage and mock anger, which is not helpful. We in the Labour Party have sought to bring a constructive approach to Opposition and to put forward genuine alternatives to try to address the real challenges that all of us hear every day from our own constituents and from people across this island. We meet people struggling to make ends meet.

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*5 o'clock*

We meet parents forced to become full-time campaigners for the basic rights of their children, particularly autistic children and those with a disability. Week in and week out, the sand is running out as we fail to tackle the climate disaster.

My conviction is that the government we need is a government of the left - a government that understands the purpose of the State is to deliver for the common good of all and to harness State action to deliver on housing, childcare, early years education, healthcare and climate. That is not this Government.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Táim ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí an Rialtas. There are 11 and a half minutes in this slot and six speakers. Five speakers will have two minutes each, with the final speaker having one and a half minutes.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Government has done more for farm families, coastal communities and rural Ireland than any previous Government. Despite Sinn Féin having access to its magic money tree before the most recent general election, its manifesto for rural Ireland and agriculture was by far the weakest of those of any of the political parties. Since we have entered government, there has not been a single original thought on this sector from that party or, indeed, from the Opposition benches as a whole.

**Deputy Sean Sherlock:** That is not true.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Meanwhile, the Government has delivered in excess of €5 billion for farmers and fishers in direct and indirect supports.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** You left €30 million on the table.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister must be allowed to speak.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** Building on that, we have created a new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, that will deliver €10 billion for the farm families of Ireland. We have delivered a 50% increase in Pillar 2 funding for CAP supports. We are delivering an agri-environmental scheme that will give farmers €10,500. We have increased the supports to our suckler sector to €250 per cow, compared with €90 under the previous scheme. We have increased fivefold the support for our organic sector, while also delivering support for the tillage and sheep sectors. In the face of Brexit, we have worked tirelessly to support our fishing sector and are investing in it like never before.

Meanwhile, we have seen little to no evidence of any policy innovation from the Opposition. Deputy McDonald has spoken today about what her party would do in regard to housing, for example, an area in which the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Government are doing massive work. Just two miles from where I live, there is a Sinn Féin housing Minister and a Sinn Féin finance Minister in government. Despite that, house prices in Northern Ireland rose by £18,000 on average last year, which was a 12% increase. The Sinn Féin Ministers there obviously have not been reading or seeing the marketing material for Deputy Ó Broin's textbooks on this matter. Again, it is evidence of Sinn Féin's bluster and lack of delivery.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Defective blocks, Charlie. Do you remember them?

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next speaker is the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, without interruption.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My God, Deputy McDonald, your arrogance today has not just gone stratospheric; it has gone intergalactic.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What about your arrogance?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** We would need NASA's Webb telescope to be able to track it.

Housing is a key political issue of our time. We know people stuck in a rent trap or on social housing waiting lists are desperate for somewhere to secure and afford.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** You do not care.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Parents and grandparents want to see their children buying a decent home, like they did at a similar age. The Government is committed to tackling this as our number one priority. After a decade of undersupply, as the Taoiseach said, the numbers of new builds, commencements and planning permissions are up. More and more people are drawing down mortgages and buying new homes. The first affordable purchase homes in a generation will be delivered this year. The first cost rental homes have been built and the largest social housing building programme in our history is under way. There will be more new-build social homes this year than ever before, regardless of the continued objections to them by Deputy McDonald's party.

We have delivered policies like the first home scheme, to which there have already been hundreds of applicants. That was opposed by Sinn Féin. A new vacancy grant is being launched this week. The expanded help to buy scheme was, again, opposed by Sinn Féin. All of these measures put home ownership back at the centre of housing solutions and Sinn Féin opposed them all. They are all part of our Housing for All plan, under which 300,000 new homes will be delivered by 2030. We are investing €4 billion a year, which is €1.2 billion more than Sinn Féin put forward in its 16-page housing plan, eight pages of which were taken up by pictures of Deputy Ó Broin and others.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** This is a real plan. I say to Sinn Féin Deputies, if they want to deliver homes, they should stop objecting to measures like the 6,000 homes in Dublin to which they objected-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** -----including the schemes for Oscar Traynor Road, O'Devaney Gardens and Ballymastone. I could go on.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The time is up, Minister.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** They say one thing and do another. They block progress, delay delivery, disrupt and sow discontent.

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**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Tell the truth.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** We have a housing plan that is taking hold. It will work and the Deputies opposite should support it.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I was astounded but not surprised by the level of arrogance of Sinn Féin frontbenchers as they took to national media in the past week to justify their latest political stunt. None of us should be shocked, however, as this opportunistic manoeuvre is straight out of the Sinn Féin playbook. It is a party that is there to delay and disrupt at every turn for political advantage. It even sought to influence the right of Independent Deputies to vote with their free will and according to their conscience.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies must let the Minister of State speak.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** The Deputies from that party who have gone on radio and television in recent days apparently believe they are Ministers-elect and want to force an election as soon as possible. It is a pity they were not so eager to act in the immediate wake of the most recent election. They chose instead to prioritise political opportunism over the national interest. Those of us on this side of the House acted and worked in collaboration, in the face of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, to form the stable Government the country needed.

Sinn Féin Deputies lambast our housing policy but vote against projects all over the country that will deliver social and affordable housing to people. Deputy McDonald referred to the clothing and footwear increases announced by the Government last week as half measures. Under the scheme, we are paying a rate of €260 to the parents of eligible primary pupils and €385 in the case of post-primary pupils. Meanwhile, in the North, where her party sets the rate, having been in power in 2007, it is giving out less than half measures, with payments of £42.90 for primary school pupils and a maximum of £67.20 for a post-primary pupil.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** It gets better.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Deputy McDonald's party should give the Irish people more credit.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Pupils there get free meals.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mary Butler:** The party should give the Irish people more credit. The electorate will not be fooled by its populism.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The next speaker is the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, who should be allowed to speak interrupted.

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** This is a cohesive and hard-working Government. As Government Chief Whip, I can announce that by the end of this session, more than 100 pieces of legislation will have been passed since the Government took office. Each and every one of those pieces of legislation has been enacted to deliver for families and make progress across many areas of policy.

More generally, we are committed to focusing on the key issues. As the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, outlined, home completions are at their highest level in a decade and we are committed to delivering social and affordable housing for people. A total of €2.4 billion has been invested in cost-of-living measures and a further €6 billion will be delivered in September this year to support families. We must not take our economy for granted, which we would see under Sinn Féin in government. A total of 275,000 jobs have been created, with the strong Exchequer returns allowing us to deliver for people and make progress across areas.

In sport, we have provided €150 million, which is the highest investment in the history of the State, at grassroots level, including to clubs, communities and schools. We have delivered record funding for high-performance programmes, promoting the participation of women in sports and provision for disadvantaged communities from the Dormant Accounts Fund.

Maidir leis an nGaeltacht, tá Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla á achtú againn chun úsáid na Gaeilge a athrú go hiomlán agus go radacach agus chun soláthar seirbhísí poiblí trí Ghaeilge a chinntiú. Chuireamar deireadh leis an maolú ar an nGaeilge atá anois mar theanga oifigiúil san Aontas Eorpach agus chuireamar 400 scoláireacht ar fáil do pháistí scoileanna DEIS chun go mbeadh siad in ann freastal ar choláistí samhraidh sa Ghaeltacht.

By tabling a motion of no confidence last week, Sinn Féin is telling people its only goal is a general election. It is not prioritising housing, dealing with the cost of living, achieving progress on our health services and delivering the constructive politics that are needed in the national interest.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The time is up. I call the Minister of State, Deputy Troy.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** This is a cynical move to exploit issues, not solve them, and to drown out every positive measure in a consistently negative and divisive approach. This is just about pursuing a path to power at any cost.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Minister of State's colleagues will lose out if he does not give way.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** People will see through it.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Robert Troy):** Last week, people in Sinn Féin looked across the water to the Parliament in Westminster from which they take their expenses but in which they do not take their seats. They saw mayhem, chaos and dysfunction and they said, "How can we get some of that over here?"

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It seems to me that is the reason for the discussion this evening.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies, please.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Respectfully, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, this motion does nothing for the people we are here to represent.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It is true that our country and our citizens are facing many challenges. The best way to address those challenges is to ensure we have a strong economy with the necessary resources to enable us to make interventions when they are needed, just as we did during the pandemic. It is because of the policies this Government has pursued that we are in a position to introduce a progressive budget and further supports to address the cost-of-living crisis. We now have 2.5 million people employed, more than were employed before the pandemic. Just today, Enterprise Ireland announced the highest-ever recorded growth. Irish businesses are creating jobs in every county. Our policies are working. We are in a three-party Government. There are differences-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Robert Troy:** -----and there are times when we must compromise, but what we are not compromising on is in our collective determination to address the challenges facing society today. Deputy McDonald said her party needs ten years. Tonight, with others, others who ran away from the opportunity to serve in government-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** -----she and her party are judging us on two years. Fianna Fáil and our partners in government-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. We are over time.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Robert Troy:** -----did not run away. We stood up to the challenge and we will deliver for this country.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy McAuliffe.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Today, the Opposition is taking Dáil time-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** It is Government time.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** -----to tell us what we already know, which is that the Opposition does not support the Government. We have known that, however, for two years. When this country faced its greatest crisis, they ran for the hills and they ran for their rallies. They were nowhere to be seen when this country needed TDs to put the country's interest ahead of their parties' interest and when this country needed politicians who were going to be climate-brave. Politics is not about the game. It is about the work and this is just cynical posturing.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** We see that cynicism when voters are told that it will take a decade to deliver, but then the Opposition cries foul after just two years of Fianna Fáil being back in government after a decade. We see that cynicism when public housing on public land is called for, but the progress of the council-led affordable purchase scheme and the affordable rental scheme is ignored. Some Deputies in the Opposition had their chance in government.

They never legislated for either of these aspects; we have. After a decade of undersupply and a reliance on the market, the State is back building and developing public homes, including 1,700 in my constituency. That is real change.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** The Government has opposed a lot of stuff. What about Scribblestown?

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please, Deputy.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** We see that cynicism when the Leader of the Opposition cynically and falsely tweets that Government TDs voted to seal mother and baby home records.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Shame on you.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Yet this October, victims will be able to access birth information-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies very much.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** -----protected by a database and protected in that Bill.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy is over time.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I have confidence in the programme for Government and I have confidence in the Government's ability to deliver in this and many other areas.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Get a clapometer.

**Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Táimid thar ama. Tá mé ag lorg tacaíocht na dTeachtaí. I call Deputy Ó Broin.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I wonder if the families who have been rendered homeless will be applauding the speech of the Deputy who has just sat down.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** Stop your councillors stopping houses.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** When I listen-----

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** It is always a-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** When I am listening to the Taoiseach talking about housing, I genuinely wonder if he is in the same country as I am. He tells us that progress is being made. I must say that is a deeply disingenuous statement. There are times when I wonder if the Taoiseach is in denial and if he actually believes the things he is saying. In fact, what is clear is that he, just like his other colleagues, including Deputy Brophy, is wilfully misleading the House and the public, not only about his record, but about the record of those of us on this side of the House.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** It is the truth. It is why you do not like it.

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**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The reason why is because the Government does not want an election. That is the very definition of cynical.

Therefore, let us just look at the progress this Government has made under the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. Homelessness has increased in the last two years by 19%, and child homelessness by a staggering 40% in the last 12 months. There are now 5,000 single adults in emergency accommodation funded by the Department of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This is the highest level of single-person homelessness ever recorded in modern times. More than 3,000 children, because of the policies of this Government, will be sleeping tonight in emergency accommodation. We are only days away from breaching the October 2019 peak of the highest level of officially-recognised homelessness in the history of the State.

Rents are sky high. The average for a rental property in this city is €24,000 annually. In the Taoiseach's constituency, it is €19,000 a year for a standard rental property. Contrary to what the Taoiseach said, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has not increased protections for renters. Last April, he stripped the single most important intervention that led to reductions in family homelessness, namely the ban on evictions. That has led to almost a month-on-month increase. The crisis in the private rental sector is continuing. Not only is that sector shrinking month-on-month because of the Government's failed policies, but the new rental supply that is coming in, because of the building and planning regulations introduced by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, is locking in high-cost rental in perpetuity. This is why the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, rightly highlighted in a report last week that this Government's policies, like those of the Governments before, are subjecting an entire generation to the risk of pensioner poverty.

Contrary as well to the claim made by the Minister and Taoiseach their party is about home-ownership, every time Fianna Fáil has been in government, with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, home ownership has plummeted. People's dependence on insecure high-cost rentals has continued. With respect to social housing, we are told that it is going to be the biggest social housing programme in the history of the State. Yet the Minister's own report at the end of the first quarter of this year stated that the total number of new social homes delivered under the Government's programme is 639, which is just 7% of the total. We are at about the same level as we were last year during Covid-19, when there was a lockdown. Therefore, I do not believe that these targets are going to be met. Even if they are met, that will be 1,000 less than what was promised by the last Government and therefore nowhere near enough. Turning to affordable housing, 65 affordable rentals were provided last year. We may get a couple of hundred affordable purchases this year. That is not a serious commitment to tackling this crisis.

I heard loud heckling from several Deputies from counties in which properties have been affected by defective blocks. They were not so loud last week when the Government----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----was ramming through legislation that left those families with tens of thousands of euro of debt-----

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** You never even responded-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----to fix defective homes that are defective because of the light touch regulation of those Deputies' parties.

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** The average price of a house in Northern Ireland-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** One of the many-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Deputy McConalogue is very loud today. Where was he last week when his constituents needed him?

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** One of the greatest-----

**Deputy Charlie McConalogue:** So much for Sinn Féin policies.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** One of the greatest misrepresentations of this Government regarding all the Opposition parties, but particularly regarding ours, is that we have no alternatives. With our Private Members' time today, along with other colleagues and the entire Raise the Roof civil society and trade union movement, we will outline those alternatives to the Government yet again.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Sinn Féin has not objected to public housing on public land.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** That is not true.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** What we have objected to are the sweetheart land deals-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----and sweetheart tax deals-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----where Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-----

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** The Deputy is on the Official Record. Tell the truth.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----are gifting public land to private developers to build unaffordable homes.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies.

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**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** If the Government Deputies wish to ask about housing objections, they should ask their colleagues from Dublin Mid-West-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. He is over time.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----why they opposed the strategic housing development, SDZ, at Clonburris-----

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** There were-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am moving on. I thank the Deputy. We are over time.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** -----of 11,000 homes.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We have the alternatives. We have the will. We want change and that is why I am supporting the motion of no confidence in this Government.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** Stop the councillors voting against housing-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Go down to Cork.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. I am moving on-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputies. Can we have a little co-operation and respect?

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Catherine Murphy. Before she begins, the Deputy is entitled to be heard with dignity and respect.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** It is impossible to vote confidence in this Government based on any objective analysis of its performance to date. This is a Government that is happy to acknowledge the vast number of people enduring serious financial pressure from an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis, yet it has consistently refused to introduce an emergency budget to provide workers and their families with interim relief in advance of the budget in the autumn. The Government is also blind to the havoc it is causing in housing, which has long morphed from a crisis into a disaster. One of the most basic requirements of any functioning society is the provision of secure and affordable housing. It is supposed to be the biggest priority for the Government, but it is also its biggest failure. The housing crisis did not happen by accident. It was caused by a collection of policy choices by successive Governments, all of which have included Fine Gael.

It is now, as I said, a housing disaster. We are told that record amounts are being spent and we have been told, and repeatedly told, about the €4 billion. Let us, however, have a look at this figure. When we take out the housing assistance payment, HAP, the rental accommodation

scheme, RAS, the financial cost of homelessness-----

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** It is not in the €4 billion-----

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** -----and the continued long leasing of housing, which is a very expensive way of delivering housing, without there being an asset at the end, it has turned social housing into an attractive and profitable product. The €4 billion shrinks to nearly €2 billion when we make allowances for all of this. The direct builds of local authorities are in many cases turnkeys rather than direct builds and are not an addition to housing completion numbers.

Last week's ESRI report is very sobering. The report states that one in three people aged between 35 and 44 years will not own a home by retirement age. The new research suggests that a future cohort of retirees will likely have substantially lower rates of homeownership than current retirees, with only 65% of those currently aged 35 to 44 years estimated to become homeowners by retirement age. It gets worse. We are told that it is even more stark for the age cohort between 25 and 34 years, of which one in two households are likely to become homeowners by retirement age. The report finds that such drastic changes in homeownership patterns could raise the proportion of people aged 65 years and over in income poverty due to housing costs from the current rate of 14% to 31%. That is some legacy and it is being created as we speak as a result of deliberate housing policies that make housing completely unaffordable. It is not just an issue of delivery. There is an affordability crisis at the heart of the housing crisis.

We are spending approximately €22 billion on our health service, yet it is in perpetual crisis. One quarter of the population, some 1.3 million people, are now on waiting lists for health services. That is a truly shocking figure. It has become much more difficult to retain our excellent healthcare workers because the system also fails them. There has been a rush to the door and it hardly fills one with confidence that people like Professor Tom Keane and Ms Laura McGahey left the health service last year partly because they did not believe there was a real commitment to reform through Sláintecare. We have watched senior officials head to the door in recent weeks and months and it does not fill one with confidence that the Department of Health is in control or can reform the healthcare system to the extent required to tackle that problem.

This is supposed to be a cohesive Government and it cannot even agree climate targets. The Green Party must ask itself what the key issue is in this Government, if it is not about delivering sectoral climate targets.

The tone of any parliament is always set by government, but the change in tone of this Parliament was like the flicking of a light switch when this Government took up office as opposed to the tone of a minority government when the Dáil was in control of the agenda and there was a more collegiate approach.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I missed that.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** Once the Government had the numbers, the tone completely changed in terms of the Business Committee, guillotines, and how we do business in the House. It matters because that changed the nature of the debate in the House and was, I believe, a big mistake. The Dáil does not have control of the agenda; the Government has taken control of it.

It is for those and a myriad of other reasons that it seems as if many of our public services are stuck together with sellotape. There are a myriad of failures and by no objective analysis could one say the Government is doing a good job. I wonder whether the country can afford this

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Government, considering some of the decisions currently being made. The waste is appalling.

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As a Government, we acknowledge there is much to do. We acknowledge there is much progress that we need to make in the rest of our mandate. However, in putting forward the motion, we also make the case for what we have achieved and delivered during two years of unprecedented challenge.

Our country faced record levels of unemployment at a time when the world was grappling with a pandemic. Where are we now? We are now in a position where we have never had more people at work in our country than we have today. At the start of our mandate, we had to borrow huge amounts of money to put in place economic supports, which worked, saved our economy and created jobs. Where are we today? National finances are approaching balance, with health and resilience back in our national finances.

When the Government took up office, health services were confronted with a pandemic without precedent. Now, 800 more beds are being built and opened in our health services to help us provide the care we know our country needs. When this Government took up office, the construction sector closed as part of the measures needed to keep our country safe from a pandemic. Where are we now? We have 30,000 homes commenced which will provide roofs over the heads of families, renters and tenants who need and deserve the homes the Government is committed to delivering.

I listened very carefully to the Leader of the Opposition's speech. Rarely have I heard a speech that was so full of attacks and so lacking in content.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Minister did not listen to his fellow Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** I listened carefully to what Deputy McDonald had to say. She talked about the need to change. In the 15 minutes afforded to her, she proposed one solution. What was that solution?

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Getting rid of the Government. That is enough.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** It was tax credit. Anyone in this country looking for change and radical reform will not find it in the speech delivered by Deputy McDonald.

What was also conspicuously lacking in that speech was what was not mentioned. There was no mention of Covid, the war in Ukraine, the economy and the value of jobs, and, shamefully, Brexit. That kind of approach might work when leading an Opposition and when one is more interested in the content of a social media video than the content of policy, but it will not work if one is looking to lead a country. It points to the greater void at the heart of Sinn Féin policies. Sinn Féin wants more rental accommodation to be built, yet it demonises landlords and anyone who seeks to provide it. It wants to make progress on climate change, yet it is against any measure, particularly difficult measures, that are needed to achieve it. It wants to abolish the local property tax in Ireland, yet it wants to hike the tax in the North. Sinn Féin wants to make progress on the cost-of-living challenge. One week it is in favour of targeted measures and the next week it is in favour of broad measures.

Has there ever been a darker act of humour in recent Irish politics than Sinn Féin publishing

a Private Members' Bill to control social media trolls? Has there even been a darker moment of irony when the party brought that measure forward? Amid the odd hint of a policy we hear from Sinn Féin, it points to the darker and more difficult truth. It is a party that is negative on Europe, indifferent to investment and always sees income in our country as something to be spent and never earned. Deputy McDonald showed an awareness that it might work for making a speech when putting forward a case in a Private Members' motion, but her speech showed no recognition of the challenges this country faces. It ended with a claim of optimism. How hollow a note to end on.

The Government knows there is much to do. We know we have much to achieve. This is an historic Government composed of different politicians and three different parties, but we are united in our view as to how we can make progress, progress that we will make.

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The reason we are describing this as an exercise in cynicism is as follows. There was a legitimate debate in the House a couple of weeks ago as to when we should have the budget and on the size of the budget package. The Government responded, moved the date of the budget forward and will now deliver a budget package bigger than previously planned. However, instead of now allowing the Government to knuckle down and get on with that job, the motion Sinn Féin has tabled would result in the dissolution of the Dáil, the hanging up of posters and a paralysis in Irish politics for the weeks and months ahead. It would result in a delay in delivering help to hard-working families at a time when, as Sinn Féin rightly highlights, they so need it. In many ways it is a mini-version of the very difficult situation in Northern Ireland that it rightly castigates. It wants to plunge this jurisdiction into paralysis, just like Northern Ireland now sees paralysis as well.

Unfortunately, it is more sinister than that. As my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, rightly outlined, we hear very eloquent speeches that prey on people's legitimate fears and concerns and offer beautiful sound bites, very well articulated, but no solutions. The people do not need that. What the people need now is a Government that will, in the face of massive global challenges, get on with progressing an agenda that will deliver for them, their families and their futures, and that is what we are doing.

We are doing it in the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, where we see massive increases in student grants coming, changes to adjacency and income thresholds, and five technological universities now bringing higher education into the regions, not just the cities. We are launching our apprenticeship action plan, delivering record numbers of apprentices to build the homes we need and to retrofit our buildings. We are determined to reduce the cost of education. Sinn Féin criticises the cost of education here, but a fact it does not talk about much is that students in Northern Ireland are charged over €2,000 more just to go to college every year than they are charged here. Shame on Sinn Féin. We are reforming the CAO process. We are giving out free laptops to more than 17,000 students. We have introduced funding streams to help autistic students to get into college and to have pathways and programmes for students with intellectual disabilities. We have abolished fees for post-leaving certificate courses. We will deliver 200 more medicine places over the next five years and new pathways and structures for our PhD students.

That is what we are doing to try to make a real and tangible difference in an important area of people's lives and the education system of our country. All of that is happening at a time when Sinn Féin offers division, a menu of empty rhetoric and stagnation and a proactive policy

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of paralysis. Of course Sinn Féin has a right to table a no-confidence motion, but that does not mean tabling one is the right thing to do. Shortly, a very significant majority of the people's representatives in this House will give Sinn Féin its answer.

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** On 9 February this year, in a post still visible on its website, Sinn Féin made a series of uncostered promises in respect of the cost of living. This is a pattern that has become all too familiar for the Sinn Féin Party. In its alternative budget last October, it committed to spending €3.2 billion over and above what the Government committed to spending. Again, more uncostered voodoo economics.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** How could it be uncostered if the Minister of State has given the figures? This is just ridiculous.

**Deputy Hildegarde Naughton:** Last February, Sinn Féin promised that every individual with an income of up to €30,000 would receive a cash payment of €200 and those earning between €30,000 and €60,000 would receive a cash payment of €100. I have costed that measure using 2020 Revenue figures. It is a promise of €310 million. Nowhere was that promise costed or an explanation given as to where the money would come from. Sinn Féin also promised to put one month's rent back into renters' pockets, another slogan without any substance. I have also costed that promise using ESRI figures. It is a promise worth €854 million. Again, it is not costed. No explanation is given as to where the money will come from. Sinn Féin would abolish carbon tax, which raises approximately €500 million per year. That revenue goes towards the retrofitting of homes and helps farmers to decarbonise, helps with a just transition, not only for the midlands but throughout the country, and helps alleviate fuel poverty. In total, in a series of promises, there is uncostered and unexplained spending of more than €1.6 billion in one press release alone.

Being in government is about having discipline, making tough decisions and telling the public what is possible as opposed to what is popular. Government cannot run on slogans or irresponsible spending commitments. Sinn Féin Deputies are like the Muppets, Statler and Waldorf, heckling from their balcony and offering absolutely no viable solutions for the people.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** It is Government Members who are like the Muppets.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What about Government Members?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Right on cue.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Behave yourselves, Members.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** The great Kerry philosopher and writer John B. Keane once said a Kerry footballer with an inferiority complex is one who thinks he is just as good as everybody else. Now a Sinn Féin Deputy with an inferiority complex is one who thinks he will only top the poll and bring in one running mate. The polls and Sinn Féin's suggested popularity have gone to the heads of its Deputies. They crave an election. We can see it. They are mad to get out there and mad for power. It has gone to their heads. They have even introduced the McDonald's Happy Meal at \$2,000 a place, but you do not even get a toy at the end of it. It is clear from the way they are carrying on they think they are in government already.

This evening is about more theatre. Last week they wanted an emergency budget. This week they want a general election. Of course, that would put back an emergency budget by months and months, but they do not care because it is all about the theatre and all about putting party before country. We are different and have always put the country before our parties, and that is the way we will carry on. Sinn Féin constantly talks down this country and the Irish people. When it does that, it does a disservice and dishonours our parents, our grandparents and our great-grandparents who fought to build this country into one of the strongest democracies in the world. That is the way it will remain. We will not bow down to, bend to or back off from Sinn Féin. The party of Gerry Adams will never defeat the party of Michael Collins. I commend the motion to the House.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Was Michael Collins in Fine Gael?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Was Gerry Adams in the IRA?

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** Was Gerry Adams in the IRA?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Order, please.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Four of the previous seven Ministers for Health sit in this Government, with nothing to show for it but a record of failure, and most, if not all, of those failures predate Covid. Let us not look back on those failures just over the past two years, because the truth is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government since the foundation of the State. The only reason they came together after the previous general election to act as one was to keep Sinn Féin out of government.

**Deputy Josepha Madigan:** Sinn Féin did not form a government.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Let us look at their failures. The trolley crisis gets worse year on year. Emergency department waiting times are more than 12 hours on average, and what has this Government served up? A damning report from HIQA on the danger of University Hospital Limerick's emergency department, with patients left waiting up to 116 hours. The Government has run down the emergency department at Navan, and the ambulance service is stretched thin, with no plan in sight. We have wholesale cancellation of elective surgeries, which is now routine, with more than 16,000 hospital appointments cancelled in May alone. Children with scoliosis and spina bifida face cancellation after cancellation and get treatment only when they and their families have to take to the media to beg for care.

Disability services are completely unfit for purpose. We have more than 700 vacancies on children's disability network teams. That means 480,000 lost therapy hours while 50,000 children are on waiting lists for care. The State and the HSE were taken to court for denying rights to children with disabilities. I say to the Minister, Deputy Harris, that that is shameful.

In mental health, more than 240 children were exposed to risk of significant harm under south Kerry CAMHS. GPs are retiring without replacements, with waiting lists for GPs growing. The dental treatment service scheme for children and medical card holders is collapsing and has been for the best part of two years. The Government's plan for waiting lists has been wholesale outsourcing to the private sector. The Government relies on the National Treatment Purchase Fund to purchase private care. The Government invests in private diagnostic capacity instead of the public system. Home care is entirely reliant on private agencies. Outsource, outsource, outsource is the Government's plan, rather than building capacity in the public system.

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The Government is building a new national maternity hospital on land the State does not own.

Front-line healthcare workers are exhausted and burnt out, yet there is no joined-up workforce plan and no plan to stem the tide of emigration of those in healthcare. No training targets of substance have been set by the Minister or the Government, and a range of healthcare contracts are out of date. Non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs, work more than 60 hours a week. The new consultant contract is years behind and there has been no resolution to pay inequality. The GP contract does not work. Medical scientists were forced to go on strike, junior doctors are now planning to strike, nurses are considering going on strike and student nurses have told me and my party leader in droves that they will leave because they were told by this Fianna Fáil Government they do not do real work. Many front-line workers are still waiting for the pandemic bonus, which has still not been paid, and there is no long-term sick pay for long Covid for those on the front line. Is it any wonder healthcare professionals leave and emigrate or do not work in the public system in the numbers they should?

We have an absolute failure of accountability in healthcare. There is no accountability for Grace, no accountability in the Brandon case and no inquiry into injury from sodium valproate or mesh implants. We have a CervicalCheck tribunal that is not supported by the survivors or families who lost loved ones and organs of deceased children incinerated without the parents' knowledge or consent. Where is the reform? There is no plan of substance to end the two-tier health service.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** What are the Deputy's plans?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Key Sláintecare figures resigned because they were frustrated at every step. The Government served up weak regional health areas.

This Government is out of ideas, out of touch and out of time. A new Sinn Féin Government would produce a multi-annual waiting list plan. We would invest in capacity and workforce planning. We would train enough healthcare workers to staff the health service safely. We would engage with young people to encourage them to train and stay in work in the Irish public health service. We would modernise contracts for GPs, consultants, junior doctors, dentists and others to deliver care at the highest level. We would end the two-tier health service and deliver universal healthcare as quickly as we could.

The longer the current Government stays in place, the further we get from real change. I have no confidence in the Minister for Health and have no confidence in the Government to deliver the single-tier health service where people would be treated with dignity, without old-age pensioners left lying on hospital trolleys. One was left on a trolley in Limerick for 116 hours while his wife had to say goodbye. That is not the Ireland I want to live in, and that is not the health service I want to see.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I have to say the Government is doing a great job for those it represents. The big five energy companies announced increased profits of €280 million in the past year. The big five food companies saw increased profits of €174 million in the past year. Irish Residential Properties REIT, the largest landlord in this country, saw profits increase to €67.5 million, representing a 16% increase. All the other corporate landlords are the same, as are the electricity companies. Collectively, the billionaires in this country increased their wealth by €15.5 billion since 2020.

The Government represents those who are profiting from the cost-of-living and housing

crises. Those people are doing extremely well. The crisis for ordinary people is an opportunity to profit for those the Government represents. Very clearly, the Government does not represent the interest of renters, who face 10% rent increases year on year. The Government does not represent the one in three people who are now living in energy poverty. It does not represent low- and middle-income workers who are seeing their income effectively eroded day after day, with prices out of control. It is doing absolutely nothing to tackle it.

I heard the Minister of State, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, on the radio this morning talking about this motion. He said everyone he speaks to is terrified of an election.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** Because of the outcome, with people like you in it.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I suggest the Minister of State try speaking to some people who are not Ministers or Government backbenchers. It might help the perspective of the Government if he spoke to some ordinary people. The people I speak to are not terrified of an election — not at all. They would like to see an election and an historic opportunity to kick out Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to establish, for the first time ever in this country, a Government that is not run by one of the two traditional, capitalist establishment parties on the basis the conservative ideas they represent.

**Deputy Michael McGrath:** Will the Deputy join us and go into government? That will be the day.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Deputy McDonald said that if Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael leads in government, it will not deliver. I agree.

**Deputy Colm Brophy:** She will take your seat.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** If Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are part of the Government, they will continue to represent the same interests: the developers, corporate landlords and big corporations. What we need to have and fight for is a left Government without Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. All those parties that say they are on the left should commit to that to rule out a coalition with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and fight for a left Government, a Government with eco-socialist policies that would actually represent the interests of renters and workers and tackle the climate crisis and not represent the interests of the rich, as the current Government does.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Government has trotted out a completely false narrative. Its members are all on message in saying they are the people with solutions and we are the people who are just being critical, but that is not the truth. Tomorrow we will have a Bill seeking to reduce the rents in this country to affordable levels and the Government will vote against it. That is the truth.

The truth is that 10,300 households will be really suffering over the coming weeks. Record numbers of people and their children are in emergency homeless accommodation. Some have been in it for three to three and a half years. I have raised their cases in this House. They have no prospect of getting out of the accommodation. The Government has not solved this. Meanwhile, we have 160,000 empty properties. In my area, flats and apartments in the hands of vulture funds have been sitting for three and four years. I have raised this repeatedly. What does the Government do about it? It does nothing but these investors are making a fortune just sitting on empty properties. They are making record profits. Energy companies are making record profits. Corporate profits have gone up by 300% in the past ten years. Those concerned

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are doing well, however. According to ICTU, housing and accommodation costs in this country are 78% higher than the EU average. Therefore, the Government should not hide behind the Ukraine war. Rents in Europe increased by 13% over a decade. In the same period they went up by 63% here. Those figures are from 2020. Now the increases in rent are more than 100%. I am referring to the past 12 years. The corporate landlords, speculators and investors are creaming it with profits while tens of thousands of people in this country can find nowhere to live or are being absolutely crushed with the costs of rent and accommodation and, on top of those, the cost of living.

This week in my office, I talked to a former postal worker who is now a pensioner. The individual is on a pension from the post office that is below the official Central Statistics Office poverty line. When he goes down to get the household benefits package, fuel allowance and telephone allowance, he is deemed to be earning too much. He is over the threshold so he gets no support in facing the cost-of-living crisis. The Minister responsible for housing and the Taoiseach promised us repeatedly this year in the Dáil that the income eligibility thresholds for social housing would be raised to stop people being hammered off the housing list. They broke that promise, and that is why I am voting to express no confidence in this Government.

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The tabling of a motion of no confidence in the Government at this time says more about the party opposite than the Government. This is a cynical political tactic to raise Sinn Féin's profile in the last week of a Dáil session, taking up valuable time when so many issues need this Parliament's focus. What makes this stunt even more cynical is the reality that it will not succeed. There was never a realistic expectation in Sinn Féin that it would. This is about disruption. It is about reinforcing negative messaging to damage the Government before a recess, at a time when stability and solution-focused politics are so badly demanded of us all.

I was in London yesterday meeting Opposition parties and my counterparts in the UK Government to discuss Anglo-Irish relations, which are not in good shape, and the ongoing instability in Northern Ireland. At a time when there is no functioning Government in Westminster because of a leadership challenge, no functioning political institutions in Northern Ireland, no North-South bodies and no devolved government, and at a time when we are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, what is Sinn Féin's primary focus? It is to collapse the Government in Dublin along with all of the other challenges we face on this island right now. This is what Sinn Féin does. This is its sixth motion of no confidence in five years. Fortunately, this House has had the wisdom to see through the motivation behind Sinn Féin's disruption tactics. It is a party whose record in collapsing governments on this island is nothing to be proud of. It is a party that continues to focus on reinforcing difference, division and what divides us rather than focusing on what needs to unite us at a time of instability.

These are not normal times. They are exceptional times in terms of international and domestic challenges for this country and its people. We are living on a continent at war. We are living through a global pandemic. We are living with all that flows from both of these things. The Government is facing these headwinds with resolve, unity and purpose. On the issue of housing, which will probably be the biggest challenge for the Government in the years ahead, we continue to increase our investment and focus to improve life for many who feel under pressure because of housing. This is despite Sinn Féin constantly opposing every new initiative we take. Sinn Féin opposed the Land Development Agency building homes. It opposed the help to buy and shared equity schemes. It is against financial interventions to get apartments built. In Dublin, Sinn Féin local authority members have opposed 6,000 homes on council land because

they are not being built in the way Sinn Féin decides rather than being based on the democratic decisions of those councils.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** You were the Minister for housing who would end homelessness. Do you remember that?

**Deputy Simon Coveney:** Despite all of this, because of the Government's priorities, 30,000 homes have been commenced in the past year and close to 10,000 social homes will be delivered this year. We have much more to do. Unfortunately, we will have to do it in spite of those opposite.

We will continue to protect a strong economy from Sinn Féin ideology and disruption, keeping people in work and growth intact to pay for the social change that is desperately needed in terms of investment. This is a Government that understands that the public investments needed are only possible in a strong economy managed responsibly. This is a message we never hear from the parties opposite. They promise the world spending somebody else's money. This is a Government that will put together one of the most significant budgets in living memory, responding comprehensively to the cost-of-living pressures that so many families throughout the country will face this autumn, while Sinn Féin will continue to call for elections and emergency budgets every second month for populist political gain. There may come a time when its populist disruption brings down the Government but it will not be today. The House sees through its tactics and so do the public.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The motion is another example of Sinn Féin speaking out of both sides of its mouth. It criticises the Government but wastes valuable time with a charade of a motion that was never going to succeed, using its time to criticise the Government with no clear direction of its own insight. Its only purpose is to cause a pointless drama and an unwelcome distraction when there are so many issues at hand.

As a member of the Government I am proud to stand on our record of working for the people. Nobody on these benches is denying there are challenges but we are determined to tackle these challenges and build a better future. Working with the people, we have come through Covid. We have more than 2.5 million people at work. We are working to tackle the cost of living because we know people are working hard for themselves and their families. We are working to build more homes. We are working to improve our health service.

In my brief I have placed domestic, sexual and gender-based violence at the top of the agenda, recently publishing the zero tolerance plan. It outlines a whole-of-society approach to create an Ireland where gender-based violence, sexual violence and child abuse are not tolerated. I have also introduced new laws to criminalise the distribution of intimate images without consent and to introduce preliminary trial hearings to make the court process less stressful for victims. We have introduced personal injury guidelines to tackle the cost of insurance. Templemore is now open, and with a new recruitment campaign we will see 200 more gardaí coming out of the Garda college and into our communities every 12 weeks. We are working on progress to make new laws on stalking and non-fatal strangulation. There is a new sex offenders Bill to strengthen the monitoring arrangements of convicted sex offenders. There is a family court Bill to put families at the centre of the family justice system. There is a hate crime Bill with tougher sentences for crimes motivated by hate and prejudice. There is a digital recording Bill to improve the use of CCTV. We will introduce body-worn cameras for An Garda Síochána and a new sale of alcohol Bill to modernise our antiquated licensing laws.

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This is a Government that is working. Our actions are clear. We will be judged by them. We can only judge Sinn Féin by its actions and let us look at them on one of the most serious issues we could face. As Minister for Justice I take my responsibility towards the security and safety of our State and our people very seriously. Weeks ago, once again, Sinn Féin failed to support the renewal of the Offences Against the State Act and the Special Criminal Court. It was another reminder that Sinn Féin cannot be trusted to protect national security and the institutions of the State. It told us it is willing to ignore very clear security advice from An Garda Síochána and the Garda Commissioner whose unambiguous view, and I put this on the record of the House, is that the Offences Against the State Act and the Special Criminal court are vital in the continued fight against terrorism and organised crime. Sinn Féin ignores these views and prefers to help its own. What other advice from the Garda Commissioner would it ignore if it were in office? What other security and intelligence briefings would it disregard? The truth is it cannot be trusted to protect our people and our State. We in government will continue to work on behalf of the people and we will not be deterred from doing so. I have no doubt we will have the support of the House this evening.

**Deputy Richard Bruton:** Everyone realises we are in the grips of a series of crises that have rocked the world. Anyone who went to the photographic exhibition the Ceann Comhairle put on today of the damage being done to lives in Ukraine would not doubt this is the reality. Mercifully, we are far from that reality but we are feeling the brunt of it. The evidence shows the Government has been caring and innovative in its response to the crisis. It is undertaking deep-seated reform in many areas that had been left untouched for many years. It is doing so with the caution required by what these underlying crises imply for our country. We need to proceed with caution and not with rashly jumping on every bandwagon that comes by our door.

There are many people bearing the scars of the multiple crises we have been through. There are many whose expectations have been far from fulfilled. What I find disconcerting about the Sinn Féin response to this is that its response is simple and cynical. It seeks to portray the Ministers in the Government as uncaring, out of touch and trying to line their own pockets or the pockets of so-called developers or wealthy interests. This portrayal is an entire fantasy. I have worked in Cabinet with Ministers from the Labour Party, Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and Independent Members. I can say with absolute confidence that none have spared themselves. None have pursued special interests. They have sought to provide government for a country that is trying to grapple with what are worldwide problems.

No matter how often the Sinn Féin communications juggernaut repeats these charges in scripts that come off its wonderful word processors, elevating it now to theatre, the truth is that those who hitch their wagon to this juggernaut today should not for one minute think it will not shortly reverse over them and the parties supporting this. Most people enter politics to resolve conflict. Unfortunately, we see too much of politics that is all about generating conflict. Twice in my lifetime I have seen the sort of situation where faith placed in the triumph of political hope over expectation has destroyed opportunity. It has been the weakest who have been damaged by this failure. Unfortunately, I see the seeds of this same approach being sown today and many days previously. We are asked to consider a change of government to Sinn Féin. I do not have the time to do it now but look at the policies and plans it is offering. There is no solution to the multiple challenges we face from the strategies offered by Sinn Féin.

*6 o'clock*

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Faoin Rialtas seo, tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta tar éis éirí ina

tubaiste sóisialta. Tá na liostaí feithimh ospidéal ag éirí níos faide ná mar a bhí riamh agus tá an caighdeán maireachtála ag titim. Is é ceann de na fáthanna go mbeidh mise ag vótáil mímhúiníne sa Rialtas seo ná go bhfuil á teip iomlán air. Tá sé in am don athrú. An Taoiseach was right when he walked outside this House a number of years ago and declared to the world that the best interests of the Irish people were not served by a Government made up of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. How right he was, unfortunately, because we have seen over the past two years how those words have rung loud and true for workers and families throughout the State.

Since the election, we have seen rents increase and spiral out of control. The average rent in this State is now €18,000 per year while, in Dublin, it is more than €24,000. Since the election, house prices have continued to spiral, with the average price now almost €312,000. A whole generation has been locked out of home ownership. Under the Government, the housing crisis has got worse and worse. Today, there are 1.3 million people on hospital waiting lists. Many of them are waiting 12 hours and longer in emergency departments up and down this State. Healthcare has become less accessible, not more, to patients and families who are struggling.

Some children with additional needs still do not even know what schools they will be in, come August and September. We saw last week when families, whose homes are crumbling before their eyes, watched as the Government rammed a defective scheme through the Dáil that leaves them with tens of thousands of euro to come out of their own pockets. Many of them will be locked out of this scheme and locked into a future of despair.

We need a strong and inclusive economy that supports workers and families, but the failures of the Government in housing and childcare are damaging our economy and the workers who have built it. Under the Government, living standards have fallen faster than at any time since the financial crash that was brought on by a Fianna Fáil-led Government. Ireland is now the most expensive country in the EU for housing costs, including rent, mortgage rates and electricity. The Ireland of today, under Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens is an Ireland in which one in three are living in energy poverty. It is an Ireland where one in three are struggling to make ends meet and too many, struggling on low pay, struggle to build a future. They live in an Ireland where they feel they have no future.

The living standard of Irish households is below the European average; that is a fact. Under this Government, workers and families face mounting energy bills, transport costs and food prices, with many of them at breaking point. Struggling under a cost-of-living crisis, workers and families deserve a Government that hears them, listens to them and is willing to respond for them. Workers and families deserve a Government that is in touch with their concerns and that will take decisive action but, instead, they are faced with a Government that refuses to take action or bring forward an emergency budget. The message to them is to sit tight and buckle up because they are on their own, but a very different message is there for the vulture funds and the investment funds because this is a Government that is only all too quick to roll out the red carpet for those who want to exploit the housing crisis to the detriment of renters and home buyers.

This is a Government that has allowed the most vulnerable to wither on the vine and has only responded when it has been shamed into action. This is a Government that is out of touch, a Government that is out of ideas and a Government that is out of time. Today, the Dáil faces a simple question: are we heading in the right direction or the wrong direction under this Government? The answer is plainly clear for anybody to see in housing, health, the cost of living, mica and many other issues. Things are getting worse for far too many people. The Irish people have big ambitions for their country, their communities and their families, but they are stuck in

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a rut, because they are with a Government that has created more problems that it solves. This is a Government that is big on promises, but weak on delivery.

I have no confidence in a Government that has turned a housing crisis into a social disaster; I have no confidence in a Government that has brought our healthcare system to a standstill for so many patients; and I have no confidence in a Government that has failed to protect lower- and middle-income households from the sharp edge of the cost-of-living crisis. Members of this House should not either. That is why I am voting no confidence in this Government. It is time for change; it is time to replace this Government.

**Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick:** I stated many times in the Chamber that the people of Ireland need help and they need help now. The main issues that are continuously being raised in my constituency office are the cost of living, housing and health. I have raised these issues with the Government and expressed my disappointment. On the cost of living, we need to cut taxes for those on middle and low incomes and increase social welfare in the upcoming budget. We need to continue the supports and reductions on the cost of energy by reducing VAT on gas and electricity and the public service obligation levy; cutting the cost of public transport and children's school transport, and the cost of putting food on the table; do and much more on top of the extra €75 lump sum for recipients of fuel allowance.

As I said in the Chamber last week, I welcome the €2.4 billion in cost-of-living measures, but help is needed and it is needed now. On housing, we need to build more houses and make them more affordable. We need more rental accommodation and to get unoccupied and vacant properties back into the housing stock. The Government has a housing plan, Housing for All, which sets out to deliver 300,000 new homes by the end of 2030, including 90,000 social houses, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost-rental homes. Families, at present, are working just to pay for their mortgage or rent. We need to help them, and we need to help them now.

We must make the Government keep its promises and we must follow up on the allocation of €165 billion towards housing, climate change and balanced regional development. Families need a home and stability, and children need a home. I look at all these vacant houses lying idle beside schools and medical centres. It is very important to give a few euro to the local authorities to put families in these houses, as soon as we can.

On the issue of health, we must not forget that Ireland had one of the most successful Covid vaccination programmes in the world. In fairness, the Government provided €48 billion to the economy and society, which was very welcome, and we all worked together. However, with the largest budget in the history of the State in 2022, it is still disappointing that we see so many patients on waiting lists. Some €350 million has been provided to deliver additional activities under the Government's waiting-list action plans and I will chase after it to see how this money is spent. With an additional 847 permanent beds in the past three years, we do not seem to see their impact, but I welcome the reduction of the drugs payment scheme threshold from €124 to €80 and a successful vaccination roll-out.

I have spoken to many constituents and businesses in my area who are concerned that Sinn Féin will get into power. They say Sinn Féin is full of promises and is always throwing the toys out of the pram when it does not get its own way. Its record in the North on housing, health, homelessness and the cost of living speaks for itself and, again, no Assembly has been elected.

The Government parties have to show me that they are fully aware of the impact of the rise in prices on households and businesses and I will work closely with them over the coming months to make sure they get the help they need. I have represented the people of Louth and east Meath for nearly 12 years. I have always been open and transparent. Since I became an Independent three years ago, I always take into consideration my constituency and I am not just here to push buttons. I will do my best for them.

It is important that we all work together like we did during the pandemic and put this wonderful country first. The last thing we need is for the Government to collapse and a general election be called, which will mean no budget until 27 December and a lengthy election similar to the last one. People need help and they need it now. I will vote confidence in this Government. I will hold it to account and make sure that it keeps its promises. I will always stand up and be counted. It is my duty, as an elected representative, to represent my constituency as best I can.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** We have a record-breaking Government but for all the wrong reasons. We have record housing prices. Some 15 years after Fianna Fáil generated the last property bubble, we have the same Celtic tiger house prices. The price of a three-bedroom home is increasing by €100 every day in this State. We have record rents. Rents are more than €254 per month higher than they were during the Celtic tiger era. People in their twenties and thirties are paying a record share of their income on accommodation. In real terms, their spending power is falling.

We also have record homelessness. More than 10,000 people are in emergency accommodation, 3,000 of whom are children. We have record hospital waiting lists. Some 1.3 million people are on health waiting lists in the State, 100,000 of whom are children. We have record overcrowding in emergency departments, with patients in some hospitals waiting for 24 hours on average. GP services are collapsing throughout the country. So far this year, 400 GPs have emigrated to Australia, which is incredible. A constituent of mine rang a doctor for an appointment and was given a date in September. At the same time we have the Government cutting emergency department and ICU capacities. There are more than 600 patients on trolleys in the middle of summer. University Hospital Limerick is like a war zone and senior management in the health service are in open revolt against the Minister for Health. He has paused the closure of the Navan emergency department but they are proceeding with it right now.

We have record fuel prices in this State. Incredibly, the Government is taking more in fuel taxes today than it did before the cost-of-living crisis. We have an incredible situation where 29% of the population is in fuel poverty and it is estimated 40% will be by the time autumn comes. Semi-State companies such as Electric Ireland are gouging citizens by increasing prices for electricity and gas while making profits of €679 million.

It is not the only semi-State company gouging citizens. The Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, is charging the highest airport car parking prices in Europe at the moment. In the airport we have people waiting for their luggage longer than the duration of their flights. Donna O'Connor arrived into Dublin Airport and could not locate her suitcase upon arrival. Her heart is broken as her luggage contained her parents' ashes.

We have a spiralling cost-of-living crisis. Ireland is one of the most expensive places to live in Europe and people are lying awake at night-time wondering what bill they are going to be able to pay.

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We also had one of the longest, most severe and costly lockdowns in Europe. It cost the citizens of the State more than €30 billion. The national debt, which no Member has discussed so far, is one of the highest in the world. It stands at €237 billion at a time interest rates internationally are about to take off.

We have also got phenomenal Government nepotism. We should not forget the selection of Katherine Zappone for an appointment that was supposed to be critical, though a year later it is still open. Dr. Tony Holohan was selected for a secondment worth more than €20 million in direct contravention of the Government's own rules and Government Teachtaí Dála have enjoyed all-expenses-paid races gifted by the gambling lobby. We had the leaking of a confidential document by the Tánaiste, the leaking of the mother and baby homes report, the plucking of Robert Watt's salary out of the air, the refusal to publish details on the selection of Martin Fraser for the job of ambassador to the UK, the mushrooming of the capital costs of projects such as the children's hospital, the glacial roll-out of broadband and Government parties pretending to be charities while selling national draw tickets. We have the refusal to investigate 10,000 people who were moved from hospitals to nursing homes during Covid, many of whom were not tested, and we have nearly 300 women forced through the courts to get justice on Cervical-Check after a promise from the Tánaiste this would not happen.

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Like the Minister for Finance, I listened with real intent to the Leader of the Opposition's speech. What I heard as the key, core, central message was that politics is framed at the moment between the ordinary people and the insiders. That is the very cornerstone of the populist playbook that has been incredibly successful in the world in the past ten years in many different countries. It tends to be quick to anger. It foments dissent and division.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** That is because we are in touch.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** It thrills in being outspoken on social media but in the cold light of day it tends to be humourless and mean. It is hugely successful until it meets the reality of being in government. Let us consider what Donald Trump did and the nationalist populism in the US and look at the nationalist populism Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered. The cold reality of the real world shows it cannot deliver the false promises it presents.

It is important because we live in extraordinary times where all of us as ordinary people are going to have to manage the most challenging situation. The cost of living is an issue because energy and food are being used as weapons of war and rhetoric about simplistic solutions is not going to heat a single home. All of us in every party, and Independents and others, have a desire that our children should be able to raise a family and have a home in this country in a way that is affordable. That desire does not belong to anyone but, again, the reality is in our country it is going to be building the builders. There will be a real change in our country with apprenticeships coming back. That is the way you actually achieve and deliver what is in the title. It says it on the tin. It is "Housing for All". We work for all in government - for the people who vote for the Opposition and those who vote for us, not for some and playing it as a division.

If it comes to change, trust me, there is so much change coming to meet our climate and biodiversity restoration plans that it is going to be beyond compare, and I am proud of what our party is doing in that regard. It would take me too long to list the changes but I want to men-

tion some of my colleagues. There is what the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, is doing to deliver a basic income for artists. That is radical change in a Green way. There is what Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, is about to do, and did last year, in helping provide childcare for all. We have three Ministers of State. Deputy Ossian Smyth was a cool and competent person when our country was under cyberattack. Deputy Joe O’Brien is responsible for social inclusion and community activation while Deputy Malcolm Noonan is trying to restore nature. In our backbenches, when we vote now as a Government, we vote from the top bench to the floor and through our chairpersons of the climate, housing and budget oversight committees. Every member of Government is part of this team, and has to be, to make it work.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Minister never mentioned forestry.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** He never mentioned forestry.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** We will not deliver it on our own.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, please.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** What did the Greens do for forestry?

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** No party can deliver it, in our voting system, on its own.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Carbon tax.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** I recall-----

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It is crucifying the people.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----saying in the convention centre two years ago that Deputy Micheál Martin had all the right characteristics to be a good Taoiseach. The past years have proven that to be right. He took the baton from the Tánaiste who managed the Covid-----

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** 1946 was the last time that forestry was as bad as now.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----crisis in a way we can be proud of and it did not drop and it will not drop again as it is handed back this year and we go the full term delivering for our people. All three parties have differences but understand that politics is the art of the possible and we will serve our people to the end, to the very best of our abilities-----

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Government will crucify them.

**Deputy Eamon Ryan:** -----hoping that in that time this wave of populism in politics that has gone right across the world might be on the wane because it will not serve our people; it will not deliver.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Hear, hear.

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The past two years have provided unprecedented challenges for this country and the coalition Government has risen to these challenges and lead the country through these turbulent times.

An extensive range of funding streams and measures to support the sector overseen by my

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Department have been introduced. The tourism and hospitality sectors felt the brunt of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In response, record levels of financial supports for those sectors have been provided, as well as the extension of the reduced 9% VAT rate into 2023. This has kept businesses afloat, kept people in jobs and maintained vibrancy in our communities. New measures to promote a thriving night-time economy are now being implemented, including more late night openings and new funding for acts in cafes and bars across Ireland. This and more will breathe life into our communities.

The basic income for the arts pilot scheme has been launched. It is a landmark initiative that recognises the intrinsic value of our artistic and creative sectors. I look forward to continuing to oversee the implementation of the scheme, with first payments to go out to the 2,000 selected recipients in the coming weeks.

The Official Languages Act 2021 to provide Irish was signed into law by the President late last year. Tá ullmhú an phlean náisiúnta ag teacht le cuspóir foriomlán an Achta a bhaint amach; is é sin gur cainteoirí Gaeilge a bheas in 20% de na hearcaigh nua chun na seirbhíse poiblí, tráth nach déanaí ná deireadh mhí na Nollag 2030.

More than €150 million was allocated to the sports capital and equipment programme to support 1,900 groups, large and small, across the country. This was the most funding ever allocated under the scheme.

Last night, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2022 passed Report Stage in the Seanad. Huge work has gone into this significant legislation to reduce harmful content online and bring an end to the era of self-regulation. Just earlier today we launched the report of the Future of Media Commission and announced a major Government initiative to support Ireland's media sector. This Government is making incredible progress on climate action, equality, transport, integration, biodiversity and in many other areas. We absolutely must keep our focus on implementing the climate action plan, setting the country on a pathway to halve our emissions by 2030. Now is not the time to risk putting all this progress into jeopardy. Now is the time to knuckle down and continue to make the real, transformational change this coalition Government is making to improve the lives of people. Families and communities across the country do not want instability after a pandemic and during a time of war. People want stability. They want progress. This coalition will continue to deliver on its promises. Tá mo mhuinín agus mo thacaíocht ag an Rialtas

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, has said, Ireland has been profoundly challenged over the past two years with the global pandemic, a war in Europe and a once-in-a-generation spike in inflation. This Government has managed those enormous challenges and at the same time has delivered new and reforming policies that improve life for people and families across this country. It is on the basis of that track record that I will vote confidence in this Government.

Within my own Department, we are investing €221 million in reforming the childcare sector so it works for everybody, including parents, children, providers and staff. We have targeted support for the most vulnerable children and families through significant additional funding for Tusla in the two most recent budgets. We have responded to the legacy of our institutional past, passing historic legislation to provide adopted people with their birth and early life information and allowing the exhumation at the site in Tuam. We are creating fairer, more equal workplaces

with legislation to make firms publish details of their gender pay gap and providing parents with new rights to more flexible working. We have made family life easier by extending parent's leave from two weeks to seven weeks paid leave per parent. Recognising the positive impact that youth services had for young people during the pandemic, we have provided additional funding for youth services in each of the two most recent budgets. We have halved transport costs for young people, providing much-needed support at a time of cost of living pressure.

We have accommodated more than 30,000 Ukrainian refugees who fled here and we have worked to improve conditions for international applicants in the face of a major migration crisis. Too many issues, including our country's institutional legacy, childcare, direct provision and inequality, have gone unresolved for too long. This Government is addressing omissions of the past. It is supporting families, children and young people. It has prioritised our international humanitarian obligations. It is making Ireland a more equal place. It is delivering, and that is why it deserves the support of this House.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I pay tribute to our healthcare workers all over the country. One would be forgiven when listening to the relentless negativity from Sinn Féin for not knowing that our men and women in healthcare around this country will deliver care to tens of thousands of men, women and children today. They will deliver care to millions of our countrymen and countrywomen this year. Sinn Féin did not talk about Covid-19. Its representatives did not say that while the waiting lists in this country are too long, they are between a half and a third of the length they are in Northern Ireland. The Sinn Féin representatives did not say that while we have added five years worth of new hospital beds in two years, the number of hospital beds in Northern Ireland has fallen every year for the past ten years. The Sinn Féin representatives did not mention Covid-19. The truth is that this Government and this nation is regarded as having one of the best responses on earth. Our vaccine levels are some of the highest in the world. Our Covid excess mortality rates are some of the lowest. In fact, our excess mortality rate during this pandemic is ten times lower than that of the UK. There was not a word from the Opposition about any of that.

I salute the women and men who deliver healthcare in this country. We will continue to invest.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Paul Reid is gone.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** We will continue to add beds. We will continue to add record numbers. We will make sure that people have access to the best quality care in this country when they need it.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** This Government has made a ground-breaking investment of €221 million in core funding for the early learning and childcare sector. Some €173 million of that is new funding. Every week I come into this Chamber and hear Sinn Féin representatives say that the Government does not know what is happening on the ground and that it is not listening to parents or providers. I can tell them that we are on the ground and listening to the parents and providers. We will continue to work with them to deliver practical and proper solutions.

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

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** We are not promising pie-in-the-sky funding and other promises that cannot happen.

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**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Government cannot even manage its speaking time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Parents, children and providers deserve better.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Even the Ceann Comhairle is telling the Government its time is up.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Could we all calm down a little, please? We are going to hear now from the Rural Independents. They are all going to talk to us.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, aided and abetted by the Green Party, are not only degrading the national Parliament on issues of serious public concern but they are also turning their backs on the ordinary public at a time of the greatest need with the cost of living so high. Instead of introducing an emergency budget, something for which we called last February, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party wish to cruise into the summer and forget about the people. Their actions are unforgivable.

The Rural Independent Group has zero confidence in this Government for numerous reasons but its continuous engagement in evasion, spin and outright deception is now damaging the very fabric of our entire democracy. Ireland deserves better. The Irish people deserve better. In no other modern state would this be accepted but it is under the watch of the two parties that have dominated politics here since partition, with the full support of the Green Party and oftentimes that of some regional so-called Independents who are not independent. One must ask oneself why. It is because between them, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are responsible for a culture of insiders and jobs for the boys. They have appointed record numbers of advisors. They keep global elites outside. There are strokes being pulled. There is cronyism, corruption, cute hoorism and brown envelopes, scratched backs, dig-outs and whatever you are having yourself. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the whole gang of them are at that. They are a disgrace.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It is simply due to the failure to protect the ordinary people of this country that I will not be supporting the Government today. There are hard-working mothers and fathers who have little or nothing in their pockets after a hard week's work as fuel costs rise and rise. Families are being fleeced with the massive Government fuel tax take and carbon tax robbery as electric bills rise. At the same time, the Government takes millions in profits from its ownership of Electric Ireland. I do not have confidence in a Government that stands idly by and watches the great demise of Irish farmers. With the fuel and fertiliser costs going out of control, the Government is asleep at the wheel. This crisis, coupled with the nitrate targets being rammed through, will further cripple farmers. Consider the fishing sector with its trawlers tied up at the piers because fishermen cannot afford to fuel their boats. The Government was asleep at the wheel during the Brexit negotiations. Those fishermen are telling me to get the Government out of office because it has ruined their businesses.

Over 1 million people are on the health waiting lists of this country and thousands, young and old, are homeless while the Government squanders billions on dream pet projects in Dublin at a time when the roads in west Cork continue to be starved of money. It is because of those and many other genuine concerns that I will not be supporting the Government.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** Some 900,000 people are waiting for operations, including 100,000 children and cancer patients. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. Patients are having to go to Belfast every month to save their eyesight. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. People, including young people, and families in Kerry are having to go into, or are already in, homeless accommodation. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. The Government did a massive U-turn on a promise it gave before the election on Shannon LNG. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. Coal is going to cost €40 per bag. The Government's answer is stop people purchasing turf that they might be able to afford. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. Farmers are facing emission restrictions that will detrimentally affect their farm incomes and practices. I have no confidence in the Government because of that. Fishermen's boats are tied up because they cannot afford to go to sea. I have no confidence in the Government because of that.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The city-based Cabinet has taken €6 billion from people in this country and there are no alternatives. They are backed up by career politicians from the county. An 18-year-old girl, Jessica Sheedy, died in University Hospital Limerick because management did not do due diligence and put many more people at risk. The Minister was in the hospital and found nothing wrong.

We were told to invest in white gold in 2011. Farmers are now being told to reduce the herd by 30% by a city-based Government. No infrastructure has been put into the towns and villages around County Limerick and around this country because the Government does not want people to live in the counties in which they grew up. It is a city-based Government backed up by career politicians from the county. It is putting everything into the major city, that is, Dublin. Shame on all of them.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** If we talk to anyone in Kerry today about football, they are all happy about that. They thank the great Kerry team for that. However, if we talk to them about health and the regional hospital, they will not thank the Government for that. If we talk to them about the cost of fuel, diesel and petrol, they will not thank the Government for the extra tax it is taking from them for that without giving back hardly anything. If we talk to the people about turf, they will not thank the Government for what it is trying to do to stop them and ensure that they will be cold for the winter. They will not thank the Government for that because they are very hurt about it. If we are talking about waiting for housing in Kerry, young people who are on the list cannot even build their own homes and they will not thank the Government for that. They certainly will not thank the Government for the cost of living.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I will be supporting my constituents in Laois-Offaly and voting no confidence in this Government. I am beholden to no party here, but I serve my constituents to the best of my ability. We tabled a motion in February, leading the way in opposition, calling for an emergency budget. That was shot down. We also called for a number of emergency measures to be put in place. Again, there was no collaboration and that call was shot down. We have tried to collaborate but there appears to be no open door or political willingness.

It would serve the Minister, Deputy Ryan, much better to stop attacking rural Ireland on a daily basis. Will he just stop this crazy carry-on with the ban on online commercial sales of turf? He should cop on and engage with Electric Ireland, which will increase electricity bills by 29% for gas customers and 10.9% for electricity from next month. That is not right. Why is the Minister not engaging with Electric Ireland and using his time and energy in that way to serve the people, instead of attacking the culture and heritage of rural people all of the time?

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He does not have a clue. The Green Party has this country run into the ground. There are 12 Deputies running the show.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** The question that I must answer to my electorate is whether I support this Government to continue with its current policies on health, housing, support for carers and, crucially, a delivery of a fair share to the regions, and the north west in particular. My answer has to be “No”.

The Taoiseach earlier asked us to be fair. Therefore, I will stick to the facts. The European Commission has downgraded the northern and western region from a developed region because our GDP, the measure of our wealth, is collapsing around our ears. IDA Ireland backed jobs from 2010 to 2020 for Sligo show an increase of 16% and for Leitrim, a 10% decrease. Nationally, we see an 85% increase. We are not even at the races.

Nationally, reports tell us that only one in two young people can hope to own their own home. That is a tragedy. Finding a place to rent is impossible, yet virtually nobody in County Leitrim can build a one-off house.

The non-implementation of the regionalisation of Sláintecare means the closure in Sligo University Hospital of the only cath lab north of a line from Dublin to Galway. When we take the bed capacity in Sligo and Letterkenny hospitals into account, Trolley Watch figures show they are comparatively almost as bad as University Hospital Limerick, yet there is no emergency response in our region.

The announcement of a €7 billion, or perhaps it is €20 billion, MetroLink project while regional and national roads are being stalled is hard to take.

Before I finish, I will say that I do not appreciate being told by the leader of Sinn Féin about standing with people. Her words show disrespect for my mandate, all Independent Deputies and the people who elected us.

The Government has had some success, and that is good for the country. However, the overall direction on the issues that matter most to my constituents has not been sufficient. There has not been enough done and there is an awful lot more to do.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** The programme for Government contains 66 headings. After two years, it has failed under most, if not all, of them. For my constituents in Donegal, it has failed on mica, farming, fishing, protecting the vulnerable, transport, broadband, homelessness, public housing, affordable housing, energy and emissions targets. It has failed family carers, mother and baby home survivors, people with disabilities and people with mental health issues. It has failed on Sláintecare and it has failed pensioners. It has failed to end direct provision and it has failed on equality. It is failing the children and women of this State in so many ways. As I have seen in this House over the past fortnight especially, it fails on basic democracy and parliamentary principles consistently. However, the people it does represent are doing very well. It is serving cuckoo funds that crucify renters, developers and billionaires all very well.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** I will be brief. The motion on the confidence in the Government reads that Dáil Éireann reaffirms its confidence in the Government. In the 30 seconds available to me, I will put on the record that I have absolutely no confidence in this Government now and never had confidence in it from day one. I will never have any confidence in any government formation that includes Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. I stand with my constituents who absolutely

rejected Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the last general election by not voting in a single Deputy from either of those parties. I support the no confidence motion put forward by Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Tá dhá nóiméad agam le cur in iúl nach bhfuil mé sásta mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don Rialtas. Níl sé sin bunaithe ar chúiseanna pearsanta. Tá a fhios agam go n-oibríonn an Rialtas agus gach Aire agus Teachta Dála go crua. Tá sé bunaithe ar na polasaithe a chuireann siad chun cinn. Is polasaithe iad atá ag cothú tuilleadh fadhbanna agus atá bunaithe ar pholasaithe nualíobrálachais.

I have 1 minute and 55 seconds to say I will not be supporting the Government in this motion of confidence. I have absolutely no confidence in this Government and I had none in the previous Government. This is not based on any personal reasons - I realise all Government Deputies work very hard - but on the policies the Government is pushing, which is one of neoliberalism that further intensifies the problems. The Government twists language and spins it to make nonsense of it. What is happening in terms of language is the greatest threat to democracy. I will not use my words on its housing policy. I refer to Simon's latest snapshot study, Locked Out of the Market, which states there are no properties available in Galway city or county under HAP - not even with the new discretionary schemes that are coming in. We have no houses available whatsoever. We have now 10,325 people homeless. We are almost approaching the peak. Can one imagine a peak of 10,514 homeless in 2019? Yet, the Government is telling us its policies are working.

I live in a city where last week somebody was on a trolley for seven days before being given a room. That may happen and if I was part of the system, I would be apologising profusely and saying it was most unusual. Unfortunately, however, it is not unusual. I failed to understand the answer. The person who spent seven days on a trolley is almost blind and on a catheter. That case was in the city I come from and it is repeated in Limerick hospital and all of the other hospitals.

I am voting against the Government because I believe it is not for the common good. We need a fundamental change in policy demanded by Covid and climate change. We cannot persist with the way we are idealising the market. It is creating more and more problems.

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Just over two years ago, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party formed a Government. It was not easy, but we did it for one overriding reason. We believe that people enter politics to improve people's lives. Putting people first was our number one interest during the Covid-19 crisis. The priority of this Government now is to protect families against the unprecedented increase in the cost of living.

This evening, once again, Sinn Féin is playing politics. The Sinn Féin motion is an absolute waste of time and pure nonsense. What does one expect from an Opposition party that just two years ago ran to the hills at the very thought of going into government? When duty and responsibility called, Sinn Féin hid in the bunkers. For a while, Sinn Féin Deputies thought they were Donald Trump. They were going around the country telling people they should be in power instead of sitting down and trying to form a government. They are great at telling everyone how to spend money but they are not so good at telling us where to find it. Their policies would bankrupt this country and plunge it into recession. We create employment; they would create unemployment. To hear Sinn Féin Deputies talking about the squeezed middle, well, I have heard it all. The truth is that if Sinn Féin was in government, it would not be worth anyone's while doing a day's work because it would tax them to the hilt.

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This Government increased the back-to-school allowance to support low-income families with a grant of €260 and €385 to help families pay for school uniforms and shoes. What is Sinn Féin doing in Northern Ireland? It announced a €7 increase in school uniform allowance, bringing it to the grand total of £42.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Cheaper shoes.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** In the eyes of Sinn Féin, €385 is not good enough for a child south of the Border but £42 is enough for a child in Northern Ireland.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** A load of partitionists.

**Deputy Heather Humphreys:** As usual with Sinn Féin, it is a case of “Do as we say, not as we do.” It is the flip-flop party. During Covid, when the Government closed the pubs, it wanted them open. When we opened the pubs, it wanted them closed. When we do universal measures, it wants targeted measures. When we do targeted measures, it wants universal measures. Last week, it wanted an emergency budget. This week, it wants a general election. It does not know what it wants. Its policy is very simple: whatever way the wind blows, Sinn Féin goes. It is a hurler on the ditch, with answers for everything but solutions for nothing. The Sinn Féin motion is the greatest load of codology I have seen in a long time. The people will see it for what it is - pure political opportunism.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Hard to follow that.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** It has been a long debate - I have been here for almost all of it - and it has been a good one. In the limited time I have, I wish to make three points. First, the motion of no confidence tabled by Sinn Féin is a deeply cynical and nakedly political one. It is pointless. The Government has a clear working majority and that will be evident from the vote tonight. Those in Sinn Féin, often master tacticians, have made a tactical error here-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Hear, hear. Their heads are down.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** -----because their motion has allowed us to demonstrate tonight that we have a clear working majority, we will be able to pass a budget and that this Government can and will last full term. We will prove by the vote tonight that there is no prospect of a Sinn Féin-led government-----

**Deputy David Cullinane:** We were on 33% in the last poll. Let us see how it goes.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** -----this year, next year or the year after, and maybe not even the year after that.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** This is a show motion. It is a publicity stunt designed to get coverage and air time for Sinn Féin politicians who have no real solutions to the problems our country face - just snappy soundbites that tested well with their expensive focus groups. It is a waste of parliamentary time as well. Let us not forget that only last week, Sinn Féin wasted 45

minutes of parliamentary time calling the same vote twice while complaining that we did not have enough time to discuss important legislation such as that on mica.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Voting matters.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** This week, three hours will be wasted on this debate even though we know the outcome of it.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It is Government time. This is its motion.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Tánaiste without interruption.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** The truth is that Sinn Féin wants chaos because it benefits from chaos.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Look at Dublin Airport for chaos.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** There is no functioning government in London. In Belfast, there is no functioning government once again. Sinn Féin wants the same here.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** That is not true.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Last week, it demanded an early budget to tackle the cost of living, but Sinn Féin is not sincere about that. It is not really on the side of hard-working Irish families. If its motion of no confidence had been passed, we would have been faced with an election in August and, with it taking several months to form a government, the budget would be pushed back and people would not get the help they need this winter.

My second point is that this is a good Government, one that I believe is doing good work.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Not for the homeless.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** We have done a lot in two years and, yes, we have a lot more to do in the next two or three years. Allow me to put on record just a few examples of the good things this Government is doing. We have invested €40 billion to help businesses and workers get through Covid, doing so through the pandemic unemployment payment and the employment wage subsidy scheme. We have the highest number of people at work in the history of the State, at 2.5 million people, with jobs growth in every region and full employment now within grasp. I refer to the biggest job increases in the south east and the south west, as well as the lowest unemployment now down the western seaboard, including the north-west region. There have been record levels of foreign direct investment, FDI. Trade with other countries has never been higher. That underpins living standards breaking all records.

We are introducing paid sick leave for all workers because nobody should feel under pressure to go to work when unwell. The sick leave that we will pay will be more in a day than Sinn Féin gives in a week in Northern Ireland. We have increased the minimum wage and are moving towards a living wage. We have a new law planned on the right to request remote working. We are building infrastructure, with 400 hubs nationwide. There will be a new public holiday in February. New laws to protect workers' tips and service charges will be passed this week. We are introducing a basic income scheme for artists and have doubled spending on the arts, ahead of schedule. We have an auto-enrolment scheme so that everybody who is at work has an oc-

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cupational pension on top of the State pension. There are new laws to protect consumers from being taken advantage of, as well as an insurance plan that is bringing down motor premiums and has outlawed the loyalty penalty. There is a new retrofitting scheme for warmer homes that are cheaper to heat. There is a new corporate enforcement agency to crack down on corporate crime. We are helping businesses to restructure and survive, such as through the small company administrative rescue process, for example, which offers a cheaper and much quicker alternative to examinership. We are providing funding for businesses to go digital and funding to help them reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Low cost loans to help businesses with Covid, Brexit and future expansion are being made available.

For children and families, there is seven weeks of paid parent's leave, an increased back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, five new technological universities, an increase in the student grant, expansion of the school meals programme, no charge for school transport and an increase in grants for postgraduates. There has been significant investment in special education, with record numbers of special needs assistants in classrooms and more special education teachers. There are more special classes than ever before. There are more pathways for people to get the career they want, with 10,000 new apprentices a year by 2025 alone. I could go on but, in so doing, in many ways I would be repeating what was said earlier.

I will come to my third point. We have heard a lot about change from the Members opposite tonight, but all change is not good. Brexit, Trump, Chavez and Lenin all promised radical change. The change happened but that change made things worse for most people.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Thatcher, Pinochet.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** I am happy to add those names to the list. The Deputy is making my point for me. All change is not change for the better.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Varadkar.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Yes, Sinn Féin would mean radical change - radical change for the worse for the majority of people. Instead of being at the heart of Europe, where we are now, we would be on the periphery, led by a self-declared euro-critical party that opposed the euro, European citizenship and the Single Market, today opposes EU free trade agreements and only last week opposed European defence and security co-operation, known as PESCO. Our influence in Europe would be diminished. Our economy would go into reverse, maybe not immediately but certainly within three or four years. There would be fewer jobs, fewer successful businesses, less FDI, reduced trade flows and reduced exports. Why? Because Sinn Féin takes the economy for granted. It simply does not understand how it works. I never hear anyone from Sinn Féin talk about job creation, enterprise policy, industrial policy or how we can help businesses establish themselves, scale up and be successful.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The Tánaiste does not listen.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** That is because they take our economy for granted. They do not understand that before one can apportion or redistribute wealth, one has to create it, and one has to create it again and again. Under Sinn Féin, the cake would be smaller and that would mean less for everyone in due course.

Finally, with regard to climate, it was significant that, as Deputy Bacik rightly pointed out, climate was not referred to in the Sinn Féin motion and was barely mentioned, if at all, in

Deputy McDonald's speech. That is because Sinn Féin is a climate-sceptic party.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is not true. The Government missed its targets this year, last year and the year before that. Emissions continue to rise.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** It is opposed to any action that might be unpopular, even if it is one that saves the planet, whether it is carbon tax or a ban on wind farms. Sin é, a Cheann Comhairle.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Tánaiste need not stop now.

**Deputy Leo Varadkar:** Tá mo mhuinín agus mo thacaíocht leis an Rialtas.

Question put:

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 66; Staon, 1.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Stاون</i>
<i>Berry, Cathal.</i>	<i>Andrews, Chris.</i>	<i>Shanahan, Matt.</i>
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Boyd Barrett, Richard.</i>	
<i>Bruton, Richard.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Browne, Martin.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Cairns, Holly.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Thomas.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Jackie.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Collins, Joan.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Cannon, Ciarán.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Carey, Joe.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Costello, Patrick.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Coveney, Simon.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Cowen, Barry.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Creed, Michael.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Fitzmaurice, Michael.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Funchion, Kathleen.</i>	
<i>Donnelly, Stephen.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Duffy, Francis Noel.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>English, Damien.</i>	<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	
<i>Fitzpatrick, Peter.</i>	<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	

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<i>Flaherty, Joe.</i>	<i>Howlin, Brendan.</i>	
<i>Flanagan, Charles.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Sean.</i>	<i>Kenny, Gino.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Griffin, Brendan.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Harris, Simon.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Haughey, Seán.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>McGrath, Mattie.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>McNamara, Michael.</i>	
<i>Hourigan, Neasa.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Humphreys, Heather.</i>	<i>Munster, Imelda.</i>	
<i>Kehoe, Paul.</i>	<i>Murphy, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>Murphy, Verona.</i>	
<i>Leddin, Brian.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>MacSharry, Marc.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Madigan, Josepha.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Martin, Catherine.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Matthews, Steven.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Pringle, Thomas.</i>	
<i>McHugh, Joe.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Ryan, Patricia.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Sean.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Shortall, Róisín.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegarde.</i>	<i>Smith, Bríd.</i>	
<i>Noonan, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Joe.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Tully, Pauline.</i>	
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Dowd, Fergus.</i>		
<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		

<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.</i>		
<i>Ó Cuív, Éamon.</i>		
<i>Phelan, John Paul.</i>		
<i>Rabbitte, Anne.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Ring, Michael.</i>		
<i>Ryan, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Ossian.</i>		
<i>Stanton, David.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Varadkar, Leo.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Brendan Griffin and Jack Chambers; Níl, Deputies Denise Mitchell and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

### **Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund: Motion**

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

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on the European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to accept the following measure:

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No. 514/2014 laying down general provisions on the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund amending Regulation (EU) 514/2014 laying down general provisions on the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and on the instrument for financial support for police cooperation, preventing and combating crime, and crisis management and amending Regulation (EU) No. 516/2014 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 30th June, 2022.

Today, I am seeking the approval of the House to proceed with the formal opt-in to the amendments to the 2014 to 2020 and the 2021 to 2027 programmes of the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, AMIF. Under the AMIF, the EU provides financial support for a

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comprehensive approach to the management of migration in the European Union. As the House will be aware, Ireland is required to opt in formally to certain EU home affairs instruments under arrangements in place for non-Schengen member states. This includes the new 2021 to 2027 AMIF programme.

The opt-in process requires both Government and Oireachtas approval. Following Oireachtas debate and approval on 3 February 2022, Ireland agreed to opt in to the 2021 to 2027 programme. The European Commission accepted Ireland's opt-in on 27 March 2022. However, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Union has adopted amendments to the AMIF regulation to support member states to manage the arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine. Ireland may be able to access €500,000 by virtue of these amendments and this can be allocated to projects to support the integration of Ukrainian displaced persons.

Opting in to this amendment is important to signal Ireland's ongoing support for and participation in the AMIF programme. I obtained Government approval at the Government meeting last week and this motion is being moved in both Houses of the Oireachtas today. Each member state participating in the fund must produce a national programme setting out its objectives and plans for how the funding will be deployed. The national programmes are normally drafted following consultations with relevant interests in the state, including non-governmental organisations, as well as with the European Commission, which is responsible for overseeing the administration of the fund generally.

Subject to approval for the opt-in, my Department will, over the coming months, lead the development of a national programme for Ireland for the 2021 to 2027 AMIF. The new national programme will cover the main areas of the fund: asylum, legal migration, integration, resettlement, countering irregular migration, returns and solidarity measures. In developing the new national programme, my Department will consult stakeholders in the areas of asylum, migration and integration, including relevant NGOs and Departments, including the Department of Justice, which will continue to manage funded activities in the area of migration and return. Subject to Oireachtas approval of the opt-in, the relevant EU bodies will be informed and work on the national programme can begin.

I commend the motion to the House.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has led to a mass influx of displaced persons to several EU member states. This has placed renewed pressure on the financial resources of the member states to deal with migration and border management needs. The increased pressure is already being felt across member states that share a land border with Ukraine and the needs have been spreading further afield. The overall objective of this proposal, as the Minister said, is to support member states to address the consequences of war in Ukraine by facilitating access to unspent financial resources. Council implementing decision No. 382 of 2022 was adopted, "establishing the existence of a massed influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and having the effect of introducing temporary protection". This implementing decision has clarified that the efforts of member states to comply with their obligations and offer temporary protection will be supported by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

I want to address a few issues in regard to the White Paper on ending direct provision, which was introduced in February 2021. At the time of its publication, the White Paper was long overdue and there was much anticipation and expectation that there would finally be meaningful

reform of a broken system. It is disappointing, 18 months later, that little or no reform has been undertaken. We welcomed the White Paper at the time because direct provision is a shameful and cruel system that has caused serious harm to many asylum seekers and wider communities. We need a modern, humane system that is fit for purpose. The White Paper contained many positive proposals, which we welcomed, including alignment of welfare rates with existing benefits, the provision of driver's licences for asylum seekers and a reduction in the reliance on private operators, one of which had obtained, through direct provision, the sum of €400 million over a period of years. The White Paper emphasised the importance of care and supports and, crucially, proposed a non-adversarial approach to applicants.

However, we pointed out at the time that the White Paper was lacking in ambition in a number of key areas. We asked that applicants be required to wait three months rather than six months before entering the labour market. We expressed disappointment at the granting of leave to remain for only five years for people who had been in the system more than two years. Many asylum seekers who were working in healthcare and food were anxious about facing deportation. In particular, we were concerned that the length of time people would remain in reception centres would be longer than four months if there was not a front-loading of capital investment in own-door accommodation and accelerated delivery of same. We were concerned about the White Paper's failure to address the growing problem of those with leave to remain who were trapped in direct provision. We called for greater supports to remove those families and ensure they were not subjected to entirely unnecessary and unfair delays.

There have been many critics of the direct provision system over the years, including very highly qualified individuals and organisations focused on supporting asylum seekers. The Government has not listened closely enough to those people and has entrenched a system that has been known to fail in the past. Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, a former special rapporteur on child protection, has called for direct provision to be abolished, noting it is not a suitable long-term solution. It has been described by the Irish Refugee Council as "already a chapter in Ireland's long and dark history of institutional living". Using for-profit accommodation providers has only added to the cruelty of the system. The Irish Refugee Council has stated that any replacement for direct provision should offer "own door accommodation, the opportunity to cook for oneself, to live in a community". The Department of Justice, which had responsibility for the direct provision system at the time, introduced regulations in this regard in August 2019. In July 2022, however, we still see the same problems, with people not having their own accommodation, being unable to cook for themselves and not being part of a community.

Three direct provision accommodation centres have been built in recent years. We all remember what happened when a large number of asylum seekers were moved into a former hotel in Cahersiveen, County Kerry. Approved housing bodies, AHBs, are clearly the best model, providing dignity and a sense of self and home and enabling asylum and refuge seekers to live a meaningful life. Any future policy that relies heavily on the private sector will repeat the mistakes of the past. I urge the Government not to repeat those mistakes. It is essential that it be transparent regarding the provision of all housing and the transition from the old direct provision model to any new system.

Direct provision was supposed to be a short-term measure designed to house people for weeks, not years, but half of the children in the direct provision system in 2019 had been there for more than five years. At that time, the Children's Rights Alliance, Dr. Liam Thornton of University College Dublin, UCD, and the Irish Countrywomen's Association all argued that direct provision does not have the best interests of children at its core and is a violation of the

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rights of the child, and that there is a need for access to complementary services. Some of those concerns were met in the White Paper but, unfortunately, 18 months since its publication and three years after the concerns were raised, we are still seeing the use of accommodation centres in very isolated areas.

Many of the asylum seekers who have come to my office say they are grateful to be in Ireland but that they quickly felt abandoned and lost in the system. They are concerned they have spent weeks and months waiting for answers via official channels. They do not have access to broadband, which makes it very expensive and stressful for them to communicate with Government bodies. All the while, they are receiving a very small amount of money from the State. Transportation to hospital or urgent appointments is also a very expensive proposition. They are reliant on Government resources such as the Tralee International Resource Centre, which provides invaluable help because there is nobody else to help them.

Direct provision is, in general, provided in sub-par accommodation in which residents are expected to share bedrooms and bathrooms, with little concern for the reasons they sought asylum in the first place. Many of them feel isolated. A single pregnant woman was sent to rural Kerry, for example, with no consideration as to how she would travel to her prenatal appointments. The travel cost was more than her weekly allowance, meaning much of her care was forgone. The provision of counselling to help her cope with the reasons she was alone and pregnant in Ireland was not even an afterthought. Many residents of direct provision refer to problems with shared kitchen resources, where facilities are often closed early in the evening and food is lost or stolen. Families may be living three to six to a single room, with some people sleeping on the floor. There is no capacity for children to play games, draw, write or even learn how to eat sitting at a kitchen table with any consistency or pleasure. Complaints from residents are met with threats of deportation or removal to a different location. One person faced the prospect of being moved to a container in Athlone, away from any small stability or community the individual had managed to establish.

We have not offered any respect for, or understanding of, people's culture but they must meet our the expectations of our culture. I urge the Minister at this late stage not to use the private sector as much as has been the case. He should use the State bodies and AHBs because they offer the best model for providing dignity and a sense of self and home.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The importance of a well-resourced and co-ordinated approach to asylum and integration has been strongly reinforced since we discussed this fund in February. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a massive humanitarian crisis, with millions of displaced people. We can be proud of the speedy response from people in the State. Whole communities have mobilised to provide assistance and recent Ukrainian arrivals have already started to contribute and work.

The challenge for the Government is to pivot from an emergency response to a long-term integration plan. Too often, immediate solutions become permanent problems. Direct provision was supposed to be a temporary process but, more than 21 years later, that inhumane system remains. Many Ukrainian families are in student accommodation or hotels with short contracts. What happens when those spaces are no longer available? Regrettably, the Department is not moving quickly enough on offers of accommodation and potential sites for use.

Confusion and misinformation facilitate those who want to stoke xenophobia and far-right ideologies. Unfortunately, some Members of this House are playing the old card of attempt-

ing to pitch vulnerable groups against each other. Linking refugees and the housing crisis is a spurious and insincere argument. The housing disaster is a decade old and is the result of failed policies, primarily from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael but also from the Labour Party and the Green Party, involving a collapse in the building of social housing, leaving homes to fall into disrepair and facilitating vulture funds over families. These are the causes of the housing crisis, not refugees. We have an obligation to be responsible and factual when discussing these issues.

Human trafficking is in the headlines today after the Olympian, Mo Farah, spoke publicly about being trafficked to the UK and forced into servitude. Unfortunately, this abhorrent crime and human rights abuse also happens in Ireland. The US State Department's Trafficking in Persons annual report for 2021 assessed Ireland as being a tier 2 country, which means we do not fully comply with the minimum standards but are making significant efforts to be in compliance. Even more concerning is that we dropped from being a tier 1 country in 2018 and we are now on what is called a tier 2 watch list because "The government continued to have systemic deficiencies in victim identification, referral, and assistance, and lacked specialised accommodation and adequate services for victims".

These findings are supported by the recent report of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, on the implementation of the EU anti-trafficking directive. It highlights the need for greater co-ordination from the Department of Justice, new mechanisms for the identification of victims, secure gender-specific shelter and avoiding secondary victimisation in the criminal justice system. There have been 475 known cases of trafficking since 2013, including 34 children. Almost two thirds of these are women, with sexual exploitation being a leading cause. Labour exploitation is the most common feature. Crucially, this issue needs a social response. While our criminal law aspects are strong, the systems to assist and support victims remain insufficient and lack a statutory footing. As part of this process, the voices of survivors must be at the centre of the policy, with the establishment of dedicated survivor counselling, as recommended by IHREC.

I urge the Government to use the fund to work on the issues identified by the commission, the US State Department and others to support victims and survivors. This issue of prioritising where to spend money relates to my larger reservations regarding AMIF. One of the fund's objectives is to contribute to countering irregular migration and ensuring the effectiveness of return and readmission in third countries. Embedded in the EU's response are hostile processes and structures that facilitate crime, push vulnerable people into the hands of criminals and lead to deaths, such as the regular drownings in the Mediterranean Sea. These are still happening, even if they do not make the headlines. There needs to be a serious critique of migration management systems in Ireland and the EU and their role in increasing human suffering.

While I welcome any discussion of these important matters, I am unclear regarding the implications of the amendment for Ireland. This is a democratic deficit. My comments are based on the EU's document, rather than on an understanding of any policy implications. This session, regrettably, is a technical function rather than anything meaningful. The Minister needs to issue policy papers and budget breakdowns before discussions such as this one, if they are to be anything more than tokenism.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I will use this opportunity to speak about the reality of the EU's migration policy, which is not, unfortunately, in keeping with the image it would like to present to us: that of it being one concerned with humanitarianism and welcoming refugees fleeing war and persecution. Instead, it is a consistent record of racism, of Fortress Europe and of trying

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to keep people out. Often, these are people fleeing the consequences of policies adopted by countries in the West. I refer to trying to keep those people out at any cost, including massive humanitarian costs and great loss of life.

What happened at the Spanish enclave of Melilla, at the border with Morocco, a few weeks ago sums up the situation. Moroccan border guards, paid for by the EU as part of the policy of externalisation of EU borders, were managing a situation where 37 refugees died trying to flee from war and persecution. They died either by being crushed against the fences in some cases, or, in others, by being beaten to death by those border guards, who are funded to the tune of €100 million by the EU. This is the true face of the Union's migration policy. We can see the same thing when we look at the EU's deal with Libya or Turkey. Massive amounts have been given to fund border guards to externalise EU borders, resulting in horrendous treatment of those trying to flee war and persecution. Over the past five years, violations by the Libyan coast guard have been repeatedly filmed and recounted by victims and eyewitnesses, including shootings at heavily-laden inflatable boats, beatings of people during disembarkation, the throwing of petrol cans onto boats and those people then facing being detained in Libya's brutal detention system.

Even within the borders of the EU, look at what is happening in Greece. I ask the Minister and the Government to commit to being in favour of an independent and transparent investigation into the clear breaches of EU law being undertaken by the Greek state. Let us look, for example, at the clear policy that exists of pushbacks. These are, as the Minister will be aware, where a coast guard or a border body of some sort push refugees back out into international waters after they have come into Greek or European territory to make them someone else's problem. It is illegal, but it is a definite policy of the Greek Government. The UN's special rapporteur on migrants stated that in Greece "pushbacks at land and sea borders have become de facto general policy".

In mid-March 2022, 30 Syrian asylum seekers, including two pregnant women and seven children, were confined on an islet in the River Evros for six days following an alleged push-back operation by the Greek authorities. Even if refugees manage to get into Greece, they are then taken into an EU-funded, so-called migration centre, worth €43 million, in Samos. This migration centre in reality is a detention centre for migrants. According to Oxfam, approximately one in five people have been in de facto detention for two months. Effectively, it is deliberately far away from towns and villages and completely isolated. There is excessive use of security, constant CCTV monitoring of all residents and an 8 p.m. curfew. It is horrendous treatment and it is EU funded.

Let us take the example of the way those who try to act in the interests of human rights and the rights of refugees are treated, including Seán Binder. There are many others, but we know of Mr. Binder because he is from Ireland. He is still facing trial. It has now been delayed and this is part of a tactic of intimidating people from engaging in helping migrants. For helping migrants, Mr. Binder is facing a prison sentence of up to 25 years if found guilty. This is the reality of what EU migration policy is. At the very least, I would like the Minister to consider or investigate the idea of supporting the Oxfam call. It has made a complaint to the European Commission concerning infringements of EU law by Greece. That complaint is detailed. It has a table and goes through all the breaches one by one. It is very long because all the breaches are long. I urge the Minister to commit to the Government supporting an independent investigation into these breaches.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute on this important issue. History has shown, since we have started taking in asylum seekers, that the conditions under which they have been living are not right. Human rights issues have not been addressed. We have placed people and families in congregated settings. For whatever reason, we have put them in buildings where they live in dormitories. They are isolated from communities. It takes a lot of time to get them to a stage where they are accepted and integrated into communities. Measures such as having curfews imposed on people to be inside at certain times of the evenings can be seen and are seen as a scandal in our time. The Minister is well aware of the issues with the mother and baby homes and with what we are trying to deal with, and what he as the Minister has been trying to deal with. We do not want to see anything like that happening again in our society. At times with asylum seekers, we are bordering on doing things that are not right.

This brings me to another concern I have. At present, we are bringing Ukrainian migrants into the country, which is right, but we are putting them into questionable accommodation. We are putting them into hotels and places where they have a bed and perhaps an ensuite and that is it. I know many people have offered housing and volunteered to let families stay in their homes. The process of making sure that Ukrainians are integrated into our society will take a lot of effort. At a time when we have crises in housing and with the cost of living, it is important in whatever we do that we deal with these people as individuals who have suffered a great deal, have been discommoded and have left their homes, families and country to come to Ireland.

If we are to learn anything, we have to go back in time and history. When our ancestors left Ireland never to return to these shores and were forced to travel to America because there was no work here, some were treated well and others not so well. We were very upset about that. At the same time, we should be very upset if our nation, Government and State do not provide properly for human beings coming into this country. We pride ourselves on our generosity and on making sure that take people in and embrace strangers. We need to go back to basic principles. When people are coming to this county we should try to provide them with accommodation that is suitable for them to live in and raise their families and allow them to integrate into the communities that are embracing them. A huge effort will have to be made. This debate sets out the concerns Deputies have about how we treat people coming into the country who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a position where their lives have been turned upside down causing them to suffer enormous trauma.

The other issue I have come across is that of people with disabilities and children with special needs coming to Ireland from Ukraine. It is important that we integrate them into the services that are available as fast as possible. We should also take into account that the services are very much stretched in trying to deal with domestic demand. There is a lot to contemplate in this debate. We should all work together and not politicise this issue in any way.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad to be able to speak on this sensitive and important topic. The issue of reception centres has been dogging us for a long number of years. There is a centre in Carrick-on-Suir which has changed and adapted and become very good and the people in it have integrated well. However, in times to come, I do not think history will be kind to us as a nation for the way we have treated asylum seekers in general. That goes without saying.

We look at the legacies of the past and talk about the Magdalen laundries and other such issues but on this issue we have taken a ham-fisted and badly organised approach. The White Paper produced in this area gave people hope that there would be changes. It was very aspira-

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tional and very little seems to have happened. This is not a personal criticism of the Minister. We have seen the appalling circumstances from which people are trying to flee, including war and devastation. We have seen graphic images of people on sinking boats and the huge loss of life. These people walked for days and weeks and having saved whatever money they could, paid unscrupulous people who then put them on boats that were not fit for purpose. That is traumatic enough without having to deal with arriving here and not being treated with a modicum of dignity and respect.

I have been criticised in the past for saying we should have limits. I say this in the context that we should cut our cloth according to measure and should look after people properly and with a modicum of respect. As I said, we have not done that. Private entrepreneurs got involved, some of whom were very good while others were desperate and awful. Millions of euro have been poured into the coffers of private individuals to do this. I know where they are and it is not far from where we stand. In a town not far from here, by the seaside, people have been treated appallingly. They have been put in big rooms divided into three parts and handed curry and chips in a plastic bag, with the use of vending machines at night. It is shocking. I wonder who is overseeing this to make sure these people are treated properly. This is no way to treat visitors who come here. We have travelled the world with an expectation of a modicum of support. A lot of work needs to be done to ensure these people are treated with dignity and respect, as they must be if we are to have any self-respect.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am also glad to speak on this issue. AMIF was set up for the period from 2021 to 2027 and funding amounts to €9.9 billion. The fund aims to further boost national capacities and improve procedures for migration management, as well as enhance solidarity and responsibility sharing between member states, particularly those providing emergency assistance.

Since 2017, nearly 100,000 men, women and children have been intercepted at sea by coast-guard vessels supported by EU surveillance and forcibly returned to Libya, a failed state. They are often locked up in detention centres that have been compared to concentration camps by Pope Francis among others. Politicians and officials who hold the levers of power know what is happening. They know it is horrific but are unwilling to act.

I have spoken before about direct provision in this country and the way it has been rolled out. I know there is an excellent centre in Clonakilty where people are treated humanely and with a bit of respect. I thank those in Clonakilty who are both living and working there. There have been other direct provision centres over the years that have been nothing short of shocking.

If people are in trouble and are coming from a war-torn country, we should by all means give them a welcome in Ireland but there have to be limits set, especially if they are being treated disrespectfully when they come to this country. We do not have the facilities for a huge number of people. Unfortunately, it has been proven in the past that the management in direct provision centres has placed large numbers of families in a single bedroom or similar, which was not fair to those people.

Perhaps this fund will be used to rectify many of those issues. If that happens, well done but there a lot left to be desired. Not all of the Ukrainians who have come to this country have been treated well and that will need to be addressed. They need to be treated with the utmost respect.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** Although I agree with the principles of the amendment to AMIF, I am sceptical of the pact on which it is based. I am concerned that it will only further reinforce European policies focused on externalisation, deterrence, containment and return.

Following the mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine, I understand the need for increased financial aid and that facilitating access to financial resources under AMIF is badly needed. However, I am also aware that accelerated border procedures, when implemented, often go hand in hand with reduced fundamental rights, standards and safeguards. The fund will provide €500,000, which is not a huge amount and perhaps we will lose a lot more by adopting the regulations.

The proposals put forward by the European Commission acknowledges that increased migratory pressure, including from reception and asylum processing procedures, is already being acutely felt by member states. I am worried that by the acceleration of border and fast-track procedures, the idea of a human being will be lost. We do not want a case where applicants are dehumanised and treated only as a number. We see the behaviour of Frontex on the European borders, especially around Greece, pushing people back into the sea in order that they do not land and are not counted among the asylum seekers entering Europe. That is not any way I would want any agency to behave in my name, and I hope the Government is not in favour of that either, but it is happening regularly and this is an agency that Ireland is supportive of and that we fund. That is wrong, and anything we do in accessing or accepting this funding should be specifically on condition that we are not supportive of those kinds of measures because that is a problem. I hope the Minister will take that on board because what is happening there is appalling. We need only see the work of Mick Wallace MEP and Clare Daly MEP in that regard. They are highlighting the issues arising in Greece every day. Every day we talk about asylum and we welcome Ukrainians, as we have to do, asylum seekers from Syria and Afghanistan are being pushed back into the sea and made sink or swim in our name. That is completely wrong.

There are a lot of great groups and projects which are currently funded through the asylum, migration and integration fund. I just hope that funds are not being taken away from such groups in this proposed process. We have the capacity to ensure that asylum seekers and migrants from all countries are accommodated in a respectful manner that has regard to their human rights. A human rights approach should be taken towards all proposals and decisions that affect our European borders. The proposal states that it seeks to unblock access to unspent amounts previously earmarked for specific purposes under the AMIF. However, it does not go on to state exactly what the funds were earmarked for. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister has an answer to that.

I believe we are in need of far more transparency in general regarding these European funds. We should be given a list of projects we are supporting to ensure all asylum seekers and migrants are treated equally under the fund and to ensure money in the fund is not used up by concentration-type camps, migrant camps and security and building companies and, as I said, for Frontex to behave in the way it does regarding migrants on our borders.

I support the motion in principle. I call, however, for better transparency and a focus on a human rights approach.

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I thank all Members for their engagement on, and their contributions, to this issue. I wish to take a few moments to restate the benefits of opting into these amendments to

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the AMIF programme. The fund will help to support a broad range of programmes in the area of asylum, migration and integration in Ireland and the State's response to the Ukraine crisis. It is my intention to build on the success of the 2014-20 AMIF programme and, if I receive approval today, to opt into these amendments. Some of the projects to which I referred earlier demonstrate the scope, scale and benefits of AMIF funding to improve the lives of vulnerable asylum seekers, migrants and third country nationals in Ireland. Subject to the approval of the opt-in, my Department will liaise with NGOs to support these vulnerable individuals and to provide assistance to Ukrainians living here. Additionally, while detailed plans for the full 2021-27 AMIF programme will not be finalised until the national programme is published, it is my intention to explore ways in which the new AMIF funding can be used to implement some of the objectives in the White Paper.

A number of Deputies raised the issue of direct provision and our treatment of international protection applicants. It is a subject we have discussed on a number of occasions in this House. Concerns were raised about the implementation of the White Paper. I will reiterate some of the progress that has been made. Driver licences and bank accounts can now be accessed by those in international protection. The time period within which someone can seek to work has been reduced from nine to six months. Significantly, vulnerability assessments, which were required of Ireland under EU law for a number of years and which were not implemented, are now being offered to all new international protection applicants. Hundreds of vulnerability assessments have taken place and have revealed the types of vulnerability Deputy Canney mentioned. In addition, in the coming weeks we will bring forward new integration supports to support not only local authorities in the work they do on integration but also the work NGOs around the country do. We will bring forward financial support to enhance that work in the context of supporting the integration not only of Ukrainian displaced persons but also of those in the international protection process living in different parts of the country. Addressing that need for more accommodation and better, more appropriate accommodation, we will bring forward the funding mechanism whereby AHBs can apply for funding to deliver phase 2 accommodation. We have been working in a lot of detail with the Housing Agency and with the representative body for AHBs to make sure we can bring forward a funding stream that is accessible to these bodies.

Deputy Cairns was correct regarding the need to pivot from an emergency response to a long-term response. Since February of this year, we have been undertaking two emergency responses: one to the humanitarian needs of Ukrainian displaced persons arriving in our country and one to the needs of international protection applicants, of whom there has been a significant increase arriving in our country. Since the beginning of this year, 6,498 people have sought international protection in our country. Pre-Covid the last major year in this regard was 2019, and in that year 4,800 people sought international protection, so we are already at 160% of 2019's number of applicants and we are just slightly over halfway through the year. There is a major migration crisis across Europe because of the wars that have been discussed here in Afghanistan and in Syria and because of the conflicts in other parts of Africa. That is putting pressure on the system. Our response at the moment is an emergency response. I acknowledge that it is not always the response we want to give to people, but it is a requirement under international law to make sure that we can accommodate people and provide meals to them. We are doing that at a time we are looking to implement the White Paper and to move on the 7,000 people who were in international protection this time last year and, of course, to support those who have obtained status to move and to live independently. There are a wide range of challenges at play here. The passing of this motion, the provision of this financial support, small as Deputy Pringle said it is, adds to our ability to do this. Undoubtedly, there are major challenges in our response to

these two crises, but we deal with them in conjunction with NGOs. Earlier today, I met with the Ukraine community forum. I have been in consistent contact with the NGOs working with Ukrainians and with those in international protection. I will continue to engage in that process in order that we can make the best provision for both displaced persons and international protection applicants.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space: Motion**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Despite the title of the motion, it is not 1 April.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Article 29.5.2° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, approves the terms of the Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, signed by the Government of Ireland on 27th January, 1967, and laid before Dáil Éireann on 30th June, 2022.

Apart from the reason we are here, it is great to have the chance to focus on the great work many are doing from an education point of view, a research point of view and an enterprise point of view. We will touch on that during the debate.

I wish to move two motions this evening. The second motion reads:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Article 29.5.2° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, approves the terms of the Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects, signed by the Government of Ireland on 29 March 1972, and laid before Dáil Éireann on 29 June 2022.

*8 o'clock*

All this happened before most of us here were Members of the House, but it is important that we get a chance to come in here and formally ratify these measures.

This is an unusual case as the two agreements that are the subject of the motions were signed and ratified by Ireland over 50 years ago. In the course of the legal and policy review undertaken by my Department, it was discovered that they were never formally approved by the Dáil. In fact, these legal matters came to light as a result of the legal and policy analysis undertaken by officials in our Department to ensure there would be a supportive legislative and policy framework in place for the future launch, maybe this year or early next year, of Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1, by UCD as part of the European Space Agency's Fly Your Satellite! programme. I am delighted the team from UCD is with us tonight in the Visitors Gallery. They stick out not because the Visitors Gallery is half empty but because they are in blue. It will be a proud moment for Ireland when we can see the fruits of their work in the months ahead. They have been very busy in UCD in recent months and I am glad they are here. They are part of the satellite programme for EIRSAT-1. We are joined by Ms Lorraine Hanlon, Mr. David McKeown, Mr. Gabriel Finneran, Mr. Joseph Thompson, Mr. Joseph Mangan and Mr. Ronan

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Wall. I think I have covered everybody and hope I am missing nobody. They are doing great work from an education point of view as well.

Article 29.5.2° of the Constitution requires that all international agreements that put a charge on funds be approved by the Dáil. The contingent liability that arises under these agreements is just such a charge. As approval was not sought at the time of ratification, it must be done now.

Ireland signed the Outer Space Treaty in 1967. The treaty is the basis on which international space law is built. It prohibits signatory states from placing nuclear weapons in space and limits the use of the moon and other celestial bodies to peaceful uses. It also introduces principles of state responsibility for objects launched into outer space, including those launched by non-governmental bodies. The State signed and ratified the UN Liability Convention in 1972. The purpose of this convention was to elaborate on the liability requirements set out in the Outer Space Treaty.

As it stands, Ireland is bound by the Outer Space Treaty and the UN Liability Convention under international law, while not complying with the requirements of the Constitution required for the domestic legal system to recognise those obligations. That is why we are in the House tonight. Passing this Dáil motion will remedy this legal lacuna and allow Ireland to further its scientific, educational and commercial interests in space, including through the forthcoming launch of the EIRSAT-1 satellite.

Ireland's obligations concerning liability arise only when Ireland becomes what is known as a "launching state". In effect, this happens when the State launches a space object or when a space object is launched from our territory. Ireland is not yet a launching state but that might change, hopefully sometime later this year or early next year, if a Government decision is made in this regard. The probability of liability occurring under these treaties is so remote that the European Space Agency has informed my Department that there does not exist any precedent globally to refer to.

When originally drafted, these two agreements were designed to promote and facilitate the peaceful use of outer space. Ireland signed and ratified them because we share these ideals, and we have always worked with our international partners, in the EU and the European Space Agency, to utilise space for educational and commercial purposes and to fund much research. The commercial, educational and research-related opportunity is a large part of why I am proposing this motion.

Space used to be the preserve of a handful of nations and only the largest and wealthiest countries could venture into it. However, over the past decade there has been an unprecedented escalation in the volume of space activities by small nations such as ours and more recently by the private sector. To put this into perspective, the number of satellites launched annually has accelerated from a stable historical average of around 100 per year to a phenomenal 1,819 in 2021, having quadrupled in the past four years alone. This trajectory is set to continue and it is right that Ireland should develop a framework such that we can benefit from a share of this growth and also be part of the educational and commercial opportunities.

Ireland's involvement in space is not well known. When we think about space, we tend to imagine rockets or moon landings, but the truth is that space touches our daily lives much more than we realise. It is important that we recognise that during these important debates. A good example of space touching our daily lives is that when you need to navigate to somewhere

new, satellite data enable the maps on your phone. When you want to know what the weather is going to be like, satellite data enable more accurate weather predictions. When you need to stay connected, satellite data enable your broadband and television services, even in the most remote areas of the world. In addition, through the increased space activity in the past decade, more data are available on the health of our planet than ever before. Space programmes that Ireland contributes to through our membership of the European Space Agency play a key role in developing our environmental understanding and informing climate change mitigation actions. Satellites can measure air quality in cities and the rate of melting of icecaps, for example, and they can monitor deforestation and inform policy decisions targeting sustainable agriculture all over the world. Critically, in emergencies such as floods or fires, satellite data can be used in real time to assess damage, supporting a safe and informed emergency response.

The Government and most of those present understand the value of space and its importance in our lives in Ireland. In May of this year, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science published Ireland's new research and innovation strategy, *Impact 2030*, which recognises "the strong potential for Irish researchers and companies to use space applications to address climate change and other environmental goals". The strategy commits to developing our network of research-and-development centres and facilities to ensure Ireland is at the forefront of technological advances in domains, including space, in order to embrace and respond to the twin challenges of climate and digital transition.

This commitment builds on Ireland's national space strategy for enterprise, which sets out a framework for investment and growth between now and 2025, focusing on technology transfer, commercialisation, entrepreneurship and the development of key skills to meet future needs in space and complementary sectors. The national strategy is being implemented by Enterprise Ireland and my Department and is yielding very positive results. The number of Irish companies in contract with the European Space Agency grew from 60 in 2017 to 94 in 2021, representing an increase of over 50% in just four years. Many in the research community and education, such as the team in UCD, are involved in work and contracts through the European Space Agency. That is really beneficial to ourselves as we bring forward a lot of new talent in the sector.

I can give many examples of the very diverse areas in which Irish companies from all regions are engaged. There is a company in Cork developing a technology that will allow the verification of carbon credits, enabling revenue streams in developing countries for maintaining carbon-capturing forests. I believe that the company might have some Kerry connections so I had better be careful to cover all relevant counties. A company in Tipperary has developed a system that uses space data to monitor the impact of illegal dumping in watercourses. Another company is involved in producing the paint for one of the satellites flying close to the moon. Many Irish companies are involved in these initiatives. Another example is that of another company in Cork that has developed a remote patient-monitoring device for use in Covid-19 patients. This technology has been trialled in both Ireland and Italy and was found to improve patient outcomes.

Therefore, much of the investment in the technologies used in outer space is beneficial to all our lives in many aspects and through many departments. None of the activities I have mentioned is one that we normally think of as being related to space. The companies are working at the very cutting edge of technology development. They have been supported to develop their technologies through Ireland's membership of the European Space Agency and through the work with Enterprise Ireland.

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I am telling the House about this Irish activity in space so the opportunity for Ireland and the rationale for addressing this legacy issue will be clear. It is incumbent on us now, as a responsible nation with growing involvement in space, to rectify the legal lacuna identified with respect to the Outer Space Treaty and the UN Liability Convention and to participate fully in the development of future standards in space that protect the peaceful use of outer space for all of us.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the House for their time. I am happy to take any questions on the agreements and the motion moved.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I never thought I would be hearing us speak about space, but here you go. This is probably the longest ratification process in the history of the Dáil. The first treaty was ratified the year I was born and we are working towards approving it in the Dáil now. That is a bit of progress anyway, so we will get there.

The cosmonaut Alexei Leonov said, “The Earth was small, light blue, and so touchingly alone, our home that must be defended like a holy relic.” I thought of these words today as I considered these proposals. As humankind, we have already committed terrible acts against our planet. The penalties we are paying now are in the form of erratic weather patterns, natural disasters and the displacement of people across the globe. Avoiding these mistakes in the great vastness that is space must be something that we can do to defend our holy relic, Earth. I welcome the debate and indicate Sinn Féin’s support for the Dáil’s approval of the terms of the outer space treaty of 1969. The treaty is many decades old and came into being at a time of great upheaval and change for our world. It was signed by the then powers, at a time the Cold War was at its height and space exploration was a rallying call for the respective Cold War camps. It was an opportunity to highlight the superiority of one ideology over another. Without such a treaty the world would have been in great peril, with the potential of weapons of mass destruction put in place in outer space. The State ratified the treaty long ago, with almost 100 other countries, but due to the advice of the Attorney General we must formally do so now by Dáil vote.

We support the treaty. It outlines how space should be used and for what purposes. The treaty should be updated to be gender-proofed as some of the language in the 1960s and 1970s would not be accepted today. The treaty outlines a number of important aspects of our use of space, such as that the exploration and use of outer space should be carried out for the benefit and in the interest of all countries and should be the province of all mankind. Another aspect is that outer space should be free for exploration and use by all states. The treaty also outlines that outer space is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation or by any other means. If all of these aims are protected, we will be in a much better place. These are principles my party is happy to support. We have some concerns with regard to the potential weaponisation of space. The treaty makes no reference to the use of conventional weapons in that setting. Nor does it mention any governance of the use of Earth-launched weapons to target space infrastructure.

As the TV show says, space is the final frontier. The frontier seems far less remote than it did on that famous day in April 1961 when Yuri Gagarin became the first human to enter space. It is right and proper that laws are in place to cover its exploration and its use. This treaty of principles has stymied efforts by those nations who may wish to colonise space. It is an international treaty that ensures space is not the site of weapons of mass destruction. It is a treaty with noble aims and one we should all support.

Irish companies and people are playing an important role at European level when it comes to the exploration of space. The number of Irish companies working for the European Space Agency has grown by 60% in the past five years. Make no mistake, Ireland has a stake in ratifying the treaty. Sinn Féin will also protect funding for Science Foundation Ireland becoming an associate member of CERN to deliver significant benefits in areas such as research and development, technology, education, training, jobs and procurement.

As space travel has expanded from an activity of nation states into the realm of private enterprise, it is important that the principles of the treaty are held on to resolutely. States must be responsible for activities regardless of whether they are carried out by the State or private companies. They have a responsibility to ensure the use of space is not monopolised by the wealthy few. Equally important is the principle of liability for damage caused by human-made space equipment and the environmental damage this has the potential to cause in space and on Earth.

We must be vigilant regarding the involvement of private companies such as SpaceX and how it operates in space. It has already deployed almost 2,000 satellites. We must ensure their use is monitored. The scale of the operation of SpaceX should be a cause for concern. Astronauts view the Starlink satellites as a primary collision hazard in the Earth's orbit. Environmentalists have raised concerns about the sheer volume of metal that will be burning in the atmosphere with the potential to trigger unprecedented changes to our climate.

For generations many children have dreamed about going to space. As space travel has expanded into the private realm in recent years, it is important that companies involved in such pursuits focus on ensuring they remain a diverse workforce. As a State we can be proud of our involvement in the European Space agency. We can be proud of the almost 100 companies from Ireland participating in space activities. We have a responsibility to ratify the treaty and I urge everyone to do so.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** This has been a very unusual evening in the week prior to recess. An hour ago, we had a full Chamber and now we are speaking about outer space.

**Deputy Damien English:** There is plenty of space here.

**Deputy Catherine Murphy:** I congratulate the UCD researchers on their work on EIR-SAT-1. They have been working on the satellite for approximately five years. I wish them the best of luck with the launch and its operation. This will be Ireland's first satellite and it is unlikely to be the last. There are no international regulations for the operation of satellites in orbit. There is no traffic management system or pollution regulations. It is up to each nation to implement its own policies and hold itself accountable. We will never put as many satellites into orbit as the US, China or Russia but this does not mean we do not have a responsibility to legislate for the handful that we may launch.

These treaties were landmark conventions in the space race era. They were written at a time when activity in space was minuscule as opposed to what it is now. Space is becoming congested. Ever since the first days of the space age there has been more rubbish in orbit than active satellites. As environmental consciousness has grown over recent decades we do not seem to have come around to viewing the space around Earth's orbit as part of our environment. No one owns it and no one takes responsibility. There are approximately 5,000 active satellites orbiting Earth. This has increased from 2,000 in late 2018. All have gone into the most congested level of our surroundings at the low Earth orbit.

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Sharing the space with these satellites are the remains of approximately 10,000 satellites and rockets. Over time they are all disintegrating, colliding and being purposely exploded into debris. Given the speed at which debris and space craft travel, any impact can be catastrophic. Travelling at more than 15,000 mph, micrometre-size particles can chip windows or dent solar cells. Millimetre-size paint flakes can destroy satellite cameras or puncture the spacesuits of astronauts. A 1 cm bolt has the explosive force of a hand grenade on impact. Anything smaller than 10 cm is untraceable. It is impossible to predict when they might impact an active space project. It is estimated there are more than 100 million pieces of untraceable debris. It is essential that we are incredibly careful about what we choose to send into orbit. All of these items will stay in orbit for hundreds or even thousands of years. Had the Romans launched a satellite into a 750-mile orbit, it would only fall back to earth around now.

There is no doubt there is a problem. The private company SpaceX plans to launch thousands more satellites and it is not alone. OneWeb, a communications company, has announced plans to launch its own constellation of 300,000 satellites. Last August, researchers in the United Kingdom reported that SpaceX satellites have been involved in approximately half of all collision avoidance moves in low orbit. In the near future, they predict this could rise to nine in every ten.

Given the range of new private actors and geopolitical tensions, any binding international treaty is probably well out of sight. Treaties will only get us so far. Domestic legislation will be needed. If something falls from space and can be identified as ours having been launched from Ireland, we have a legal responsibility. We should not lose sight of this. For the limited amount of space activity in which we take part, we need to have leadership. Our activity is very limited. I suggest to further and higher education institutes seeking to replicate the work of UCD, which I again applaud, that the area of space decluttering is where we should focus some of our efforts. It does not look like it is happening at a global level. It is only when it becomes a real issue and we see something catastrophic that we will realise we have allowed this to get to a point where it causes real problems.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** I am delighted to be in the Chamber to speak on a scientific topic such as this. It is an area of great interest to me. To paraphrase Deputy Quinlivan, space is the final frontier. There are great opportunities from a commercial point of view. There are also great responsibilities from environmental and peacekeeping perspectives. I join Deputy Catherine Murphy in congratulating the UCD team. It is a fantastic achievement. I believe they are in the Gallery and I say well done ladies and gents. It is outstanding and inspirational work. It took five years' work. The team designed, built and tested and now they are almost ready to launch Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1. It is a fantastic achievement and we very much look forward to greater details on it. It could be a precursor to something even more ambitious. We do not have any Irish astronauts. There has not been one yet. We know Dr. Norah Patten has put herself forward. She is very motivated, gives many talks and has major qualifications in aeronautical engineering. Has Enterprise Ireland considered establishing a programme to mentor, support and subsidise Irish citizens who may be interested in becoming more competitive for the candidate selection process of the European Space Agency? We have travelled the world. Why do we not travel beyond the world as well? It would be an inspirational goal for many people in primary and secondary school. It would definitely be worth identifying, through a competitive process, ten people who would stand a fighting chance and supporting them as they continue their preparations.

Most people will agree that Shannon Airport is very underutilised. I am not sure whether

consideration has been given to offering its services to the European Space Agency as an opportunity for training or even rocket launches. It is on the west coast, close to the Atlantic and it is safe. Rockets, such as booster rockets, can land on barges now. There is an opportunity there if we wish to exploit it. Many people in County Clare recognise the underutilisation of Shannon Airport and this may be an opportunity for the future.

I very much support the two motions on the outer space treaty and the liability convention. Is there any information on where and when the launch will take place? Will it take place in Ireland or abroad? The reason we are discussing this matter is that it will probably impose a cost on the taxpayer. Is there an estimate of that cost? I wish the team every success. I hope this is the start of a wonderful new horizon for Ireland.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** The Cabinet has approved this motion and it is now before the Dáil for consideration. Following the Cabinet's approval, the Tánaiste cited space as an area of growing importance for Ireland, with the number of companies based here and engaged with the European Space Agency having grown by almost 60% in the past five years. The outer space treaty sets out the key principles of international space law, from prohibiting the placement of weapons of mass destruction in outer space to ensuring that nations cannot make a claim of national sovereignty to any part of space. It also requires states to be responsible for actions by their non-government entities, which is an obligation that has arisen in disputes between China and the United States over the activities of the Elon Musk-backed SpaceX.

The number of companies based in Ireland which are taking part in space activities has risen significantly, from 55 in 2015 to 87 in 2020. A spokesperson indicated that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has been undertaking a legal and policy analysis to ensure that Ireland has a supportive framework with regard to potential future launches of space objects for commercial or educational purposes.

Ireland previously signed and ratified two agreements, the outer space agreement in 1967 and the liability convention in 1972, of which the latter arose from the need for effective international rules to deal with the liability for damage caused by space objects and to ensure the prompt payment of compensation. At the time of their signing, the agreements were laid before the Dáil in compliance with the Constitution. The Attorney General has now advised that formal Dáil approval is required for both agreements again. Under national law, Ireland is party to both these agreements.

The key provisions of the outer space treaty include prohibiting of nuclear weapons in space, limiting the use of the moon and all other celestial bodies to peaceful purposes and establishing that space shall be freely explored and used by all nations. The treaty precludes any country from claiming any type of sovereignty over outer space or any other celestial body. Although it forbids the establishing of military bases, testing of weapons and conducting of military manoeuvres on celestial bodies, the treaty does not expressly ban all military activities in space, the establishment of military space forces or the placement of conventional weapons in space.

From 1968 to 1984, the outer space treaty birthed four additional agreements on the rules for activities on the moon, liability for damages caused by space craft, the safe return of fallen astronauts, and the registration of all space vehicles, respectively. The treaty provided many practical uses and was the most important link in the chain of international legal agreements for space, from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s. The treaty was at the heart of a network of inter-state treaties and strategic power negotiations to achieve the best available conditions for

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nuclear weapons world security. It also declares that space is an area for free use and exploration by all and “shall be the province of all mankind”.

Drawing heavily on the Antarctic Treaty of 1961, the outer space treaty likewise focuses on regulating certain activities and preventing unrestricted competition that could lead to conflict. Consequently, it is largely silent or ambiguous on newly developed space activities, such as lunar and asteroid mining. Nevertheless, the treaty is the first and most fundamental legal instrument of space law and its broader principles of promoting the civil and peaceful use of space continue to underpin multilateral initiatives in space, such as the International Space Station and the Artemis programme. It is very important that Ireland do everything we can to promote and encourage the educational use of space for future generations.

**Deputy Thomas Pringle:** This debate has thrown up all the different types of “Star Trek” references and every other reference to space and space use. I was thinking about speaking on this motion on my way down to Dublin today. There was an item on the radio about the James Webb telescope which has sent fancy pictures back of the formation of the galaxy many thousands of years ago. It was probably appropriate that the motion of confidence was tabled today instead of this motion because they both hark back to the past and how great it was, rather than look to the future.

The discussion on this motion was assigned a couple of hours today when important legislation was to be taken. It is to approve a treaty that was ratified more than 50 years ago. It is shocking that we ratified a treaty 50 years ago and we have still not put it into law. It shows how the Government works. I remember all of the other treaties that have been ratified and never enacted, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. These treaties were passed and enacted, not 50 years ago but ten, 11 or 12 years ago, and nothing was done with regard to implementing them.

I wondered why this was being done now. In many countries, space use is for a military purpose. Maybe we just have to make sure we get all of our ducks in a row and ratify these treaties to ensure there is no comeback in this area in future. The Minister of State outlined that space development has many useful purposes in peacetime but many developments in space have been done from a military point of view. Will we see this tied in with the European Space Agency in a few years’ time for something it will do with satellites for the defence of Europe? It would be interesting to see what that is.

The Minister went on to say that, “As it stands, Ireland is bound by the Outer Space Treaty and the Liability Convention under international law, while not complying with the requirements of the Constitution required for the domestic legal system to recognise those obligations.” That is a strange statement. How can we comply with something when it has not been ratified under the Constitution, which is the primary legal article in our State? I do not see how that complies. It would be interesting to see what the legal situation is of any work that has gone on before now on that. I am not saying this as a way of scuppering anything that is going on at the minute but why this is all happening now is very interesting. It is interesting it is happening when there is talk about Ireland moving into the European defence mechanisms and everything else like that. It will be interesting to see how this develops over the next year or two. We will see then how it goes. I hope much of the work that is ongoing and that is of value will continue. I hope we will not see the Irish space agency working with the ESA on developing satellite weapons technology and stuff like that. That is probably what is at the heart of this, when it comes to happen.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** With Deputies' co-operation I am going to go back to People Before Profit.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. It is difficult to resist, when discussing a treaty on outer space, the gag about this Government living on a different planet, but I will resist it and try to take the issue seriously.

It is quite incredible it has taken 50 years to get to the point of actually transcribing this treaty into law. That is a pretty extraordinary fact. The objectives and intentions of the treaty seem laudable on the face of it. However, when I looked at what are called the depository nations where the treaty, I understand, will be deposited, I saw they are the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which is now obviously the Russian Federation, the United States of America and the UK. That says it all. We have a treaty that is supposed to prohibit anybody trying to claim sovereignty over outer space or to use space for the purposes of war and the depository nations for that are three of the biggest warmongers and imperialist powers in the world. The idea they can be trusted with ensuring there are not attempts to colonise space for selfish strategic interests or to use space for military purposes is frankly preposterous. There is zero chance of that having any meaningful effect.

I heard the Minister of State talking earlier about the wonderful impact of satellite technology and how it helps us navigate, identify problems with the climate, deforestation and impacts on water. It is incredible, not that the world takes much notice, most of the time, of the information we gather from this amazing technology. However, it is also that same technology that allows the US, Russia, Britain, China or some of the other big military powers in the world to guide precision missiles to hit people from hundreds and thousands of kilometres away and blow those human beings to pieces. That is happening all the time. That is what the US and the UK did in Iraq with utterly devastating consequences and it is what the Russian Federation is now doing to people in Ukraine. Indeed, those very same states are now ramping up their military expenditure, in a great irony of the discourse of such powers, by saying that to guard somehow against the horrors we are seeing in Ukraine, we must spend more on weapons and the military, as if that is not ultimately going to result in more disaster for humanity and the climate. It is difficult, therefore, to believe this treaty is going to make any difference in preventing the use of space for this. In reality it is being used for it already. I was quite shocked to read Elon Musk, who is very close to the American political establishment, is the owner of 40% of the satellites circulating around the Earth at the moment. That is one individual and he has a very close relationship with the American state.

The other interesting issue is the space debris floating around. In orbit of the Earth, or floating around there, are thousands of old satellites and bits of debris that have been thrown up into space.

The objectives of all this are laudable but it is difficult to credit the idea it actually is going to achieve those objectives when you look at the states and the big corporations that are utterly dominating the use of space, as they are the main users of military technology both terrestrially and in space.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I thank the House for its support for this motion. As the Minister of State said at the outset, the motion will resolve an issue that has been outstanding since the great era of space exploration back in the 1960s. The motion will also help Ireland to stimulate further space activity.

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The treaty itself dates back to a radically different time when space exploration was in its infancy and the race was under way to put the first man on the moon. However, its core aims are as relevant today as they ever were. The treaty states international responsibility for missions lies with the jurisdictions that launches them. It prohibits nuclear weapons in space and limits the use of the moon and all other celestial bodies to peaceful purposes only. It says no country can claim sovereignty over a celestial body or establish military bases on them but does not preclude all military activity. Exploration is open to all signatories and, rather quaintly, it requires that astronauts be treated kindly as envoys of mankind.

I want Ireland to be at the forefront of cutting-edge technology, and by its very nature that must include working in outer space. This motion will ensure Ireland is able to make further progress in this very exciting area. Commercial space is a real growth sector. The number of Irish companies involved in space is growing, as is the amount of activity. Ireland has been a member of the ESA since 1975 and its governing conventions ensure it is used exclusively for peaceful purposes. We now have 94 Irish companies engaged in contracts with the ESA, and all these companies are operating at the very cutting edge of technological development. We are almost certain we will hit our target of having 100 Irish companies engaged with the ESA three years ahead of schedule. ESA membership is essential for Irish companies to access expertise in space technology. It also generates strong returns. Enterprise Ireland estimates a return on investment of something close to 5:1 in 2025 and rising to 10:1 by 2030.

In the long run, we may need bespoke legislation for further work in space. Although it is not currently necessary, we are monitoring this area.

As well as this commercial space activity involving Irish companies, there is also great work under way in education. Our membership of the ESA has helped UCD secure the opportunity to launch Ireland's first satellite, which will be named EIRSAT-1. I am not sure how exactly satellites are named and maybe we did not have discretion on this matter but I am a little sorry a somewhat more imaginative name was not chosen. I suggest we might call the next one Ulysses 22, for example, in recognition of the classics and the wonderful journeys that occurred in that time. It would also be a nod to our own literary history. As a child who grew up as a big fan of "Ulysses 31", it would give me particular pleasure.

To date, believe it or not, Ireland is the only ESA member which has not launched a satellite. However, we are now about to take that first foray into outer space. It is a big and exciting moment. That is why we need to ratify this treaty formally now. The ESA is covering the cost of the launch, with free access to its test facilities. The launch will be from French Guiana and the launch window is scheduled for some point between November of this year and January of 2023. Officials are still progressing a number of legal and policy issues in advance of seeking Government approval for EIRSAT-1 to launch later this year. It will require a Government memo for us to do so and we hope to do that in the autumn.

It is a fantastic opportunity for UCD, its academic staff and students. I recognise the presence in the Gallery of some of the EIRSAT team. Lorraine Hanlon, David McKeown, Gabriel Finneran, Joe Thompson, Joe Mangan and Ronan Wall are all very welcome to the House.

We are now finally going to join the growing number of nations engaged in satellite activity and, therefore, take our place among the nations of the world. Hundreds of Irish people, including the Minister of State, Deputy English, and I, are looking forward to the launch with great excitement. The passing of this motion will allow Ireland to further its scientific, educational

and commercial interests in space. I thank Deputies for their support and commend the motion to the House.

I should mention that the second motion will be taken without debate on Thursday. Apologies for the error in that regard.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Therefore, we are only dealing with one motion that has been formally moved already.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Raise the Roof: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party Government has been in Office for two years;

— during this time rents have increased by 15 per cent, house prices by 22 per cent and homelessness by 19 per cent;

— in the last year alone child homelessness has increased by 41 per cent;

— there are 5,054 single people, 3,028 children and 1,366 families officially recognised as homeless;

— there are 3,278 adults and children with leave to remain trapped in Direct Provision;

— there are hundreds of adults and children in Tusla funded domestic violence refuges and homeless hostels not funded by the State;

— there is an unknown number of people sofa surfing or living in overcrowded and inadequate accommodation;

— travellers, people with disabilities, older people and migrants continue to live in unsuitable accommodation at the margins of our housing system;

— the latest Economic and Social Research Institute report on housing tenure and pension income adequacy indicates significant risk of increased pensioner poverty for those unable to buy their own home and dependent on private renting;

— Census 2022 identified 48,000 long-term vacant homes and 35,000 vacant rental homes;

— the targets set out in the Government's housing plan are not sufficient to meet the ever-growing housing need;

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— the failure to deliver an adequate supply of public housing to meet social and affordable need is driving the housing crisis;

— the failure to provide an adequate supply of affordable student accommodation has led to an ever-deepening student accommodation crisis; and

— this ever-deepening housing disaster has led to the relaunch of the Raise the Roof Homes For All campaign led by the trade union movement, housing and homeless organisations, housing rights activists and political parties; and

agrees that Budget 2023 must deliver a radical shift in housing policy, as demanded by the Raise the Roof Homes For All campaign, including:

— a major focus on the delivery of large volumes of genuinely affordable homes for those locked out of the private rental and owner occupier markets;

— an increase in direct capital investment in public housing to deliver at least 20,000 social and affordable homes per year, including 4,000 affordable Cost Rental homes;

— a greater focus on bringing vacant homes back into use through the public housing programme and the introduction of a vacant property tax;

— an increase in the percentage of Part V units allocated for social and affordable housing;

— a ban on rent increases and measures to cut rents in the private rental sector;

— an emergency ban on evictions to halt the rise in homelessness and legislative change to restrict grounds for eviction;

— a new student accommodation strategy, in partnership with colleges and students' unions, delivering genuinely affordable accommodation for students on or near campus and greater protections for those students in digs-style accommodation;

— full implementation of the recommendations from the report of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group;

— implementation of the Irish Refugee Council proposals for providing emergency accommodation to Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war;

— an end to all pro-developer subsidies including the Help to Buy scheme, the "First Home" Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme and the Croí Cónaithe (Cities) Scheme;

— an introduction of measures to tackle the issues of speculative investment in land and land hoarding;

— an end to the outrageous tax reliefs on rent and capital gains for institutional cuckoo and vulture funds; and

— the holding of a referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution.

The Minister will remember that in 2016, 2017 and 2018, the current phase of the housing crisis started to escalate. In direct response, there were a growing number of protest movements,

some of which were very localised and included local soup kitchens and homeless tables, and others of which were State-wide, such as the National Housing and Homeless Coalition. There were occupations of buildings here in Dublin and elsewhere as part of the Take Back the City movement. All of that culminated in a large trade union and civil society-led movement called Raise the Roof.

The Minister will also remember that in 2018, 10,000 to 15,000 people, led by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the entire trade union movement, many of the country's leading housing and homeless organisations, housing rights activists and political parties from the Opposition, gathered to call for the Dáil to support a motion setting out what was then the agreed position of Raise the Roof as to how best to tackle the housing crisis. That evening, the Minister and his party colleagues, who were in opposition but supporting the then Government through a confidence and supply arrangement, supported the Raise the Roof motion. That was the beginning of what many of us hoped was going to be a mass mobilisation of civil society and of people power to try to force a radical change in Government housing policy. Unfortunately, the pandemic and the public health restrictions, necessary as they were, intervened and the possibility of continuing large-scale popular mobilisation was put on hold.

Given the very serious deterioration in the housing and homelessness situation over the past 12 months, Raise the Roof relaunched its campaign earlier this year. The first phase was a series of public meetings around the country. Many of us have attended those meetings, spoke at them and participated in them. The meetings in Galway, Limerick, Maynooth, Dublin, Waterford and Navan have shown there is a public appetite to get involved again in the public campaign for a new direction in housing. Those meetings were also, in many cases, very disturbing because people were giving voice to their very real and acute level of housing need and housing stress, in part caused by Government policy failures. As part of the relaunch of the campaign, a range of Opposition parties have co-signed this Raise the Roof motion, which also carries the *imprimatur* of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the entire trade union movement, many of the homeless and housing NGOs, many housing rights activists, campaign groups and others. We are calling for something substantial in what we want the Government not to say but to do. I want to focus on the positives of this motion and contrast them with the gap between the rhetoric and reality of what this Government is doing.

At the centre of this motion is a demand for a refocusing of Government policy towards genuinely affordable homes, not measures that heap additional debt on working families to buy overpriced homes, not developer-led subsidies to lock in, if not push ever higher, the unaffordable cost of homes in our cities, and not tax reliefs for institutional investors who have a model for the development of residential stock that will be permanently unaffordable. This is about saying the State needs to increase direct capital investment dramatically in the delivery of large volumes of public homes on public land to meet social and affordable need.

On many occasions, the Minister has said, and I am sure he will say it today, that is what the Government is doing and that is in its plan. He will claim the Government is spending €4 billion this year to deliver the largest public housing building programme in the history of the State. First of all, the Government is not spending €4 billion on public housing this year. Anybody with eyes to read can look at the voted capital expenditure in the most recent budget. The Government is spending less than half of that. It is claiming that averaged expenditure, including approved housing body, AHB, borrowing and potential expenditure by the Land Development Agency, LDA, four, five or six years into the future, can be booked as €4 billion of expenditure this year but that is not what is happening.

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Likewise, the Minister is telling us that the social housing programme this year will be the largest in the history of the State. That is not factually accurate on a *per capita* basis or indeed on a real expenditure basis. Given that the Government has only actually delivered just over 600 social homes between the new-build programme and Part Vs in the first quarter of this year, which is not far off the delivery figures for last year, it is hard to see how that will develop.

Other colleagues will use their time to talk through the other elements of this motion but we are urging the Government to realise that unless it starts to deliver the 20,000 public homes a year it promised during the election campaign and quickly abandoned thereafter, this crisis is going to get worse. That is the key to tackling this crisis and it is the central element, though only one of many, in the motion before us today.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I listened to the debate on the motion of confidence in the Government, and Ministers and Deputies from Government parties, one after another, rolled out and talked about the great work the Government is doing to deliver housing and all the start-ups. The fact is that in my 14 years in politics, it has never been as bad as it is now. This is not just Sinn Féin talking; all of the Opposition are saying the same. It is not just us. It is also the Simon Community, the Peter McVerry Trust and the Cork Penny Dinners. Any of the charities that deal with families who are in homeless or emergency accommodation or need supports will say the same. Thirty-eight families and people have come to me because they will be evicted by Christmas. The Government's answer is to tell us about start-ups. People do not care about start-ups; they care about homes. The Minister and the Government are not delivering homes. People are becoming homeless under the Government's watch. The homeless figures are rising.

We spoke during the debate on Covid-19 about how a ban on evictions would work, and it did work. However, the minute the Government got the opportunity to do so, it lifted those restrictions and now we have a situation where more and more people are becoming homeless. At one time, homelessness was for people who might have problems with addiction or with their mental health. Now we have families with one or two people working who cannot put a roof over their heads. How is that possible in a society where people are working in good jobs? It is not just me saying this. These are the facts. The Government has failed. It is in power more than two years now and we have seen the homeless, housing, social housing and the affordable housing crises get worse. We have seen private purchase and cost rental get worse as well. It is all under the Minister's watch. The Government has failed, and that is why we are supporting this motion. We need to work together to raise the roof.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** Earlier, the Tánaiste said this is a good Government. However, it is not if you are a student looking for affordable accommodation. We are hurtling headlong into an accommodation crisis for students like we have never seen before. It is the biggest barrier to third level education today. This is especially true of students in rural areas. Many end up having to commute extraordinary distances because they are unable to secure any accommodation. The on-campus projects are being shelved because colleges are rightly unwilling to advance projects that will deliver accommodation that is far too expensive for the majority of students. We already have student accommodation in public universities that cost €1,300 and more. We desperately need a student accommodation strategy, in partnership with colleges and students' unions, delivering genuinely affordable accommodation for students on or near campus and greater protection for students in digs-like accommodation.

I want to turn to Mayo. There are only 22 properties to rent in Mayo. I want the Minister to hear the story in the headlines in *The Western People* of Niamh O'Malley, who, with her au-

tistic son, is at risk of homelessness because she cannot find a property for less than €1,500 per month, which is all she can afford. She cannot find one. She says:

I work hard and mother harder. It is society who has failed us and the cards I've been dealt. I'm not looking for pity. I wake up every day and night and search for homes. I feel the fear in my belly and yet I still mother. I still show up every single day. I'm not ashamed to share my story. People deserve to know how others are being treated in 2022.

Those are her words, not mine.

I want to finish on the issue of apprenticeships. We say this is the great success of the Government, but the truth is fewer apprenticeships have qualified tradespeople in 2021 than they did in 2017. We need to look at the figures, be honest with people, and deal with this.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** The figures speak for themselves and they are absolutely damning. During the Minister's time in this Government, rents have increased by 15% and house prices by 22%. It is disgraceful. Homelessness has increased 19% in the lifetime of this shambolic Government, particularly considering there was a moratorium on evictions during lockdown.

For ordinary workers and families, having a decent home at a decent price is a goal that has been ripped from their lives because of decisions by others and policies of successive governments that failed them. The number of households living in rented accommodation has doubled in two decades. The number of these households that are purely private renters - those not paying rent to a local authority or receiving State supports - has tripled.

Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and others in government have deliberately created this change. In those 20 years, from 2001 to date, Government has spent over €12 billion in support of a private rental market, be it through the housing assistance payment, HAP, leasing, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, or any of those schemes. Against the best interests of ordinary people, successive governments have reversed the successes of previous generations and put those successes out of the reach of this and future generations. An ESRI report states that between the 1950s and 1960s, fewer than 20% of people lived in private rental accommodation in their mid-30s. Of those born in the 1980s, it is now more than 40% living in private rented accommodation. That is mirroring the decline in home ownership. Government parties to date have supervised, supported and encouraged that 180 degree turn. I do not remember any election posters promising a return to lifelong renting or ending the possibility of home ownership, but that is what the Government has done. It is crystal clear that what people want and what the Government is providing has become completely polarised, and ordinary people are suffering horrific consequences.

Earlier today I heard the Taoiseach speak about the potential for landlords leaving the market. I want to ask a very specific question. Why is it that local authorities are now refusing homeless supports to families who abide by their notice to quit? Where a family leaves on the final date of their notice to quit, local authorities are refusing to provide them with homeless supports and are encouraging them to break that notice to quit and overhold, because if they do not, they will not get any help from anywhere.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** In the two years this Government has been in office, we have seen spikes in rents, house prices and the number of people presenting homeless. We have seen Government policy repeatedly failing to do what was promised, with Ministers more concerned about representing the views of the big developers and the hedge funds. Corporate landlords

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are being treated as the State's golden goose, with the Government showing little concern for people who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads. The shared equity loan scheme, which has been widely criticised by everyone from the ESRI to the Central Bank, is a concrete example of a policy that will put people into more hardship.

According to the Daft report for quarter 2, average house prices in Dublin Bay North are above €390,000. This morning, I had a look at Daft and there were 23 rental properties available in Dublin 5, Dublin 13 and Dublin 17. If a person is lucky enough to be able to get one of these, he or she is looking at paying a minimum of €1,800 a month for a one-bedroom apartment. That is absolutely shocking.

In the past year, the number of children entering homelessness increased by 41%. That is another damning statistic that speaks to the Government's failure to tackle the homelessness crisis.

It is time we moved forward. We need to enshrine the right to housing in our Constitution via a referendum. We need large-scale delivery of genuinely affordable homes so families and workers can afford to put a roof over their heads.

The motion also refers to vacant homes. I think the Minister would agree that it makes complete sense to bring the thousands of vacant homes back into use. In addition, we need a ban on rent increases as well as a ban on emergency evictions and we need that now.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Raise the Roof was established because the housing policies failed workers and families. In Limerick recently, the first and biggest public meeting since the easing of restrictions was held. I have no doubt the rally taking place on Saturday will be big as well.

The housing market in Limerick is broken. I want to talk to the Minister about three specific issues we have there. The first is about renters. Anybody who has a constituency office like I do will know there is something noticeable with every single person who comes in at the moment, and that is the envelope in their hand. You know exactly what it is before they even give you the envelope. The envelope is the notice to quit. I have never seen so many of them. The homeless services tell me to see them. If a person is approved for social housing, there is no RAS property available in Limerick. There simply is not one there.

I looked at Daft this morning and there were nine properties available. There is a one-bedroom apartment on Thomas Street in Limerick city centre for €1,800 a month. If that does not tell the Minister how broken the market in Limerick is, nothing will. If a person has a notice to quit and simply has nowhere to go, there is no emergency accommodation in Limerick, and Limerick City and County Council told me that. Providers of homeless services have told me that for a number of weeks, that there is no emergency accommodation available.

Regarding people who work and might have a job, a small income or whatever and earn slightly over the limit, the income thresholds to get a social support have not changed since 2011. The Minister has been talking for a long time about doing something on that, but we have been waiting and waiting and have not seen anything come in on that. A family of two adults and children in Limerick has an income limit of €36,000. If the adults have any sort of a job, they are not getting any supports.

*9 o'clock*

I support the aims of Raise the Roof. It is an important campaign that will build as it goes on. Among its aims are a ban on rent increases and an emergency ban on evictions, bringing vacant homes back into use and holding a referendum on the right to housing. We can do better, but only if the Government has the political will to do so. What we cannot do is stand by while developers profit and families suffer.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** Through the years, Fianna Fáil has clocked up a shambolic track record when it comes to housing. Generations will bear the brunt of the crisis it got this country into, but it has learned nothing. Fine Gael subsequently facilitated the selling out of families and invited in cuckoo and vulture funds. Those traditions continue today, no matter what spin the Minister and others tried to put on this situation earlier. The fact that since the Government came to power, the number of homeless adults in County Tipperary more than doubled shows the extent of the Government's failure. One does not hear Deputies and Senators from Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael trying to sell those figures in their constituencies. Do they know how many people are sleeping in cars in County Tipperary this evening, or how many kids are in a different house each night? They do not know because those figures are not collected.

Sinn Féin warned the Government that lifting the ban on evictions would lead to this tsunami of homelessness, but it would not listen then either. To take the example of the Tipperary-Cashel-Cahir municipal district, there are 841 people on the waiting list, with five council houses available. There are 16 properties available to rent in the entire county - the biggest inland county - which has a population of more than 160,000. Meanwhile, the Minister and his constituency colleagues remain intent on following the failing housing plan. Does the fact that 184 children in the mid-west and south east are homeless indicate a successful policy, as the Government tried to spin today? The Taoiseach spoke earlier about how well his Government has done. Does that include the fracturing of families or the rise in mental health issues? Does it account for no affordable houses being built in County Tipperary in 2021? I recently asked the Minister if he was prepared to allow councils to take emergency measures to address the housing crisis. I got an unrelated stock response. It is shameful.

We have a broad campaign calling for an increase in direct capital investment in public housing, real action to use vacant homes, an emergency ban on evictions, a ban on rent increases and measures to cut private rents. We are also calling for an immediate referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution. We need this to protect the public against the Government's failed policies and its approach to housing as much as anything else.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that this Government:

— published its housing plan, Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland (Housing for All), in September 2021, with record levels of funding in place to support the delivery of the plan, and unprecedented guaranteed State investment of over €4 billion each year to support Housing for All, through an overall combination of €12 billion in direct Exchequer funding, €3.5 billion in funding through the Land Development Agency (LDA) and €5 billion funding through the Housing Finance Agency;

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— has committed to ensuring that over 300,000 homes will be built over the next decade across the categories of social, affordable and Cost Rental, private rental and private ownership, and, on average, over 33,000 homes will be built per annum, rising to 40,000 by 2030;

— is funding the largest ever social housing build programme, with a target of over 90,000 social homes by the end of 2030, including an average new-build component of over 9,500 social homes by the end of 2030;

— will deliver 54,000 affordable homes between now and 2030, with 2,000 Cost Rental homes and 4,000 local authority Affordable Purchase Homes on average to be provided each year;

— recognises the challenges of rising homelessness numbers and is taking action, and the Housing for All plan has a strong focus on homelessness with specific actions under the plan, including incorporating Ireland's commitment to the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, which includes a commitment to work to eradicate homelessness by 2030;

— has increased the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) discretion rate, from the current 20 per cent to a maximum of 35 per cent for all local authority areas, and as this will apply to both new and existing tenancies, it will secure more tenancies and prevent new entries to homelessness;

— has provided additional flexibility in HAP by allowing local authorities to apply a couple rate to a single person household, where required, in recognition of the shared one-bed need and the particular challenges faced by single persons in securing accommodation;

— has established a National Homeless Action Committee, which has representatives from Government departments, agencies and bodies, including representation from the homelessness services non-government organisation sector and this Committee is focusing on activating measures to prevent homelessness;

— has delivered over 700 'Housing First' tenancies up to the end of 2021, with a goal of over 1,300 new 'Housing First' tenancies by 2026;

— recognises the positive impact of the Voids Stimulus Programme in 2021 in bringing 2,425 units back into use and further plans for 2,200 units this year under a new Voids Stimulus Programme for 2022 with an emphasis on a quick turnaround and re-letting of vacant social housing stock to those on social housing waiting lists, including those in emergency accommodation;

— will publish a new youth homelessness strategy in Q3 of this year;

— is supporting local authorities to acquire homes for social housing for priority purposes, including acquisitions which support a household to exit or to prevent homelessness;

— has approved the bringing forward of new arrangements in relation to short-term letting, aimed at strengthening the pre-existing regulatory controls in this area, which will ensure that non-principal private residences in Rent Pressure Zones

(RPZ) will not be advertised or accept bookings on online platforms or other media for short-term letting purposes without the necessary planning permission being in place in respect of the property concerned or the property concerned being otherwise exempted;

— has extended further the required termination notice period that tenants must receive, a measure designed to give greater security of tenure to tenants, and, in addition, the amendments provide for a new requirement on landlords to simultaneously copy the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) with all Notices of Termination given to a tenant;

— has tasked the RTB with reviewing Notices to Quit which involve the sale of a property, to ensure that there was compliance with the law and to take action where needed;

— is funding Threshold's National Tenancy Protection Service, which is instrumental in preventing homelessness in the first instance and supporting people to remain in their homes and is funding Threshold's Own Your Rights campaign for a second year, which aims to promote and increase general awareness of tenants' rights and is due to launch in September;

— has capped rent increases at a maximum of 2 per cent in RPZs and provided for tenancies of unlimited duration;

— is building on the success of the Mortgage to Rent scheme in 2021, when 678 borrowers availed of the scheme, and in 2022 the scheme will be expanded and it is expected that the scheme will deal with 1,000 cases, which is the commitment under Housing For All;

— is progressing actions on housing for older people, people with a disability and Travellers through Pathway 2 of Housing for All, including through sectoral specific plans such as the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022 – 2027;

— recognises that increased housing supply is vital and, at the half-way point of the year, indicators suggest that we are on track to deliver the target of 24,600 new homes in 2022, with planning permission granted for 8,463 new units in Q1, up from 7,272 in Q1 2019, while commencements in the first five months of 2022 totalled 12,089;

— has recently launched the 'First Home' Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme, an affordability measure, to support first-time buyers in purchasing newly built homes nationwide, and the scheme will support 8,000 homeowners with affordable purchases up to 2026;

— has brought forward the delivery of the first Cost Rental homes, which are now beginning to come into the market, advertised at rates that are 40 per cent to 50 per cent lower than market rent;

— has legislated for affordable housing for purchase and for rent, and welcomes that homes for affordable purchase are now being made available under the Local Authority Affordable Purchase Scheme;

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— has increased the percentage of Part V to 20 per cent for social and affordable or Cost Rental homes on private sites;

— has introduced a new Local Authority Home Loan for those on modest/low incomes who cannot get sufficient funding from commercial banks to purchase or build a home;

— is enabling the delivery of residential units, which will help to revitalise urban centres, through the provision of State land to the LDA, and has agreed the transfer of State lands to the LDA with potential to produce 15,000 homes;

— welcomes progress by the LDA, who have lodged planning applications for a total of 2,358 homes for the year to date, and a contractor has been appointed to begin building 597 social and affordable homes in Shanganagh from September;

— welcomes the progress by the LDA on Project Tosaigh, which aims to accelerate delivery of 5,000 homes on non-State lands where planning permission has already been granted, but not yet activated;

— has introduced both fiscal and regulatory measures to address certain activities by corporate investors that may be detrimental to the market, including through the introduction of the 10 per cent Stamp Duty rate on bulk purchases of houses;

— has implemented an owner-occupier guarantee, which requires each local authority to ensure home ownership as a tenure type is provided for and estimated in their housing strategies, and notes that recently published analysis of the impact of planning guidelines that issued in May 2021, aimed at preventing multiple housing and duplex units being sold to a single buyer, shows that almost 16,000 residential units have been ring-fenced for individual buyers and that bulk buying or multiple sales to a single purchaser have been restricted;

— has launched the Croí Cónaithe (Cities) Scheme to deliver up to 5,000 additional apartments for individuals seeking to buy a home in the five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, and it will also support the Government's objectives of compact growth and creating vibrant liveable cities for people who want to live close to work and urban amenities;

— will shortly launch the Croí Cónaithe towns scheme to support refurbishment of vacant houses in our towns and villages, a measure which directly underpins the objectives set out in the Town Centre First policy;

— will fund projects to address vacancy and dereliction in rural towns and villages and which aim to redevelop buildings to provide essential infrastructure, including remote working facilities, community facilities and libraries under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund;

— has made the Vacant Homes Officer position full-time across all local authorities;

— intends to bring forward a vacant property tax in Budget 2023;

— has reformed the Nursing Homes Support (Fair Deal) Scheme to remove dis-

incentives for the sale of vacant properties, and under the changes to the scheme introduced by the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Amendment Act 2021 from October 2021, the three-year cap on contributions applies to the proceeds of a sale of a home, in the same way as it applies to the value of a home that is not sold;

— is progressing a comprehensive review of planning legislation, led by the Attorney General, and a new process for Large-scale Residential Developments of 100 plus units has been introduced to bring supply forward quicker;

— is bringing forward a new system of land value sharing that will be legislated for in 2022, which, along with the introduction of urban development zones, will underpin the delivery of land and infrastructure, and these measures will play a key role in the delivery of social and affordable housing, in particular, in decisions around the zoning or designation of land and the uplift in value of that land as a result;

— has published new statutory national planning guidelines for the preparation of local authority development plans, to ensure that sufficient new homes can be built in key areas of housing demand;

— has published statutory national planning guidelines to assist with the identification and mapping of lands in scope for the new Residential Zoned Land Tax;

— has funded the first project under the Enterprise Ireland Built to Innovate campaign, which is aimed at improving the productivity of the domestic residential construction sector;

— is progressing work on the new Construction Technology Centre and has established the Modern Methods of Construction leadership and integration group;

— welcomes the increase in apprenticeship registrations and is progressing a suite of actions in order to enable and enhance international recruitment and domestic workforce activation;

— is promoting construction careers among school leavers, potential career changers and those outside the labour force, to encourage them to take up employment or training opportunities in the sector; and

— has established the Housing Commission, which is tasked with examining issues such as tenure, standards, sustainability and quality-of-life issues in the provision of housing, and, as well as examining the potential for independent regulation of the social housing sector, the Commission will bring forward proposals on the referendum on housing referred to in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future.”

I thank the Deputies for tabling the motion to allow us to have a further discussion on housing and the current situation in that regard, which is, without question, difficult. What has not been recognised is the two years that we have come through, with two significant construction shutdowns that did affect output. Most reasonable people would recognise that has had an impact on delivery. Thankfully, our projections are that we will deliver on our target of 24,600 homes this year, even with the current difficult inflationary environment and the supply chain issues that have occurred, mainly due to the war in Ukraine.

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What is interesting about the motion tabled by the Opposition is that, straight away, it calls for the delivery of 20,000 social homes per annum. We are going to deliver 8,000 to 9,000 new build social homes this year and, on top of that, other homes that I will discuss momentarily. That is more than 10,000 social homes. What has not been addressed by any of the Deputies who have spoken thus far on the motion is the capacity of the sector to deliver that number of homes. All present are aware that one needs people to build the homes in order to deliver them. I can advise Deputies that, thankfully, the capacity within the construction sector now is above pre-pandemic levels. We need a workforce to deliver those homes. The Deputies opposite have on many occasions raised their desire to see 20,000 social homes delivered in one year. What is never said is how long that will take, where they will be built or by whom.

The Government's plan, Housing for All, which is €4 billion of investment in social and affordable housing, sets out clearly the trajectory of how we increase social housing supply in every county. That is happening now. It may not politically suit some people to recognise the basis from which we started. There were ten or 12 years of undersupply, particularly on social housing.

I am acutely aware of the challenges that we face, particularly in the area of homelessness. I chair the national homeless action committee, which is made up of many of the organisations-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What is the Minister going to do?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** -----that have been referenced here already. We are working with every tool available to us to drive down the numbers in homelessness. The approach to homelessness has to be housing-led. It has to be about increasing supply across all tenures - social housing, affordable housing, private housing and rental housing. Deputies have referenced the lack of rental housing on the market. Some Deputies have bemoaned the amount spent on HAP. I think it was Deputy Mitchell who referred to the €1 billion being spent on HAP and RAS payments. That is supporting more than 60,000 families with direct rental payments. We have seen a reduction in the increases in HAP in the past two years and that is what I want. I want to see people transition out of HAP into permanent social housing. What is the suggestion of the Sinn Féin Deputies, however? Is it that we stop HAP payments? I increased them just last week. The Deputies should not call it a subvention for private landlords when, on the other hand, the Sinn Féin housing spokesperson bemoans the loss of private individual landlords from the market.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** The Government is forcing people to sleep in cars.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** In Sinn Féin's most recent budget manifesto, the only proposal relating to rental properties was to add a €400 second home tax on individual landlords, the very mom and pop landlords Deputy Ó Broin says he wants to keep in the market. That was the Sinn Féin proposal.

Let us get back to the facts. The reality is that housing is not a political game. Deputies should not be playing with people in this space. What we have to show people is a realistic way to increase supply and deliver affordable housing. The Affordable Housing Act passed by this House passed, with the support of many Deputies opposite, is delivering cost rental for the first time in this country. We want to deliver that at scale. We are going to deliver cost rental at greater scale through the LDA, which is about using State-owned land to deliver houses. Its goal is to

put idle State-owned land to use for the good of citizens and deliver social and affordable housing. Deputy Ó Broin and his party colleagues voted against the LDA legislation.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I make no apologies for that.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** They do not believe the LDA should even plan for houses. Do they want the four planning applications for 2,400 homes recently lodged by the LDA to be refused? Do they want to see those homes built? Maybe they do not. That may be the reason that, as we discussed earlier-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** We want homes now.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Deputy Gould should try to behave himself, please.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** We want homes now. People need homes now. They are sick and tired of listening to bluff.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Tá brón orm, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will not state the obvious, but the reality is that there is a need to build supply up, and supply is increasing. Supply is increasing across the board, albeit not to the levels we need. We need to go further. To March 2022, we had the highest number of residential units completed since 2011. That is 22,219 new homes. It is not possible to go from 20,000 homes to 40,000 homes in 12 months. If the Deputies opposite are telling people they can do so, then they are lying to them. It cannot be done. The total number of planning permissions in the past 12 months is up substantially, to more than 42,000, the highest since 2007. These are facts. Commencements in the year to April is 30,233. That is a start of construction of new homes and apartments, to many of which the Deputy probably objected.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I have objected to no developments. I have never objected to any of them.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** It is very difficult to continue with the repeated interruptions.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** The Minister should not make accusations.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** There is a need to build up supply and capacity across all tenures. Housing for All will deliver, and is delivering, the single biggest social housing programme in the history of the State. It is doing that. It will deliver thousands of new social homes this year. I believe in homeownership but I do not believe Sinn Féin does. Sinn Féin has railed against the help to buy scheme which has helped more than 30,000 households to get a deposit together to buy a home. Over the past 12 months, first-time buyers comprised the largest proportion of people drawing down mortgages. We need to get affordability into the market. How do we do that? The first home scheme launched last Thursday but Sinn Féin's motion called for it to be scrapped. I sometimes get a sense from the main Opposition spokesperson, in particular, that he does not want to see progress in this space. He does not want to see a scheme that works. Since last Thursday, we have had hundreds of applications. Sinn Féin's initial criticism of this was that it would be a second mortgage and that the interest rates was going to be at 6%, 7% or 8%. It is not a mortgage-based product; it is equity. The State is stepping in to assist those people who have been locked out of the-----

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** It has to be paid back.

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**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Equity debt.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Try to behave yourself, please.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Do not mislead the House.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I am stating a fact.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Debt with interest.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Last year Deputy Ó Broin said in this House that it was going to be a second mortgage, which was going to be at 6%, 7% or 8% interest. It is not a second mortgage. It is an equity stake that the State is taking to help the thousands of people the Deputy said he wants to help-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Pushing house prices and punishing-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** That is just the usual trite nonsense Deputy Ó Broin goes on with. The fact of the matter is there is a scheme here-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is thanks to the Minister.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Right now there are people paying rents above the level they should be paying. People are paying-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** There are 600 social homes this year.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** The Deputy tabled the motion. Does he want a debate or not? Will I sit down? The reality is I am about delivering policies that positively impact-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I am not going to continue to be shouted down. I certainly will not be bullied by the Deputy in this House. I should be allowed to respond, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I have tabled a Government countermotion-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy, can you let the Minister speak?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** He finds it difficult to contain himself.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is thanks to the Minister.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I did not know I had that affect on the Deputy.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Can we speak through the Chair?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** All those families-----

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I am not sure about that either.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** This is not a joke. Some 3,000 children are homeless.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You cannot do this Deputy Ó Broin. If this keeps up, I will simply suspend the Dáil.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Deputy Ó Broin is out of order.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Minister gave up on those children.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I gave up on nobody. On a point of order-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you. Minister. I am going to stand up. Will the Minister sit down? We cannot have it both ways. We cannot have provocation from both sides. I am sitting here trying to bring order. We are going to speak through the Chair. If the Minister or Deputy Ó Broin do not speak through the Chair, I will suspend the debate. It is as simple as that.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Unfortunately a Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will allow the Minister up to one minute speak through the Chair.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Apologies.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Through the Chair, absolutely.

What I have attempted to do this evening is to put forward some of the policies that are taking hold and are working. I will try again to restate the facts. The first home scheme is going to help thousands of people who are in a rental trap and who have saved and are working hard to be able to own their own home at an affordable rate that is not a second mortgage. Hundreds already have responded to this. The first applications are being approved and on top of that we are going to deliver the first affordable purchase homes, through local authorities, in a generation with purchase prices starting from €166,000. We will deliver that and build up supply. It is unfortunate, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, that I have been interrupted so many times-----

**Deputy Martin Browne:** The truth hurts.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** -----that I have not been able to answer the charges that have been put forward by some of the Deputies opposite, but that probably suits them.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Labour Party Deputy is not here. I call Deputy Mairéad Farrell.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** The Minister said it is not a political game and I agree with him but to be honest, much of the time when I hear Government Deputies shouting about the housing crisis, I really think they think it is some kind of political game. The reality is that the housing crisis is as a result of political choices. That is why we are where we are. There is no denying that. It is because of political choices made by the previous Government, which the Minister supported, and by this Government. I am sure the Minister knows of, and everyone in this Chamber faces, the situation where every Monday at my clinic the key issue that comes through the door is housing. To be honest, it has become increasingly difficult to find any kind of solutions for the people coming in the door. Much of the time the people have notices to quit. We know there are rising numbers of notices to quit and the best the council can say to

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people is to apply for the housing assistance payment, HAP. The reality in Galway city, and I cannot speak for anywhere else, is that there are no rental properties available, let alone anything within the HAP limits. What are these families to do? We know the figures and the huge increase in the number of people who are in emergency accommodation. The reality for these people is that being faced with this prospect is a huge and terrifying shock for them. They really have two or three options. They can try to get emergency accommodation, much of which is substandard. I have seen the photographs from people who come to my office. They can try sleeping in their parents' sitting rooms or maybe on a friend's couch but that is all they have. It is getting worse. I hear about it in my clinics.

On the points the Minister in regard to affordable housing, I would love him to come to Galway city and bring us the affordable housing. This is not about me wanting to win this argument. I do not want Sinn Féin to win this argument. I want the Government to deliver. For years we, in Galway city, have been hearing talk about an affordable housing estate. We are told that the earliest it will be delivered is 2024. It will not be enough for all the people who ask me if they can get an affordable house. To be clear, I am sick of hearing Fianna Fáil Deputies telling me that we object. Fianna Fáil has been objecting in Galway for years. The Minister should maybe check that out.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Minister mentioned facts. Here are some facts. The percentage of young people under 35 who can buy their own homes halved between 2005 and 2015. We all know that this is in freefall. The average cost of a one- to three-bedroom home in County Laois has increased by 9.9% in the past year to €225,000. That average includes one-bedroom homes. In County Offaly the average cost was pushed up by 8.6% to €230,000. High rents are imposing serious hardship on workers and families. In the past 12 months, the average rent in County Laois for an apartment or a house increased by 10.5% to a whopping €1,169. There was a massive increase in County Offaly of 14.6% to an average of €1,158 per month. Government housing policy is failing renters.

The Minister mentioned HAP. Any increase in HAP payments would be welcome but the problem is that you need a rent freeze to go with it because it results in chasing high rents. Rents go up when HAP payments increase. The Minister will know that if he checks the history of what happened the last time.

A recent check on availability in counties Laois and Offaly showed that only four long-term lets were available for rent in County Laois. At the same time, there were 57 Airbnbs available. The picture in County Offaly is similar with only three long-term lets available, but 53 short-term Airbnbs. The Government has to change tack. The recent census shows a huge increase in population in both counties, similar to the rest of the State. The supply of housing is not keeping in line with that.

The Minister mentioned supply. Supply on its own will not do it. I want to see increased supply of private, affordable and social housing but I remind the Minister of when his party was in power and it crashed the housing market and the economy. More than 90,000 homes were built in 2006. What happened in 2006? House prices shot up. The Government needs to change its approach. It needs to bring in a rent freeze. In particular, the rent pressure zones are not working. In Laois-Offaly, only the Tullamore, Portlaoise and Portarlington-Graigecullen districts have them and they are not working in those districts. Half of the constituency has no rent pressure zones. The delivery of affordable to purchase and cost-rental homes needs to be ramped up significantly to deliver genuine affordability, and accelerated provision of new hous-

ing schemes is also needed. According to the census, 48,000 long-term homes were vacant. There are a further 45,000 rentals lying empty. We need a vacant property tax to bring those back into use. We need to end speculation by taxing it.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** Our Uachtarán was right. This is no longer a housing emergency; this is a housing disaster. I was there when he spoke in Naas in my constituency in north Kildare last month and his words really crackled like electricity in people.

One person who lived those words is a spokesperson for Focus Ireland, Ms Kelly Anne Byrne, who addressed us in Maynooth last week at a Raise the Roof public meeting. She was electrifying too but it was traumatic to have to listen to her - she has given me permission to speak here about it. Ms Byrne spoke of the chaos, the terror of not having a place for herself and her children as a young mother, and how her life and the lives of her children changed dramatically once they found a decent place to live. I wish the Minister could have heard her speak of the small, but essential, joy it is to be able to come home and to close your door on the world and enjoy your dignified private life in your dignified private space.

The difference between Sinn Féin and the Government is that we believe that housing is a right. It is a right to be secured under a referendum and a right to be enjoyed regardless of income because every person needs a home. Only in this State and the absolute state the Government has made of governing, hard work, a good job, a degree, a deposit, savings and a mortgage are no longer enough to buy a home. Thanks to too much Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, one now needs a wealth fund or an inheritance to buy a small three-bedroom semi-detached house. By what measure and in whose world is that progress? This is unfair. It is unsustainable and unjust to the hardworking people who only want an affordable home to rent or buy, if they are happy to pay.

There is a certain political mindset in the Government that believes some people get free houses but the only people getting free houses in Kildare are the developers. The local authority hands back the houses to them after a 25-year lease, all paid for and all redone at the taxpayers' expense, with the tenants homeless again. No society gets away unscathed from treating so many people so badly while at the same time protecting and venerating the privileged few. Leonard Cohen sang a song,

There is a crack ... in everything

That's how the light gets in

I ask people to join their local Raise the Roof group, raise the roof and let some light in on the Minister's disastrous housing policy.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We need to raise the roof. I am not the first Deputy to repeat the following figures: a 15% increase in rents, a 22% increase in house prices and a 19% increase in homelessness. We have all probably taken a look at Daft. Across Louth, there are 18 houses for rent. In Dundalk, the corresponding figure is nine.

Anecdotally, in relation to issues I try to deal with, a number of my party's councillors on a day-to-day basis are engaging with people and trying to find solutions. Of course, we use everything available, including the housing assistance payment, HAP. We are waiting for the 35% and the other changes, that the Minister is talking about, to happen as soon as possible because that will get us some time until this fixes but we know we are all operating in a dysfunctional

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system that will not get any better until we deal with the supply issue, . It is exactly as Deputy Mairéad Farrell said. It is getting worse. Every time we deal with this issues, more people come in to us. People who never would have come in with regard to housing issues are now coming in. They are finding themselves in absolutely dreadful situations.

I have spoken specifically to the Minister about anomalies in relation to HAP and how people who should be able to get a payment cannot get it. We need to introduce some element of flexibility or we will only put more people into homelessness.

It goes without saying that we must do the basics. We must protect renters. We did some of these pieces of work during the pandemic. It is not beyond the realm of possibility to do so again. We know that we will only do real business when the State engages fully and we look at figures, such as the need to deliver at least 20,000 social and affordable homes per year, including cost rental. The fact is, if one talks to Mr. Tom Parlon and others from the Construction Industry Federation, CIF, they say they are solution-focused if they have targets that they will do all in their power to deliver. It cannot be beyond the realm of possibility to do what has been done previously. We have no choice. We must deliver because we are failing everybody.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I am glad to be able to have an opportunity to speak on this cross-party Raise the Roof motion today.

Every day in my political life, particularly as a Deputy, is a day where I am dealing with people in housing distress but today is one of those days that I think most Members have experienced where the cases I am dealing with had that extra air of complexity or sadness or a dead end to them. That is the day I have had with the people with whom I have been dealing and I am glad this motion is being debated tonight.

I am also glad it is being debated on the same day that we had this showpiece debate late this afternoon which, quite frankly, did not show this Parliament in its best light considering the depth of this housing crisis. The Chamber was full for almost two hours. It was a breathtaking display of barracking, one-liners, jokes, heckles, arrogance and detachment. Anyone with whom I or many of us dealt today, in the past week or the last months, anyone on the housing list and anyone who is waiting for an offer letter to drop onto his or her letter-box floor but who will probably get a notice to quit before he or she gets an offer letter would say, were he or she watching this afternoon, that there is no combination of groups in that Parliament that will be able to resolve this housing crisis. This motion is timely in that it comes so quickly after that. It is a good motion. It is coming from a cross-party, cross-political NGO group that is speaking to the heart and the complexity of this housing crisis, which, too often, we do not get to the root of in this Chamber, and we have seen an element of it already in this debate this evening. It does a disservice to the people that we all purport to be representing.

The Minister has gone all in on Housing for All as his policy. Nearly two years into the term of this Government, at most there are three years left. At present, it is hard to see how Housing for All would be delivered for all. That is the reality. It seems to be housing for those who can afford it and profits for those who can build it. I am not seeing it. Deputy Mairéad Farrell said it earlier. Even six months ago or a year ago, if anyone came to one of my clinics, at least one would have a couple of options for them. Sometimes that option might be only to help people look through *daft.ie*, to telephone rental agencies or whatever the case may be. Now it seems those ways of helping are being diminished. With the Covid protections now unwound and with there being no rent freeze and no ban on evictions, we are seeing the notices to quit drop

at a rate that is quite frankly frightening. We are not building houses quick enough. We are not acquiring houses. They are not coming on. Whatever the method of supply, and we can argue over the method, they are not quick enough to meet the standstill target we have. That target is getting bigger and bigger every day with the rate of notices to quit.

The level of private rental accommodation available is minimal and the short-term rentals are soaking up a large number of homes in our cities and towns. I have yet to find any value in or any good about Airbnb as to why it exists. It is anti-worker. It is anti-standards. It is contrary to a fair housing system. These gig economy superpowers, such as Airbnb and Uber, are global behemoths with a substantial amount of resources. They do not build a house and in the case of Uber it does not own a car, but they undermine absolutely everything. It is the worst form of capitalism with a glossy progressive branding that is tricking the rich part of the world into believing that it is engaged in something that is somehow helpful because it might be saving a few bob. It is killing the rental market. Any hope we have of having supply for long-term rents is being absolutely undermined by the likes of Airbnb. There is not one reason I can think of that that company should be in existence.

The price of a home is moving further and further out of reach for multiple generations. I will never forget one of the first presentations I ever attended here from the trade union movement in the audiovisual room. A representative from the Mandate trade union said that 20 or 25 years ago someone who worked on the bakery counter in Superquinn who married someone who worked in the local shoe shop, if they worked and saved, and it was never easy, would be able to afford to buy a house. Now we know that if the baker in the local SuperValu is married to or in a relationship with a person who works in the shoe shop, all they could hope for is social housing and they would have to be 13 or 14 years on the list. The reality is that because the income limits have not changed, they may be 13 years on the list. We are all getting it now. They are so long on the list and they see it incrementally going up and up, then they are in the offer zone and, bang, they are asked for their income details. Two low-paid people in a couple might be on €43,000 and they are ticked off the list because they are over the income threshold. Those income thresholds have not changed in over a decade and they need to change to reflect the reality. We cannot trust the housing list when people are being knocked off for having low incomes which are above those income thresholds.

Rents have increased by 15% and we have heard the figures on homelessness, with 5,000 single people, 3,000 children and 1,366 families in homeless accommodation. During a cost-of-living crisis, the loopholes that exist in the rent pressure zones have allowed these funds to contribute to this problem by charging exorbitant rents of €2,140 per month for a one-bed apartment up to €5,220 a month for a three-bed apartment. When someone comes into my clinic and says they have found something for €1,800, and I find myself saying it is good value, it shows how crazy it is. That is where we are. We are not seeing anything ticked down in a structured manner. The Minister said that we have had commencements and supply and that people are going to build, but given the tragedy that is happening now, we are not seeing any evidence of it working. We are just seeing prices go up and up.

The next six months is going to see this crisis taking off to a whole other level. More than anything else, the struggle to find affordable accommodation is in part due to the fact the Government is refusing to regulate these cuckoo funds in recognition of their increased dominance in the housing market. We see it in every constituency, we know where they are, we know the developments and we can see them pushing out existing tenants who may be on legacy rents so they can get new tenants in at the market value as it exists right now.

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We know the power of the State when it acts. We know the State can introduce a rent freeze. It has done it before and it should not take a pandemic to do it. What the Minister is doing instead is spending €560 million on the help-to-buy scheme, which has helped some people but, as shown by the Oireachtas Parliamentary Budget Office, was not needed by a third of those who availed of it. The €450 million Croí Cónaithe scheme is essentially a slush fund for those who have squatted on prime development sites instead of developing them. We have handed over millions to these developers to build to their own timetable and to apportion out these schemes and these phases in order to continually push up the price. Anyone could set their clock by it - phase 1 will be expensive, phase 2 will be more expensive, then phase 3 and phase 4. That is how they do it and nothing the Minister has brought in is going to stop that.

Last September, the Labour Party brought forward a comprehensive renters rights Bill to limit the multiple excuses used to evict families and to enshrine long-term tenancies. We have seen no changes in that regard. The two words the Minister seems to most hate are “rent freeze”, which is a real, tangible measure that could help to reduce the burden of rent bills, along with a ban on evictions. The argument is beyond being made that they have to be brought in. We need urgent action on Traveller accommodation and the implementation of the Irish Refugee Council proposal on emergency accommodation for all refugees. In the budget, the Government can also show its willingness to tackle the rental crisis by increasing taxes on REITs, IREFs and the speculators. Again, none of us have any sense that is going to be done.

It is quite a depressing day all round to be bringing this debate here but it is much needed. We need to have a more sophisticated debate on housing. We need to put the people who are in housing distress first every time we are in the Dáil. As we come out of Covid, we are seeing those notices to quit fall like an avalanche on people’s doorsteps over the course of this blistering hot summer in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. This winter, when people are not able to afford heating, food or medicines, they will be in an even longer line outside the homeless offices of our local authorities all over the country. It is a shame that we are there but, based on my experience, that is exactly where we are.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I am happy to support this motion from the Raise the Roof coalition. It is useful that a coalition of unions, civil society and housing and homeless organisations has come together as part of this campaign. I agree with the previous Deputy that, as we all know, this is an incredibly serious issue that is having a profound and detrimental effect on people across Ireland. It requires from us, in terms of the debate and discussion we have, that we treat it with seriousness and that we do not engage in a war of words and spin because that is not helpful to anyone.

I am not clear from the comments of the Minister whether he thinks we need 20,000 affordable, social and cost rental homes. I am not clear on that.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** I did not say that.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I note the Minister does not like being interrupted by other people but he happily does it to me. I do not mind him interrupting but I am just pointing out that he takes umbrage when others do it, yet he does it to me all of the time. He can just reflect on that.

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** Sorry.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** We mentioned in the motion 20,000 social, affordable and cost

rental homes, not 20,000 social homes, but perhaps the Minister did not actually read it. It is not clear if the Minister thinks it is not possible to do that. I do not understand how the Minister feels it is possible to do 24,000 homes this year yet we could not have 20,000 of those as social, affordable and cost rental homes. If we have the capacity to build 24,000 homes, including many that will be owned by investment funds, how come we do not have the capacity to do that? Some of them will be high-end and high-rent. If we have the skills and the labour in Ireland to build 24,000 homes, how come we do not have the skills and the labour to ensure that 20,000 of those will be social, affordable and cost rental homes? It makes no sense whatsoever.

The issue with a lot of housing policy in Ireland is that there are far too many measures that are stimulating demand, pushing up prices and pushing up rents, and not nearly enough on the affordability side, and on the affordable supply side in particular. Long-term leases are doing that, HAP is doing that, the shared equity scheme is doing that and acquisitions are doing that because they buy out of a limited pool rather than putting enough resources into affordable supply. That is the issue.

I really wonder if the Minister is serious when he cites uptake in some of these schemes as proof that they are working. That should not be a sign of success. The fact we are in a crisis and a disaster situation, and that people are understandably going to whatever supports or schemes are in place, does not mean those schemes are a success or the best use of scarce resources. If that is how the Minister and the Government are measuring the success of their housing policy, we have another problem in housing because that is not the way it should be measured. The way the Government should be analysing this is by asking what is the effect of the different schemes we are doing and whether this is pushing up house prices, pushing up rents or increasing the supply of affordable homes. Those are the questions they should be asking, not whether people in a desperate situation, who are either renting or looking to buy, are availing of whatever schemes are made available. Of course, they will do that.

One of the things that we did not hear from the Minister in his comments, and that I was hoping we would hear because we need to hear it from the Minister and the Government, is what action they are going to take urgently and now to stop the absolute disaster of us reaching record levels of homelessness in the coming days. We need to hear what the Government is going to do about that now, today, urgently. It should be top of the list for all of us to be asking that question and we have not heard that. There needs to be immediate emergency action on that right now.

The Taoiseach, the Minister and other Ministers constantly make this claim that there is €4 billion in State capital expenditure on housing. It simply is not true and there is no such figure in State capital expenditure on housing. In fact, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage heckled and interrupted my party colleague, Deputy Catherine Murphy, when she referenced this earlier today. There is no €4 billion State capital expenditure on housing. That is a highly misleading claim. This year, less than €2.3 billion is being set aside by the Government for capital expenditure on housing, which is just over half the €4 billion to which it keeps referring as being the claimed expenditure. Simply including possible Land Development Agency, LDA, expenditure and loans to the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, issue to bring the total expenditure up to €4 billion is misleading. It is not the level of direct capital expenditure that was called for by the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. This is an issue that goes across the board and does not just apply to housing. There is a danger the Government will begin to believe its own spin in this regard. The more it does so, the further we will be from solutions.

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There are three tests that apply when assessing how we are doing on housing. First is the supply and availability of housing that is affordable, second is home ownership rates and third is the level of homelessness. On the first test, there were zero affordable purchase homes delivered last year, despite all the promises that were made. Just 65 cost rental homes were tenanted. We can contrast that with the thousands of apartments in the ownership of investment funds that were built to attract high-end rents. We can contrast it with the reports this week that Greystar, which already charges rents of between €2,140 and €5,220 per month in Dublin, is seeking double-digit rent increases. That is the reality of what has happened with much of the new housing supply that has come on stream. Rents have almost doubled over the past decade and we have had the third highest rent increases in the EU since 2010. Rents in Dublin are among the highest of any capital city in the EU.

Home ownership rates, as we know from information provided by the Parliamentary Budget Office, PBO, have collapsed among people of working age. We have had a report from the ESRI indicating that the number of 25- to 34-year-olds who own their own home has halved in the past 15 years. That is absolutely shocking. As people become older, poverty levels will increase substantially as they will not have the security of owning their own home. The Government talks about its support for home ownership and that is all fine. In fact, what is happening now is that home ownership levels are continuing to decline. Last year, the number of new-build homes that were available for individuals to buy plummeted to fewer than 6,000 individual homes.

There is a lack of urgency in the Government's response to the crisis. In 2017, Fine Gael in government promised to implement a tax on vacant homes to help to bring them back into use. It still has not been introduced. That should be done now; in fact, it is one of the measures we should be taking in the Dáil this week. We should forget about the rushed changes on planning that mean An Bord Pleanála cannot be held to account in the same way it currently can be. Why not bring in a vacant homes tax this week, especially given the rental crisis, the homelessness crisis and the Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures showing there were 35,000 rental homes, making up 20% of the total rental stock, lying empty on census night? If that tax were brought in as an emergency measure, it would go some way to helping the situation.

I do not think the Government grasps how serious the situation is. It knows there is an issue but it is not grasping the knock-on effects it is having across society. We now have parents withdrawing from the workforce because they cannot get childcare as their childcare providers are reducing capacity as a consequence of their staff being unable to find anywhere affordable to live. We are seeing the same effect in schools. There has been a massive impact on the hospitality industry, with businesses simply not opening or operating on reduced days and hours because they cannot get staff. There are huge knock-on impacts but we are not seeing an urgency from the Government to act to address them.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I am sharing time with Deputy Boyd Barrett. I see the Minister is leaving the Chamber.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** He is scared of Deputy Kenny.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I was about to let loose. I wonder whether the Minister has ever thought for one minute that the current housing policy and others that preceded it are and were wrong. I would like somebody on that side of the House to say, "You know what, I think we have got it wrong." I am not getting that sense and I do not think it will ever happen.

To deal with the housing crisis, we must look at what happened 20 years ago. There is a historical legacy of commodification and marketisation of homes. In fact, it is a basic need of human beings to have shelter. This discussion is like Groundhog Day because we are now in a situation where 10,000-plus people are in emergency accommodation. There is a crisis in regard to the provision of rental accommodation and affordable housing and those issues are only going to get worse. Several speakers alluded to the tsunami of notices to quit, with a huge number of people in line to be homeless come the autumn. Those figures are going to go north rather than south.

This situation is completely untenable and unacceptable. One factor relates to the operation of the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme in the rental market. HAP rates are nowhere near market rental rates. Even in the case of the homeless HAP scheme, the amount of money that is being given to private landlords is obscene. In many cases, they are charging up to €2,400 per month for a home. These people should be wearing balaclavas because they are robbing the State. Some of the homes are not worth €2,400 by any means.

This is both a historical legacy issue and a contemporary issue. It comes down to policy, choice and the decision to look at shelter as something that is all about the monetary value. This is not new. It has happened in Britain and elsewhere around the world, where speculators, or robbers, speculate on property. That is the situation in which many people find themselves. Homelessness and the housing crisis affect everybody at this stage. It is not the classical situation where it is just about the people who are homeless and living on the street. That is not the situation at the moment, if it ever was.

The most recent general election probably was the most important election for a generation. It sent a message to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, which have been ruling the country for the past 100 years, that people have had enough and are not going to take any more when it comes to public services, particularly housing, that are inadequate. It is the reason many people who voted for the Minister of State's party are now turning away from it. The housing crisis will be the key factor in the next general election, whenever it happens. If the Government does not address the issues we are talking about today, the parties in government will pay a heavy price. People do not forget the misery they have endured. Some have had to emigrate and others have had to go into emergency accommodation. It stays etched in people's minds that they have seen their children go into emergency accommodation. It is unacceptable that in such a wealthy country, more than 11,000 people have been allowed to end up homeless.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Minister suggested that some of us are just playing politics with this issue and we do not really want to see the housing crisis improved because, somehow, there is some political benefit to us from its persistence. I do not know whether he is just saying that to play politics or if he actually believes it. I say to him that it is absolute nonsense. I can tell him that I absolutely dread going into my clinic on a Monday and a Friday because of the misery I have to face when families and individuals come in, one after another, who find themselves in absolutely hopeless situations. I have lost count of how many of these situations I am dealing with, where over the next few weeks, a month, or couple of months, people are going to be made homeless because their landlords are selling up and there is nothing else for them. There are no council houses, no HAP properties available and now no emergency accommodation. There is not even emergency accommodation. As dreadful as that thought is, people are now scrambling for such emergency accommodation. It is utterly hopeless, and it gets worse.

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There are so many different aspects to how much worse this situation has got. Rents have gone up by more than 100% in the last decade and average rents in Dublin are now more than €2,000 a month. In my area in the past six months, average monthly rents have been €2,600. That is completely unaffordable for the vast majority of people. In the same period that this has happened, the number of people eligible for social housing support has dropped because the Government refuses to raise the income thresholds for social housing eligibility and support.

There are so many different things I could have asked the Minister, but he has run off. I will ask him again tomorrow, for about the 50th time, when he is going to raise the social housing income thresholds. He promised me on at least three occasions in this House that we would be told the answer to this question before the summer recess. We are now going on recess, however, and there has been no answer to the question. The result is that again this week, just as there was last week, the week before that and the weeks before that, families who have been on the housing waiting list for up to ten to 12 years, and 15 years and 20 years in many cases, will be taken off that list. All those years waiting will count for nothing. Not only will those people now never get a council house, they will not even be entitled to the HAP. If people are not on the housing list, then they cannot get HAP. Therefore, if people get a pay increase or a promotion and their income goes just a few quid over that threshold, then they are goosed. They will have no chance of being able to afford something. These are people who are working but who will have no chance of being able to buy, no chance of being able to pay these rents and will not now even be entitled to social housing support.

We were told that a report has been sitting on the Minister's desk since December 2021. Why has he not come into the House and told us what is in that review? Why? He promised us that he would do so. He has sat on that review since December and he has not brought that information into the House. Of course, however, we know the answer. This is a conscious strategy that has been pursued for five years to reduce the number of people eligible for social housing support. This is to reduce the numbers and to reduce the bill. This is what is going on.

Thankfully, the ESRI has quantified all this. In 2011, 47% of households were entitled to social housing support. This is now reduced to 33% as of 2019, and it is probably considerably lower now. The ESRI's figures only cover the period to 2019. Therefore, when rents are higher than ever before, when more and more people need help with the rent or social housing, fewer and fewer people are entitled to avail of those supports. It is a stealth cut of the nastiest kind and it is directly contributing to massive housing lists. This is why the Minister has run out. We do not get an answer to this question. I have asked the Taoiseach again where this report is. I know I am not going to get an answer from the Minister of State either.

If there is no other reason why I have no confidence in this Government, it is this: I was promised that we would have the review by now. I know what is going on. The Government wants to reduce eligibility for social housing. That is a fact. The Government wants to make everybody pray to the flipping market and to the same crowd who are building all these special housing developments, SHDs and build-to-rent apartments. Half of them, as we discovered from Killian Woods's report at the weekend, are in flipping tax havens, not paying tax and dodging tax and making a fortune out of the human misery in our rental crisis and the Government does not want to do anything about it.

I will conclude on this point. Apart from all the stuff in the context of this motion, which I obviously support, here is something simple that the Government could do now. Regarding all those SHDs, do not take 20%, take all of it. There is no justification for putting stuff on the

market now at these kinds of rental prices. Take every bit of it. We will be paying for it anyway with HAP. If we got those properties into public hands ourselves, however, then we might actually make a dent in the homelessness crisis and in the housing emergency we are facing.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I welcome this opportunity to discuss what is the most pressing issue for many families and young people. I heard many people talking tonight about what is wrong, what the problems are and what people are suffering. I come across these aspects in my constituency. Many people might think this is a city-based problem. In fact, it is experienced right across rural Ireland as well. Young people are not getting a chance to build their own houses or to get mortgages to buy houses. They are stuck in this bind. At the other end of this situation, people come into my office who have applied for social housing and have found that the thresholds are so low that they cannot get onto the ladder.

Taking Galway County Council as an example, the income threshold is lower in the county than in the city. People therefore try to get onto the city's local authority housing waiting list, but they must prove that they have a link to the area and all this kind of thing. Those people are going around doing paperwork without getting any place with it. It is very stressful. A woman contacted me today who has until 28 July before she must vacate her house because it is being sold. She has two children who are aged one and four. She is a single mother. She is in a bind and her only recourse is to go to the homeless services and God knows where she will end up from there.

When we come back to why involuntary landlords are selling houses or whatever, there is a problem in this regard. People may own a house they wish to sell. It might be their second house or they might have ended up with a house by default, perhaps by inheriting it or whatever. They may have been renting that house and now want to sell it for family reasons, etc. These things will happen. We need to find solutions to these kinds of problems. The basic problem is supply. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly undertook a survey where it was found that there were 44,500 vacant properties in its area. Those almost 45,000 vacant properties are there to be taken in and made use of for people to live in. Most of these vacant properties are in our towns and villages where the communities could do with additional people living in them.

I understand that the Minister may be bringing forward some sort of a grant scheme worth €30,000 per house for first-time buyers of second-hand properties or vacant properties. We in the Regional Group called for this measure in the last budget. We were led to believe that it would happen. It is beginning to happen now, almost a year later. One of the frustrations concerning housing is that decisions are slow to come and when they do come, another year has passed and the situation has worsened.

The biggest problem with new builds from the perspective of the local authorities is that we have a huge issue with trying to get projects to the stage where they can go to construction. I have no doubt but that the construction industry can build all the houses we need. We can use innovative techniques. We talk about modular homes and the use of precast and timber-framed elements. That is the easy part of it. It takes up to six years to get a project from inception to the stage where a building contractor is appointed to undertake the work. The building stage is the easiest. Until we face up to the fact that housing is an imperative issue of overriding public interest, take the planning process and bring in a fast-tracked approach to building social housing, we will still be talking about the housing supply issue in five years' time.

*10 o'clock*

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We need to look at the planning and procurement processes that are in place for public works. We need to look at the public spending code and set these things aside, because a plethora of appraisals and approvals are required throughout a process, which can hold up projects for months on end. I am bringing forward solutions. This is not a criticism. We need to act on this quickly if we are to increase the number of social houses being built. Above all, we must make sure that local authorities are properly resourced so that they can manage their housing stocks, turn around the vacant properties as fast as they can, and build houses quickly.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I welcome the work of the Raise the Roof campaign and I was delighted to attend its launch in Meath not so long ago.

From Phil Hogan, to Deputies Kelly and Coveney, Eoghan Murphy and now the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, we have been told that there is no overnight fix to the housing crisis we are in. However, it is now more than a decade since we first heard that excuse being used in the Chamber.

I have three constituency offices. We are inundated with housing issues. Like many Members in this Chamber, I have heard many horror stories in terms of the housing crisis that is engulfing so many families. Housing is in the worst state it has ever been in. I have heard the Government blame different factors for the housing crisis. I have heard it blame Covid for the lack of supply. Let us be honest, in the first quarter of 2021, Ireland was the only country in Europe that closed building sites. Ireland, which had the worst housing crisis in Europe, was the only country to shut down the building of homes for three months. No other political party mentioned that issue in the Chamber today.

During the earlier motion of confidence in the Government, the Minister of State's colleagues majored in the points that Opposition Members are refusing to bring solutions to the housing crisis to the table, which is grossly untrue. We in Aontú tabled a Bill that would end the tax advantages of real estate investment trusts, REITs, and reduce the competitive advantages they have when they compete against first-time buyers. We tabled a Bill that would end the ability of Airbnbs to function in towns and cities with a population of 10,000 for a period of three years. Overnight, this would increase the supply of long-term lets by thousands for families in the State. We have been urging the Government to get real when it comes to vacant property taxes. The Minister has refused to talk about such taxes for years. We have demanded that homes which remain vacant for long periods of time be taxed properly to get them back into use, and to ring-fence and invest that money into the vacant properties so that they are in good shape for families to use. Despite the urgency of all of that, house taxes are still referred to in the future tense by this Government.

We in Aontú urged the Government to use NAMA land to build thousands of social homes, but the Taoiseach refused to do it. He made the argument to me in the Chamber that building social homes would go against NAMA's mandate. He said that NAMA's job was to protect the taxpayer and that this was underpinned by legislation. First, the Government can change the legislation as well as NAMA's mandate so that it can build social homes. Second, more than 70,000 families are in receipt of rental accommodation scheme, RAS, payments and the housing assistance payment, HAP, in this State. The taxpayer is paying private landlords every month for the use of 70,000 homes. The Government is paying private landlords €1.3 billion every year for RAS and HAP when it could be using that money to build public and social housing. The Government is not protecting the taxpayer in any way in that regard.

Aontú set out a plan to increase of the number of apprentices. We proposed a vacant site tax that would actually work. The last vacant site tax that the Government brought in raised €29,000 in its final year. Never before has a tax cost more to draft than what it collected in a given year. It is absolutely incredible.

I carried out research into the level of vacant State buildings and land. I found that there are hundreds of State-owned buildings throughout the country and thousands of acres of Government land that are actually vacant while we are in a housing crisis. The HSE is the worst offender. It has 137 unused buildings or vacant land. Our analysis showed that the Thornton Hall site, which was bought by the Progressive Democrats to build a big prison a number years ago, is still being used to grow spuds because the Government has not got it together to use it for the community.

The Government has been boasting about full employment, but let us remember that under its economic model, many families with both parents working cannot afford to buy a house or rent a home in their area, and that is a fault with its economic model.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I am in the Dáil since 2016 and, since then, I do not know how many times we have spoken about housing. I often think that if a couple of dozen houses were built every time we spoke about housing, there would not be a housing crisis in the country but, sadly, there has been a lot of talk with nothing happening afterwards.

This motion is about Raise the Roof. I would like to talk about putting in foundations before we even get to the roof and that is a sad situation in which we find ourselves. Many young people who are trying to start off in life do not want a social house. They only want to borrow a bit of money so they can build a home for themselves and their family. However, every obstacle has been put in their way and every county development plan that comes along puts another obstacle in front of them. It is sad to think that many young people end up on the social housing waiting list, a list which the Government has promised to shorten, for as long as I have been a Deputy, but it has gotten longer. We have a massive crisis in building houses, with young people trying to get planning permission for their homes.

I also mention sites that are in towns and villages throughout the country. I always believed in having a proper rural regeneration programme but the Government would not even consider providing an incentive to people, who are struggling to get homes in the cities, to move to rural Ireland. They are good people who deserve a home. Sadly, that was always refused. There is not a great incentive at present. There are great communities in west Cork, including Ballinaspittle, Ballinadee, Ballydehob, Schull, Ardgroom, Eyerics and Drimoleague, fine places that have great community centres, schools and sports clubs that could easily cater for all the people. Unfortunately, there is no great incentive to move people into the communities that are badly in need of new life.

We have a crisis in Clonakilty, west Cork, where no building can take place because there is a lack of water. It is a scandalous situation for one of the biggest towns in west Cork to find itself in. We need to raise HAP funding as well as the wage limits for social housing because many people do not qualify.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** I compliment the umbrella group, Raise the Roof, comprised of trade unions, housing and homeless charities, women and Traveller groups, and others, for the excellent work it does on a continuous basis.

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I want to speak about the elephant in the room. I do not want this to be twisted or for anyone to say that I am saying anything wrong. The elephant in room is the very sad and tragic situation facing Ukrainian people coming to this country. The Ceann Comhairle visited Ukraine and will appreciate what I am saying. I do not mean to disparage the people coming here. They are coming here out of want and necessity, and it is our duty to help them if we can. We always help people to the best of our ability. Just because I want to talk about it, does not mean anything bad. What it is doing is putting a massive strain on services that were already under pressure. Thousands of people are after coming here. I am very glad that they have found refuge and are safe and that there are no bombs coming down upon them and their children. That does mean, however, that there is unreal pressure out there at the moment. I have seen people come into clinics who are going into homelessness and into homeless shelters and centres, where they do not want to go but where they have to go. There is a massive lack of availability of housing now, and the fact that we have an uncapped number of people coming here because of the war in Ukraine is, of course, compounding the problem. What I have always stated - and it is in the interest of the people we have - is that we should have a serious debate on capping the numbers. If you cannot help people properly and adequately, you should let them know that. It would be fine if we had endless accommodation. Then I would suggest that as many as possible come here. Why tell people to come here, however, if we will not be able to cater for them? So many people do not have places to go to now that it is a major worry. We have people sleeping in cars who would never have had to do so before. It is just a worry and a problem, and we must have a debate on it.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank Raise the Roof and compliment it on its efforts. I hope I can add to its call to help. The Government's focus at present seems to be totally on Airbnb. The Government thinks that will sort out the issue. There are people who want to let their houses short-term and they will not let them long-term. The Government cannot make them do otherwise with any law it brings in. The fact that in our local authority last October we had 162 vacant houses, many of which have not been brought up to the standard at which they can be allocated, says something. The Government needs to do something about that. It needs to give the local authorities adequate funding to bring such houses back to the standard it is asking the local authorities to bring them to. Today I was told about a Kerry local authority house still vacant after four and a half years in the heart of Killarney, with briars growing in around the windows and the doors. I got a call about it because there are now vermin perching there and threatening the people next door. Householders and landlords want to get out of letting properties. Why? That is the big question. There is a reason, and the Government has to suss it out because many of them are getting out. The Government cannot make them stay because they have problems. As for planning permission in the Killarney electoral area, where people want to build homes themselves and put a roof over their heads, half the total area of the electoral area is sterilised on one side by the national park, where people cannot build, coming out onto the national secondary roads from Rathmore to Killarney to Killorglin, and from the county bounds into Killarney. We are waiting for a bypass for Killarney. All that land is sterilised from Farranfore through the heart of Kilcummin. People just cannot get planning permission to put a roof over their heads.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I thank Raise the Roof for its work, but before you can do any work on raising the roof you have to have infrastructure. I have been in construction all my life and I know the importance of having infrastructure in an area. I will use the example of Limerick and the statistics I have. For 38 years Askeaton has been waiting for the Government, the previous Government and the governments before it to put infrastructure in place to

stop raw sewage going into the river. Dromcollogher, the Deel and Hospital have been polluted by the local authority. I am talking about areas such as Glin and Foynes. Does the Minister of State want me to keep talking about all the pollution that has been done to our county because of lack of infrastructure? We have been waiting for infrastructure. What does infrastructure mean? I will tell the Minister of State. If you have proper infrastructure, including sewerage and water, you have houses. If you have houses, you have sustainable business, sustainable sports clubs such as GAA and soccer clubs, and sustainable schools. That is what infrastructure means. However, this Government, the Minister of State's partners in the Government and the previous Government have not invested in infrastructure in County Limerick. We have had a junior Minister in Limerick County for 15 years, with nothing returned for Limerick. We have another junior Minister who celebrated ten years recently, with nothing returned for the area he is elected for. That is not a good record. They have been in power, in positions where they could deliver infrastructure for County Limerick, and they have not done so and they expect people to keep voting for them. People in County Limerick are sick of it. We want our families to return to our county. We want infrastructure that basic humanity needs and that any person should have. We would be quite sustainable by ourselves if we had infrastructure, but the Government cannot see that infrastructure in areas means sustainability in all of Ireland. All it has done is invest in city projects, with county junior Ministers backing the Government all the way.

**Deputy Peter Burke:** The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, must have been hard on Deputy O'Donoghue this morning, was he?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** He did not even speak to me this morning. For the record, he ran out of here today when I was speaking.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, let us not get into personalised-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Is that all the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, can do? Laugh and giggle?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, let us not get into personal attacks on people.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** They are not personal attacks.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank Sinn Féin and Raise the Roof for this comprehensive motion. It sets out the facts and then states that we need a radical shift in housing policy. That is exactly what we need because it is the policy of this Government and previous governments that has led to the emergency in which we find ourselves, which the Government has not declared an emergency. In the motion there are 14 points, and at the end it refers to the holding of a referendum to enshrine a right to housing in the Constitution. That is the most basic step we should take. I have said repeatedly that without security of tenure and without a home, people - residents and citizens - cannot participate actively in democracy. More than ever, we need security of tenure and homes.

The Minister has left. I know he is busy. He put up a spirited defence but what he tried to defend is indefensible. We are now on our fourth Minister since I was first elected here in February 2016. We have had Deputy Alan Kelly, followed by Deputy Simon Coveney and Eoghan Murphy, and now Deputy Darragh O'Brien. What has not changed at all, other than the documents and the glossy covers, is the policy. We keep going with the policy that the market will provide and, when it does not, we will use taxpayers to make it provide at enormous cost, with absence of security of tenure and a dire emergency.

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I am so tired listening to my own voice on this that I will quote from documents. When the Minister was here he accused the Opposition of being against homeownership and said that his policy is to encourage homeownership with various schemes, which have been found utterly defective. My time is limited but I will quote from an ESRI report published in July 2022. It is an interesting document. It notes that there has been “a notable decline in homeownership and a rise in the proportion of households in private rental accommodation”. It goes on to state that “Ireland has experienced a marked drop in homeownership rates” and goes on to give the specific figures, which are substantial. That fully contradicts the Minister’s statement that his policies have led to homeownership. That is clearly not the case. In the report there is a very interesting statistic. The authors talk about poverty later in life among people who do not own their own homes and the increase in such poverty, particularly among women. The report points out research that was carried out across ten member states, including Ireland, which found that neither generous pensions nor high ownership rates had the strongest poverty-reducing potential. What had? Lower poverty rates in older age were most strongly associated with the provision of social housing for older people. That is an interesting fact in the middle of the research.

Let me look again at the Simon Community report because I have a little more time than I had earlier. Directly consequent to the Government’s policies, Galway city has absolutely no properties available. There are very few for rent and absolutely none in the county or city within the HAP criteria. Even if you allow for the increase in the discretion, there is nothing available. The study was carried out in June over three days. It is called a snapshot. It is the Simon Community’s 37th report. Worse the situation has got. The Simon Community, which has no axe to grind, is setting out the facts and figures for Galway city and county and the rest of the country. Those are the facts, so any sensible, intelligent Government — maybe these do not go together; I do not know — would say the policies are not working and will have to be reconsidered. That is not happening.

A point was made on NAMA. NAMA has been a huge part of the problem considering the remit it was given. It was praised for carrying out that remit, which has artificially, along with HAP and all the payments enshrined in law by the Labour Party and Fine Gael in 2014, but particularly the HAP, ensured the prices of houses and rent would remain astronomically high and simply unaffordable to everyone. The latest is that the young teachers trying to get jobs in Dublin cannot stay in Dublin because there is no accommodation, yet we persist with making silly personal comments across the floor as if we were standing here just for nothing. All the time, we are doing what we do on behalf of our constituents on the ground, yet we cannot even get a meeting with the local authority; we have to do it by email.

**Deputy Joan Collins:** Recently, both the Minister responsible for housing and the Taoiseach claimed progress was being made in the Government’s so-called Housing for All plan. This claim flies in the face of reality given the actual statistics concerning any area covered by the plan. We have a new homelessness emergency on top of the existing crisis. It is a crisis within a crisis, which was partly abated by the ban on evictions during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The number of homeless families grew by 11% in 2021 over 2020. In Dublin last year, 30 families became homeless every week. A total of 786 children have been in emergency accommodation for over a year, affecting their schooling and mental health.

I have raised this issue already and I am sure the Ceann Comhairle is sick and tired of me raising it in the past couple of weeks. Last year, 3,038 households renting were served a notice to quit, mainly because the landlords were selling up. I cannot understand why the Government

is not alarmed by it. It was the highest number of evictions of tenants in a single year since the foundation of the State. The trend has continued unabated into this year, but now we know there is another problem on top of it because the family support unit, in response to queries from our office, has said it is at capacity. There is no room in the hubs; they are full. No rooms can be got in hotels or B&Bs. Now we have the quarterly report of the Simon Community, Locked Out of the Market, which states there is not a single property to rent for families with one child identified anywhere in the country based on the standard HAP rate, and just 12 were available on the basis of the discretionary rate. There are now officially 10,335 people nationally in emergency accommodation. In May, there were 7,200 adults and 3,000 children. In October 2019, there was a record number in emergency accommodation: 10,500. The Simon Community has said the number will be surpassed in the next two months while we are on holidays. There will be no opportunity for the Government to intervene if this becomes worse over the next eight weeks.

This is not progress by any stretch of the imagination, as far as I am concerned. As stated in the Private Members' motion, there is an urgent need to reinstate the eviction ban and introduce rent freezes. I appeal to the Government to achieve this because, in the next eight weeks, families will be in a worse situation. Whatever hope there would otherwise be of getting them somewhere, there will be none. Therefore, there is an urgent situation developing.

On every front, Housing for All is failing to meet the targets set. A target of 33,000 new builds was not met in 2021, 2020 or 2019 and is unlikely to be met this year. Last year, there were 20,433 new units built. That is 12,000 short of the target. An important question is: How many of these 20,000 were actually affordable? Not one affordable one was actually built. Just 65 cost-rental units were actually built. Construction of new apartments was up 30%, to just over 5,000, but they were mainly built to rent and were extremely unaffordable. Two-bed apartments were being advertised in Dublin at €2,250 per month. That is 72% of take-home pay on an income of €50,000, which a large majority of working people do not earn.

With regard to so-called social and public housing, only 3,144 units were built out of a target of 9,000. Even then, 2,000 or so of these were not actually built by local authorities or approved housing bodies; they were given over by private developers under Part V agreements.

In the private rental sector, rents are continuing to rise. They were up by over 8% in 2021. The rent caps are not working as new or refurbished properties are exempted. One could say the Government's rent caps were designed not to work. Despite Government claims of progress on security of tenure, as long as landlords can evict on the basis of selling or refurbishing, or of a family member moving in, there will be no security of tenure for renters. We now have the Minister asking Departments to look at land in their possession with a view to getting permission to build and then selling it on to developers in the continuation of a housing policy that has failed miserably through its reliance on the private sector. I fully support the motion from Raise the Roof and thank Sinn Féin and the others that have signed it.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate while I was here. As already indicated by my colleague Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the Minister, much is being done by the Government to address housing supply and homelessness. I assure the Deputies in the House of the work done to date. The Government is committed, through Housing for All, to over 200 actions designed to tackle housing issues. Increasing the supply of housing is at the centre of Housing for All. This includes major direct investment in social and affordable housing, reforms to ensure the availability of land, measures to support the viability of development

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and ensuring sufficient investment and capacity to support housing construction.

Housing for All is backed by a €20 billion State investment in housing to the end of 2026. It gives certainty and stability to those who want to finance and build homes. Addressing homelessness continues to be an absolute priority of the Government and my Department in particular. Resources and funding are not obstacles to the urgent efforts required. There is a €194 million allocation for homelessness services alone in 2022. This funding ensures that local authorities can continue to provide emergency accommodation and other essential support services to households experiencing homelessness, while also ensuring that pathways out of homelessness for those households in emergency accommodation are secured as quickly as possible.

The Government is also committed to the reduction and prevention of homelessness and last year signed the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness. Many of the actions in Housing for All directly address this, including the expansion of Housing First, the development of a youth homelessness strategy and the establishment of the national homelessness action committee. To secure more tenancies and prevent new entries into homelessness, thus relieving pressure on emergency accommodation, we have increased the HAP discretion rate to 35% and allowed local authorities to apply a couple rate to single-person households where required. The proposed measures to strengthen the regulation of the short-term lettings sector, which have been approved by the Cabinet this week, will lead to a return of much-needed properties to the long-term rental market, further preventing entry to and increasing exits from homelessness.

The first home shared equity scheme is open for applications to support 8,000 affordable purchases by 2025, primarily for first-time buyers. The first home scheme will help applicants exit the rental market and achieve the stability and security of affordable new homes through the use of an equity share model within the designated regional price ceilings to target starter homes. The Croí Conaithe city scheme will bring apartments forward for development, delivering much needed additional supply in cities. We believe that demand for owner occupation of apartments in these city locations is strong but cannot be met because of the viability gap. We have been pragmatic in recognising the barrier to apartment construction that the viability gap presents and have worked to bridge it and kick-start the construction of much-needed apartment schemes. These will provide much-needed homes as well as facilitate compact growth and create vibrant livable communities in our largest cities. Meanwhile the Croí Cónaithe town scheme will support regeneration in our towns and villages, with further details on the scheme to be announced later this week.

It has been more than a decade since State-led affordable homes have been built. Building new social, affordable and market supplied housing is key. Adding to the supply of housing is at the very heart of our Housing for All strategy. We are pressing ahead with delivering new affordable housing to meet the clearly identified need. A total of 234 cost-rental homes had been tenanted as of the end of June. A total of 65 were delivered in 2021 and a further 169 have been tenanted so far this year. The development of the cost-rental sector from a concept to an on-the-ground reality is a huge step forward. We intend to scale up this tenure type to ensure we provide tenants with secure affordable options.

The LDA is working to deliver on its social and affordable housing mandate. The contractor has been appointed for the development of 597 new cost-rental affordable purchase and social homes at Shanganagh, County Dublin, with work on site to commence in September. Work will

also start at St. Kevin's site in Cork this year. Planning permission has also been applied for in respect of four other sites which are expected to yield close to 2,300 units.

Vacancy is being addressed through a number of measures, including the rural regeneration and development fund, the introduction of a vacant property tax, the reforming of the fair deal scheme and expansion of the voids programme. Tenants are being supported through the extension of notice of termination periods, the introduction of tenancies of unlimited duration, the requirement for landlords to inform the Residential Tenancies Board when serving a notice of termination and the capping of rent increases at a maximum of 2% in rent pressure zones. Actions on housing for older people, those with a disability and Traveller accommodation, including sectoral specific plans such as the national housing strategy for disabled people 2022 to 2027, are being progressed by means of pathway 2 of Housing for All.

Indicators show the Government's 2022 housing targets will be met, with more than 22,000 new homes completed in the 12 months to the end of March, increases in commencement notices month on month and residential planning permission applications increasing by more than 22% over a 12-month period. The fourth progress report for Housing for All will be published this week and reflects the significant progress that has been made towards overall reform of the housing system and delivery of measures to accelerate the supply of homes in the short to medium term.

As Deputies and campaigners know, homelessness is a very complex issue in which casual factors and family circumstances vary considerably, as do the type of responses that are needed. Homelessness is interrelated with other areas in the housing system and with broader social and healthcare policies and service delivery. A whole-of-government approach is required when dealing with this huge challenge. Housing for All is this approach, and we will continue to work to house everyone. For those who have left homelessness, we must work to ensure that, where needed, families and individuals are supported to sustain their tenancies. This is important work that needs to continue. We must also ensure that families and individuals remain in their homes and do not re-enter homelessness. All of these supports are essential to tackle homelessness. If we work together in co-operation and collaboration we can reverse the trend of rising homelessness. I thank all of the organisations involved in helping those at risk of homelessness. We will all work together to continue to drive our actions in Housing for All, which will be critical to the success of the strategy.

The issue of infrastructure has been raised in the debate. Irish Water is doing significant work. A critical point on infrastructure is that it takes significant capital funds to unlock it. We know that Irish Water competes for funding with various Departments, including those responsible for transport, health and education. As I travel throughout the country I see the demand is great. There are sites that were environmental flash points where wastewater was getting into our water courses. These had to be worked on urgently. There are also remediation schemes throughout the 31 local authority areas. Unfortunately, at the height of the Celtic tiger era, developments failed and remediation schemes had to be established. There is significant demand in rural towns and villages throughout the country for the infrastructure to unlock the development of homes and increase the capacity. We are working hard to do this but it will take time because the call to do so is significant.

People have to be realistic about the funding streams and the revenue raised to deliver these actions and the competing interests. I acknowledge that Deputies have mentioned dealing with the public in their clinics. I acknowledge it is very challenging. It is very difficult. I meet con-

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stituents at clinics on a weekly basis and I try to assist them with housing options. As I have said in the House in recent months, there is significant hope given the increase in commencement notices, which are above 30,000. This is strong evidence of builders on site delivering homes. I can see it in my community as I look around. There are four or five significant large-scale sites. They will assist in providing secure tenancies for all our citizens. This is what collectively all of us in the House are trying to achieve.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** It is important to see the support this motion has from many Opposition Members. It relates to housing, which has been one of the main political issues of this Dáil. It is appropriate that we table this comprehensive motion in the last week of the term, when the Government's targets are not sufficient to meet the housing disaster ahead of us. This is an issue that affects every constituency in Ireland. In County Wexford alone the latest house prices and rent prices have increased by 14% on what they were this time last year. The trend is putting hard-working people in the impossible position of never owning permanent homes.

People are one paycheck, one price hike or one notice to quit away from being back in their parents' box rooms or, in the worst scenario, on the streets. Every day I receive emails and phone calls from constituents looking for affordable places to rent, affordable housing or social housing. They are just not there. It breaks my heart to know that what we can do is limited and that the Government's policy will ensure these issues will continue.

One of the most difficult aspects of the housing disaster is children and homelessness. There are 5,054 single people, 3,028 children and 1,366 families who are homeless as we speak. Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have health problems, go hungry, experience development delays and have higher rates of depression, anxiety and behaviour disorders than other children. These children can spend three years or more in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. Other children are in direct provision centres for ten years or more. These are our most vulnerable children and the Government is fully aware of these facts. It is time to sink or swim and support the Raise the Roof campaign led by the trade union movement, housing rights activists and all those young hard-working citizens who are brushed aside from owning their own homes by vulture funds and the wolves of the stock market. The budget must be used to deliver a major shift in housing policy. It must focus on affordable homes and increase direct capital to deliver at least 20,000 social and affordable homes, including 4,000 cost-rental homes. The Minister must not fail another young generation.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I do not believe that people fleeing war and savagery are responsible for people sleeping in cars.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** That was mentioned earlier. It has been happening for years in this city. There are plenty of houses but unfortunately they are in the wrong hands and they are being used for the wrong purposes. Child homelessness is endemic once again. There are more than 3,000 children without a place to call home. This is the official number. We do not know how many are sharing box rooms or sitting rooms at night, with their parents, in homes of other family members, or just staying with mammy's or daddy's friends.

This Government has been in power for two years. Fine Gael has been in power for 11 long years. Under the combined rule of these parties, rents, house prices and homelessness have all skyrocketed. None of this is by accident. It was not always the way, but Fine Gael and Fianna

Fáil are wedded to the idea that private development is the only path forward. The ideal of the State providing housing does not gel with their world view. The result is 3,000 homeless children.

They are even warning now of a housing crisis for pensioners on the horizon. The Government reacted with shock and surprise, but what did it expect when home ownership or housing stability is just a pipe dream for whole generations of Irish people? More than 80,000 vacant homes have been identified in the census. Think of the impact we could make on homelessness figures if even 10% of those could be brought back on stream. However, the Minister for Finance has fought tooth and nail against bringing in an effective vacant property tax and we have a Government that is best friends with the speculator and developer, while children go without a roof over their heads.

Most of the solutions coming from Government have caused more damage. The so-called help-to-buy and shared equity schemes only served to pump more money into an already broken system, raise house prices further and create a system where only investing firms can afford to swoop in and Hoover up properties, while workers and families give up the dream of ever owning their own home.

Budget 2023 must deliver a radical shift in housing policy, as demanded by the Raise the Roof, homes-for-all campaign. We have to tackle the speculative investment in land and land hoarding. We must end outrageous tax reliefs on rents and capital gains for institutional cuckoo and vulture funds and there should be a referendum to enshrine the right to housing in the Constitution.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. The problem is that there is a void at the very heart of the Government's housing plan, which is the lack of an ambitious public housing delivery programme, based on the level of need that is out there. Even if the Government meets its social and affordable housing targets, which I do not believe it will, it will come nowhere close to meeting existing needs, let alone growing, emerging and future needs.

The reason I do not believe the Government will meet its targets is that of the 9,000 newly built social homes that were to be delivered this year, just over 600 were delivered in quarter 1. That is roughly the same as the same quarter last year, when there was lockdown. Even the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, started to use the figure of 8,000, today, rather than 9,000. Maybe he is gently breaking the news to us that the targets will be missed.

The Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, made reference to the cost-rental targets. Some 169 have been delivered to date this year, of a very low target of 700. Clearly, it will be a challenge to even meet the 700 by year's end. Some 700 is nowhere near enough. With regard to the affordable purchase side, the target is 450 to 500 and none have yet been purchased. Some are close, but they are in the tens, not in the hundreds.

That is why this motion centres around the need for a minimum of 20,000 social, affordable rental and affordable purchase social homes. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, asked where the homes would come from. Of course, if he had read the motion, he would have gotten some indication. We have tens of thousands of vacant homes. If local authorities were given a dedicated financing stream to purchase those properties, up front, for social or affordable use, we could turn many of those around.

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Increasing Part V, not just for land bought from this year, but for planning permissions on land that had been bought previously, would deliver more social and affordable homes. With 90,000 planning permissions out there and a nervousness among the private sector, because of construction sector inflation for starts next year and the year after, a more assertive turnkey programme for mixed-tenure, social, affordable, rental and affordable purchase estates could combine to yield a far greater output. The money and planning permissions are there. What is lacking is the political will. We also need urgent action for renters. Rents cannot continue to rise at the rate which they are currently rising. Renters need the crucial relief of a three-year ban on rent increases, as well as putting one month's rent back in their pocket.

However, this motion also talks about a number of other issues, some of which are the direct responsibility of the Minister of State. We still do not have enough urgency with the implementation of the 32 recommendations of the expert group on Traveller accommodation. I know many people are doing considerable work, but the outcome is key. When we look at what is happening throughout the State, we are still seeing many local authorities not spending their Traveller accommodation budgets, or spending it on anything other than the delivery of new, culturally appropriate accommodation. The acceleration of the implementation of that report is key and, in particular, the recommendations around planning and land.

I have to say I fundamentally disagree with the Rural Independent Group. We are a rich country and we have many properties. We can meet the needs of our own homeless community, Ukrainian refugees and everybody in between. It is wrong, no matter how politely it is presented, to suggest that providing refuge for people fleeing war is in any way exacerbating our housing crisis. It is not. I urge the Government to take on board the Irish Refugee Council's proposal for the access of holiday homes offer those property owners a licence agreement, 12-month legal security and a small administrative payment. Our getting 5% or 10% of the 60,000 holiday homes would take considerable pressure off hotels, while providing people fleeing Russia's unjustified war in Ukraine with better-quality accommodation. That is something the Government has yet to do and I urge it to do so.

We need a new accommodation strategy for students. The existing strategy had a 20,000-bed shortfall at the end of the plan and the reliance on the private rental sector to meet student accommodation need, given the crisis in that sector, will no longer be possible. More needs to be done.

There is a problem with respect to so-called help to buy, the shared equity loan scheme and Croí Cónaithe. We know from the recent Parliamentary Budget Office report that one third of the help-to-buy scheme went to people who already had a deposit and a sufficient mortgage to buy a home. That is €200 million. According to figures from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, that could have delivered 1,000 new-build social homes. We have 1,300 homeless families. Why would we give €200 million to people who had a deposit and a mortgage, when that money could have been used to build or buy homes for families in emergency accommodation? That makes no sense, regardless of the inflationary impact of those demand-side schemes and the additional debt, particularly, that would be carried by the equity portion of the shared equity scheme.

There are a considerable number of positive solutions in this motion, but if Government does not listen and change tack, we will be here in six, 12 or 24 months, with an ever-deepening housing crisis and a Government using the same speeches to justify the same failed policies, with the same failed results. It is time to raise the roof and change policy.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 80(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 13 July 2022.

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

### **Health Services Staff**

81. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of the pandemic bonus payment and special leave with pay for frontline healthcare workers with long-Covid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37351/22]

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The first question is to afford the Minister for Health an opportunity to outline the status of the pandemic bonus payment, how the payment of the bonus is progressing for all healthcare workers who are entitled to it and to outline the status of the special leave with pay for front-line healthcare workers with long Covid and, more importantly, what long-term payment will be put in place.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As of last Friday, approximately 90,000 eligible HSE and section 38 staff have received the Covid-19 pandemic recognition payment. We estimate that is approximately nine in every ten people who are eligible for the payment, as public sector healthcare or section 38 staff. This payment recognises the extraordinary contribution and efforts made during the pandemic by our healthcare workers. Roll-out of the payment continues to be prioritised across all services, and should be completed within the coming weeks.

Officials are working to ensure payments to eligible non-HSE, non-section 38 employees are rolled out. This will take time for several reasons, as I am sure the Deputy appreciates. One such reason is these employees are not normally paid by the public health service. Another is that we must avoid duplicate payments. For example, we may have somebody who is working as a healthcare professional in one of our hospitals and who has been paid but who also works for another organisation. We want to avoid that duplication. As I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, there are very many organisations to be covered in this wider group. I very am keen that all efforts are made to pay these eligible staff as quickly as possible. To clarify, the comment about the “coming weeks” is with regard to the HSE and the section 38 staff. There are other staff there who it will take a bit more time to pay but I have no doubt if we were making payments in ways that were not verified, the Deputy would quite rightly be raising the question of the proper allocation of public resources.

I am happy to come back on the second issue the Deputy raised in the next round.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I am fair-minded when I come at this because I understand we must ensure we get it right and the payment is made appropriately but I think the Minister would also accept this was a concept first mooted 18 months ago. The Government started the year announcing the payment yet six months later, here we are with many workers still not having received it. I am referring to section 39 workers, contract workers and workers working in private nursing homes. In fact, I do not know if some of the lowest-paid workers, including cleaners, security staff and catering staff are being paid but we are being inundated all the time

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on the status of that, as I am sure Government public representatives are too.

When the Minister comes back on the second round he might be able to outline to us why it is the case the special leave with pay payment, that was changed on foot of an instruction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to now only cover the period of isolation when a front-line healthcare worker is out with Covid, no longer includes long Covid. When will the Minister put in place a permanent solution to that?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform introduced the temporary special leave with pay scheme for Covid at the start of the pandemic. It was there to assist in preventing Covid spread in workplaces. Since 1 July this pay continues to cover Covid-related illnesses for the duration of the self-isolation period. Any period of illness extending beyond the isolation period is treated as ordinary sick leave. A special scheme specific to the health sector is merited in recognition of the requirement on staff to work on site through the most challenging phases of the pandemic and where they were clinically exposed or in a clinically-exposed Covid-19 environment. There are ongoing discussions between the representative unions and the Departments of Health and Public Expenditure and Reform. My understanding is, and I want to acknowledge, that not everything that has been asked for has been included. However, critically, what was sought first and foremost was an extension to the scheme and it has now been extended for a full year.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The Minister will be aware that when he attended a conference organised by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, he made a clear commitment there would be no cliff edge and that the payment would not simply end without an alternative in place. That is precisely what happened. I was in contact with the INMO today to find out whether there were any changes to the special leave with pay payment for front-line workers with Covid. There have not been, so at the moment there is no support. Of course the Minister can talk about the merit of a scheme but we have similar schemes in place for, for example, front-line workers who contract MRSA, or in the past contracted TB, or blood-spread illnesses and a whole range of different risks front-line workers must take when they go into work. Covid is an occupational hazard and there is obviously an additional risk for those on the front-line, so it is not good enough that cliff edge has come and workers with long Covid have gone over it and are now entitled to no payment because the Minister simply did not extend that option to them.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. The first ask made was that the scheme be extended and it was something I committed to advocating for. It is not a Department of Health scheme but it is something I committed to and we have secured an extension for a year, and that is very welcome. Any employee who is eligible for the payment receives his or her full rate of basic pay. Such employees receive the fixed allowance and, if eligible, they receive-----

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Not if they have long Covid.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----premium payments as well. The Deputy has raised various issues on which I am in conversations with the Department of Health and on which the officials are talking to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I again acknowledge that not everything the representative bodies have sought is included. There is an ongoing conversation but critically, what was important was we got the scheme extended and that has been secured.

## **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

82. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if he acknowledges that the medical cannabis access programme, MCAP, is not fulfilling its potential given that only 12 persons have been registered on the MCAP, the limitations to date and the programme's upcoming clinical review. [38141/22]

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** My question relates to a report commissioned five years ago, namely, Cannabis for Medical Use - A Scientific Review, which was commissioned from the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA. One of the main recommendations was an access programme. That was five years ago. The programme has been extremely restrictive and has omitted many people who could benefit from medical cannabis. I want to get the Minister's views on the programme itself.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy and acknowledge his ongoing advocacy work on this area and indeed on the MCAP. The programme was initiated following a ministerially commissioned expert report some time back on cannabis for medical use. Access to cannabis for medical purposes for the treatment of three specified conditions was the recommendation, when all other treatments had failed. The programme commenced in July 2021 and I was very happy to initiate that. It is operated by the HSE. There have been some initial issues with availability of products and I am happy to come back to that. Most issues have now been resolved and one additional product will be available in the coming weeks.

We must recognise there are of course limitations to the programme. Products are not authorised medicines and assurances regarding the safety, quality and effectiveness are not the same as they would be for an authorised medicine. The required structures have been put in place to function as expected for the programme to function as expected. However, it is a clinical decision whether to prescribe these products. Currently 20 patients out of 22 applicants have been accepted onto the programme. In parallel there are 40 patients assessing cannabis for medicinal use through the ministerial licence scheme.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I think the Minister will agree with me the policy of a ministerial licence was from the outset overly bureaucratic and very arduous for parents. Many parents had to fight tooth and nail to get access for their children. I have always found it strange that with the more than 40 people who have ministerial licence, there is no joined-up thinking. There is no research done or joined-up thinking. The access programme gives that kind of joined-up thinking. Twenty people is a very small number to be benefiting from medical cannabis. If we look at the Danish medical cannabis programme, which I will allude to in the next part, it has been broadened out with more conditions. The clinical review is very important.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. I think the question he is posing is whether we can extend the programme to different conditions. As we were discussing, the original report recommended its use for three conditions once other treatments were no longer deemed viable. The question is whether we can broaden that. The Department of Health has now commissioned an evidence review. This is examining the efficacy and the safety of the cannabis-based treatments for a wider range of conditions. When that is completed a clinical group is going to be convened to assess the evidence and provide guidance to the Government on any potential amendments to that list. That is something that would potentially widen access. As I was saying to the Deputy, two products are currently available and there is a third product, Tilray, that will be available shortly. I am aware there are some clinicians who have been waiting

for that specific product for their patients.

*11 o'clock*

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** If the programme is not broadened in its conditions, I do not see it going anywhere for medical and commercial reasons. The Danish medical cannabis access programme has been open since 2018 and 2,500 patients have got medical cannabis products via prescription. Some of the conditions it is being prescribed for are not in the medical access programme here. One particular example of that is neuropathic pain. The evidence around the effect of cannabis on neuropathic pain is very good. Access programmes throughout the world allow cannabis for the treatment of chronic pain or neuropathic pain. Chronic pain is a very broad term. The omission of chronic pain in the initial report was very controversial. A whole host of people could benefit from medical cannabis, particularly for neuropathic pain.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Let us see what the research comes back with. I acknowledge the Deputy's position and I know there are others here and around the world who share his view. I want to see what the evidence comes back with and we can then look at clinical recommendations about expanding the conditions.

Part of why it might be more limited than would have been expected is good news. Approximately 85% of the expected cost for the programme was specifically being attributed to refractory epilepsy patients. In December last year, the HSE agreed to reimburse a product called Epidiolex. It is a licensed cannabis-based medicine that the clinicians have been going for, I imagine in part because it is licensed rather than unlicensed.

### **Emergency Departments**

83. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to tackle the crisis in emergency departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37352/22]

**Deputy David Cullinane:** This question relates to the Minister's plans to tackle the crisis in emergency departments. As he knows, waiting times in emergency departments are unacceptably high. I accept that Covid-19 is in part responsible for that but there are also issues in respect of the lack of capacity in some hospitals. Part of the problem is patients are not getting sufficiently good care in the community or through a GP. I also wish to ask the Minister specifically about the mid-west region and the particular problems we have at University Hospital Limerick.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. I agree that the time patients are having to wait in emergency departments is not acceptable. Much of that is due to Covid and it is frustrating for everyone, including the patients, our healthcare professionals and all of us, because there is a level of capacity in the system now that has never been there before. There are more hospital beds, doctors, nurses and healthcare assistants than ever before. There is more community-based care than there has ever been. There are more home care hours and there is more preventative community care. One would expect the emergency departments not to be under the pressure they are.

A big part of the problem is the unprecedented level of presentations. May of this year saw the highest monthly national emergency department attendance on record. That was May, not

December or January. Not only was that number the highest on record, the people coming in are older and more frail as a result of many of them having been at home for two years during the pandemic. I know the Deputy has acknowledged that.

What are we doing about it? I am working with the Department and the HSE to put together a short-term plan for all 29 emergency departments. There is now a draft plan in place and being worked out. More and more detail is being added to it. That plan is for all 29 emergency departments. It is considering how we keep people out of the emergency departments unless they really need to be there. Injury units, access to GPs on call, community-based care, older person intervention teams, home supports and other measures are the alternatives. When people need to come to emergency departments, we must consider whether the hospitals have the resources they need in the emergency departments and elsewhere in the hospital. Something that is critical, and the closer we look at this issue the more we realise this problem must be resolved, is the discharge option. For example, one of the big issues in Limerick is that patients are not being discharged as quickly as they should be. It would help with patient flow in the emergency department if they were.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** We need a comprehensive review of healthcare services in the mid-west. I would, in fact, argue that one of the first regional health areas should be established in that area. We need to properly align community care, primary care and acute care. We must also consider capacity in Nenagh Hospital, Ennis Hospital and St. John's Hospital. I know the hospital group has advocated for an elective hospital in the mid-west. There is possibly merit in that. I know that representatives of the group have met the Minister on that issue. That might be one of the solutions. I certainly believe we need to consider increasing capacity in Nenagh and Ennis. The question of whether that is emergency department capacity is something that would have to be clinically assessed but elective capacity can certainly be considered to take the pressure off.

It is not difficult to understand what is happening in our emergency departments. It is partly a result of Covid but if people cannot get access to out-of-hours GP care, they will go to their local emergency department. If they cannot get access to an injury unit quickly enough, they will go to an emergency department. Far too many people are attending emergency departments. Admission avoidance is necessary and we need a plan to make it happen.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** In the short term, one of the issues we are looking at is exactly the point the Deputy has raised. The injury units are superb. Many people who are walking into emergency departments could be seen quicker in an injury unit. We are considering whether the injury units can be opened for longer. Can they see more people? There are age limits on many of the injury units. Is everybody in the community aware of exactly the kind of injuries for which one would attend an injury unit? For example, there is a brilliant injury unit in Smithfield in Dublin but not that many people know about it. We need to have much more comprehensive engagement and communication. We are also looking, in the medium and long term, to build out the permanent capacity in the step-down facilities in the community.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** All of that is necessary. However, I would like to see what is in the short-term plan about which the Minister is talking. I have visited a number of hospitals, as the Minister knows. I have attended 15 in total in the past year. I know the Minister has attended some as well. Some hospitals have taken a zero-tolerance approach to patients on hospital trolleys. In fact, in my own constituency of Waterford, there have been no patients on trolleys for the whole year. It does not mean that people are not waiting too long in emergency

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departments but very clear action was taken. I know that a hospital in Drogheda, for example, has got to grips with what was happening in its emergency department and the trolley situation involved. The last thing it wants is more pressure and that is why there is controversy around closing the emergency department in Navan. We need short-term plans but without medium- to long-term structural changes that will bed in community care, provide alternative care pathways and increase admission avoidance, we are going to see more pressure on our emergency departments.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy raised the example of Waterford, which is a great example of what can be done. A specialist team was sent into Waterford a few years ago. I stand to be corrected but from memory, I was told that it went from being one of the worst performing in respect of patient waiting times to the best. They have done things differently in Waterford.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** They have good Deputies there, for a start.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There are, for example, overflow beds. The hospital is doing incredibly well. We have taken the same approach, for example, in Kerry and Limerick, where we have sent in specialist teams. There is a plan. It is a living document and as we learn more, the plan changes. I would be very happy to share the draft we have now with the Deputy. There are at least ten specific items that are being actioned for Limerick. The team is down there right now working with management to try to achieve in Limerick exactly what was achieved in Waterford.

## Dental Services

84. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the provisions that his Department is making to provide emergency dental cover for adult medical card holders who are unable to access a dental service due to the current oral healthcare crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38125/22]

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Last week, a man from Wexford in his 80th year, Seán Hayes, pulled his own teeth having contacted seven dentists in Wexford as well as the primary care centre at Grogan's Road, all of whom told him they could do nothing for him. He said on local radio that he blames the Government and not the dentists. I am asking the Minister for Health what provisions his Department is making to provide emergency dental cover for adult medical card holders unable to access dental services due to the current oral healthcare crisis and request that he makes a statement on the matter.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The situation the Deputy has described is unacceptable. Everybody who has a medical card needs to be able to access a dentist under the dental treatment service scheme. As the Deputy has quite rightly identified, the number of dentists participating in the scheme has fallen substantially, particularly over the past two years. There was a precipitous drop in participants in 2019, 2020, 2021 and this year. I looked at the figures for the Deputy's county and that is seen in Wexford as well. Unfortunately, the majority of dentists who were on the scheme just three years ago – just before Covid – are no longer on the scheme. That is causing huge pressure in terms of people in Wexford who have medical cards and who are trying to find a dentist who is on the scheme.

What are we doing? There is a longer-term solution to this, which is root and branch reform of the dental treatment scheme. That is something on which the Department of Health is engaging with the representative body, namely, the Irish Dental Association. However, that is not enough because it will take time for that kind of scheme to be negotiated and implemented.

In the meantime, for this year, I have allocated a very significant amount of extra money. The forecast spend for this year would have been about €40 million for this scheme. We have increased that from €40 million to €66 million. We have increased the amount of funding into it by more than a half. That has meant two things. First, there are services available, such as scale and polish, which had been removed from the scheme, which we added back into it. More importantly for the dentists, the fees that we are paying have dramatically increased. What we would like to see and what I would ask the dentists to do is to re-engage with the scheme. We have many dentists around the country and, indeed, in Wexford who had been involved in this scheme for many years. The fees are now substantially higher and I would ask those dentists to re-engage and stay with us while we negotiate our new scheme.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** “Substantially higher” would be somewhat of an exaggeration. The question I asked the Minister was what he is doing about access to emergency services. This is an 80-year-old man whose wife died a couple of years ago and who also lost his son. It is in no way reflective of the €21 billion we put into health in order to have a First World health service. As Mr. Hayes said, it is a Third World health service. Somebody of 80 years of age who worked and paid tax all his life having to pull four of his own teeth certainly does not instil confidence. I am not sure if he was here today he would have been voting for the Government in the confidence motion. Those were his words on a local radio in Wexford. An 80-year-old man pulled four of his own teeth. There was no emergency service.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** In an emergency situation, people should get in touch with the HSE, which will do several things. The first thing it will do is contact dentists who are on the scheme in the area and try to arrange emergency care or an emergency visit. In an extreme situation, the care can be provided directly by a HSE dentist. However, there is a very limited number of HSE dentists and they are spending most of their time treating children, for example. That is the direct answer in terms of emergency care.

The Deputy comes from a commercial background. If she saw an organisation that had an increase in its revenue of more than 50% in one year or saw revenue going into an organisation increasing from €40 million to €66 million, I think, in fairness, the Deputy would call that a substantial increase. So let us not dismiss an increase in funding in one year from €40 million to €66 million.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Before the Minister is finished waffling, let me tell him the response from the HSE to a recent parliamentary question in relation to emergency services. It stated that the HSE is not resourced to provide treatment to adults and does not have the capacity to do so. That was in response to Parliamentary Question No. 767 received on 31 May, a month ago. Clearly, what the Minister has just told me about the HSE is a load of rubbish and he does not have a clue. A man who paid tax his whole life pulling four of his own teeth is absolutely criminal. The Minister cannot defend it, nor can he give me the answer as to where the next 80-year-old is supposed to go rather than pulling their own teeth. Unfortunately, it is not the €66 million we are discussing. It is the fact that we do not have emergency services for adults in Wexford and the Minister is not aware of it.

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**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The only person waffling here is the Deputy. She dismissed a massive increase. She said that an increase from €40 million to €66 million is not substantial. That is nonsense. The only person talking rubbish here right now is the Deputy.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Let me tell the Minister what the Irish Dental Association said-

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*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** The Deputy does not even have the courtesy to let other people in this Chamber speak. We all have to listen to her nonsense, waffle and insults.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Seán Hayes believes that too.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I have just answered the questions. By the way, the Deputy just described the Irish healthcare system as a Third World healthcare system.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** No, I did not. Seán Hayes did that on the radio.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** And the Deputy repeated it here. I wonder how many Third World healthcare systems she has been in. What an insult from the Deputy, as an elected Member, to come here and say that. What an insult to an insult to all of the dentists, doctors-----

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Good man.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** -----and nurses. What we will do while she waffles is fix the problem.

**Deputy Verona Murphy:** Take your time.

### **Health Services Staff**

85. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address concerns that an estimated 21% of persons with Parkinson's disease reported having had access to a Parkinson's disease nurse specialist since diagnosis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38142/22]

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Michael Collins will take this on behalf of Deputy Nolan.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The Parkinson's Association of Ireland is looking for proper care for people with Parkinson's disease nationally in Ireland. With only a small number of specialised Parkinson's nurses in Ireland, we are nationally falling way behind. There is a need for at least 20 specialised Parkinson's nurses in Ireland. The very least that should happen in this budget is the Government should set aside funding for six this year. The Minister might be able to tell us his plans in relation to Parkinson's sufferers in this budget.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I met some of the representatives outside the Kildare Street gates just last week and we discussed these issues.

The HSE's national clinical programme for neurology has engaged with the patient organisations to identify service requirements for neurology nurse specialists. The clinical pro-

gramme recognises the value of highly trained nursing staff and endorses the expansion of the neurology nursing workforce, including for Parkinson's disease. I support it as well. Many years ago, I met patients with Parkinson's. We went through the ratio of specialist nurses in the Republic versus Northern Ireland and the reality is that the ratios are much higher in Northern Ireland. We need to increase it, which is exactly the point of the Deputy's question.

There are currently five Parkinson's disease nurse specialists in acute neurology centres. The HSE plans to increase specialist nursing capacity in areas, including Parkinson's. Building a specialist capacity of this nature takes several years. There is training, recruitment and deployment involved. The HSE will be guided by the work of the national clinical programme to ensure that priority is given to the areas of greatest geographical inequity to begin with and the neurology sub-specialties most in need. Parkinson's must be one of the priorities. I do not believe we are providing the level of service that is required. I certainly will be looking to the next budget to begin to address that.

As well as this, the HSE implementation framework for the neurorehabilitation strategy also provides guidance for the development of specialist neurorehabilitation services across the continuum of care for people with conditions, including Parkinson's and including in the community.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank the Minister for his reply. I would like to also acknowledge Deputy Nolan who put this question together for me.

We hosted the Parkinson's Association of Ireland and the Minister met representatives from it outside the gates before they came into the audiovisual room. They were from Cork, Dublin and elsewhere in the country. We were told that there has been no Parkinson's consultant in Cork University Hospital, CUH, since 2016. There has been a promise of replacement time after time for years, but still nothing. We were also told there have been no specialist Parkinson's nurses in Cork since 2021. That is an astonishing situation that Parkinson's sufferers are finding themselves in. Imagine that there has been no consultant there since 2016. This is an unfair situation that the people of Cork and Munster find themselves in. I know it is a national issue that there is a lack of specialised nurses, and the Minister said there are only five in total. It is a national issue, yes, but it certainly is a crisis issue in Cork. I would appreciate if the Minister might address that in his answer.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I recognise there is a shortage in the Cork and Munster area. In fact, it was one of the things that was raised in the conversation I had with the representative from the patient group just last week. The Deputy's question was whether we can we look at Cork and the Munster area as one of the areas that clearly does not have the level of resource that it needs and, therefore, is one of the areas that can be prioritised. The answer is "Yes". We can of course look at that.

There is annual funding of nearly €3 million provided to the first managed clinical rehab network. The pilot project accepts patients on referral from hospitals. It uses multidisciplinary teams to serve patients with complex needs who do not need inpatient facilities. The lessons from the demonstrator pilot will help to inform this national roll-out. It will consider experiences and outcomes for all neurological conditions.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank the Minister for his reply. Three weeks ago, I was invited to a house in my constituency to meet a person suffering from Parkinson's disease. When I got

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there, I found out that three people in that family have Parkinson's disease. The sad thing is that I could not advise them where to go. The only help I could offer them was Tony Wilkinson. I hope he is tuning in to these proceedings because he has done Trojan work on behalf of Parkinson's sufferers throughout the country. I think the Minister met him outside the gates of Leinster House last week. The only person I could send them to was a person who himself suffers from Parkinson's. He is an expert and a genuine person who gives hours every day trying to help people but he is not a specialised nurse and should not be treated as such. People with Parkinson's are suffering from falls, costing the State millions of euro, but they could get a little help if specialised nurses are put in place, whether in Cork or throughout the country. I would appreciate it if that were addressed straight away.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy. I did meet Tony Wilkinson outside the gates of Leinster House. At the moment, there are five Parkinson's disease nurse specialists in the acute section, that is, in acute neurology. They are in Limerick, St. Vincent's, Tallaght, the Mater and Galway hospitals. The Deputy made the point that we do not have one of the nurse specialists in Cork at the moment. That is something we need to address. We also need to do so in the context of other parts of the country. The aim of the national clinical programme for neurology is equitable access to a high-quality service. That has to guide where we invest and where we deploy specialist nurses, both in terms of the clinical area, namely, Parkinson's disease, and, as the Deputy stated, the geographical area, recognising that there is no such nurse specialist in that area at the moment.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Health Services Staff**

86. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if an international recruitment campaign for healthcare professionals, including therapists, is under way in the context of employment with the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37477/22]

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** There has been a welcome increase in the number of personnel employed by the HSE in the past two years. I presume some of those people were recruited through an international recruitment campaign. I know from working with advocacy groups that are outlining the need for better services for children with a disability that they are very anxious that additional therapists be recruited. Apparently, such therapists are not available in this country or on the neighbouring island. The groups have been strong advocates for recruiting internationally for speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue relating to recruitment generally, as well as for health and social care professionals and therapists and, as the Deputy rightly stated, in the area of children's disability services. I acknowledge that recruitment is very challenging at present, particularly as we are dealing with the effects of the global pandemic. However, it is worth nothing that recruitment in the past two years has been the highest in the history of the HSE. There is a lot more that needs to be done. Hundreds of posts have been sanctioned in disability services and those posts need to be filled. The quickest and most effective way to make sure that every child gets the assessment and treatment he or

she needs is to hire those therapists. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is working every day to fix this problem. We have sanctioned hundreds of posts around the country that are not yet filled. As they get filled, there will be a substantial increase in the number of therapists available and that will make a big difference. Ultimately, we have to get these waiting lists down to zero. No child should be waiting for an assessment or therapies.

More broadly, the workforce has grown by nearly 15,000 whole-time equivalents since 2019. It is continuing to grow at an unprecedented rate and is on track to grow by approximately 5,500 whole-time equivalents this year, which would be an increase of approximately 4% in just one year. To put it in context, the workforce grew by approximately 2,400 whole-time equivalents since the end of 2021.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister for his response. I am glad that he indicated his particular concern regarding the lack of adequate numbers of therapists to deal with children with additional needs or a disability. I have been engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, on the problems in Cavan-Monaghan, the area I represent. The House recently dealt with legislation aimed at ensuring that children with additional needs get a placement in an appropriate setting in a school. All present are aware that, in many instances, delays in getting assessments for those children deprives them of an appropriate placement in a school. It is essential that assessments take place in a timely manner and that the follow-up treatments and therapies, if needed, are put in place at an early date. Many families are buying services. They cannot afford to do so but are doing it for the sake of their children. I cannot emphasise strongly enough the need to ensure that as many therapists as possible are recruited to reduce considerably the unacceptable delays that exists at present in places such as Cavan and Monaghan.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There are two groups specifically providing the service for children with disabilities. One is the community disability network teams through the progressing disability services strategy and the other is what we would consider to be normal primary care teams. The hundreds of vacant posts are in the area of progressing disability services. They are being filled but we need to do so as quickly as possible. As regards primary care, I am delighted to be able to say that we have sanctioned 3,500 staff across the country in enhanced community care programmes. More than 1,600 of them have now been recruited and over 500 more are at an advanced stage. Nearly 80% of the allocated new developments posts in CHO 1, which includes Cavan-Monaghan, the area represented by the Deputy, have been filled.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The recruitment in the Cavan-Monaghan area particularly relates to the enhanced community care programme, the launch of which I recently attended with the Minister at Cavan General Hospital in Lisdaran. I compliment Suzann O'Callaghan, the manager of the hospital, and Rose Mooney, the manager of services for the elderly in Cavan-Monaghan. They have put a great system in place there. The general hospital and services for the elderly are working together to bring as many services as possible nearer to home for people who need them. That is particularly beneficial for older persons. Good progress is being made in that regard.

As regards children with a disability, we have to ensure priority is attached to this issue. I have another question tabled on a related matter but I do not know if it will be reached. It has received representations that, as a country, we should be employing more therapy assistants. Apparently, that works very well in Britain. I know that is outside the remit of this question but it may be an area that should be given further consideration.

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**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** It is certainly something that can be examined. Many different areas, such as advanced practitioners in health and social care professional grades, are also being considered as well. We are looking into a lot of innovation in this regard.

To go back to the original question on international recruitment, we are supplementing the national workforce through international recruitment across several professions. The recruitment of doctors from overseas has long been a feature of HSE recruitment but, last year, in addition to doctors, approximately 1,000 nurses were recruited from the international market. So far this year, an additional 650 nurses have been recruited into posts in hospitals and community settings. There is a strong international recruitment campaign under way.

### Medical Cards

87. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if he intends to review the medical card assessment process for persons with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37502/22]

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** Does the Minister intend to carry out a review of the medical card assessment process for people with disabilities? What shape would such a review take?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** Eligibility for a medical card is primarily based on a financial assessment in accordance with the Act of 1970. The issue of granting medical cards on the basis of illness or a disability was previously examined in 2014 by an expert panel on medical need and medical card eligibility. The panel concluded that it was not feasible, desirable or ethically justifiable to list medical conditions in priority order for medical card eligibility. An example was where there was discussion around medical cards for cancer patients. The answer we got back was not to create a hierarchy of diseases, such as a cancer patient versus someone with motor neurone disease and so forth. That was not recommended in the 2014 report. However, since December 2018, the medical card earnings disregard for people in receipt of disability allowance was substantially increased from €120 to €427 per week. It applies to the assessment process for single people and to family assessments. This very significant policy change gave effect to the important recommendation of the Make Work Pay for People with Disabilities report. This substantial increase in allowable earnings acknowledges that a medical card is a particularly significant support and ensures that people with disabilities can continue to be supported to access care where needed. Furthermore people who have been on a disability payment for at least a year can retain a medical card for a further three years on return to work provided they were in receipt of the payment for a period of at least 12 months prior to commencing employment.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** Week after week at the Joint Committee on Disability Matters, disability advocacy groups and people with disabilities come in. They constantly say that the medical card is gold for a person with a disability. It is hugely important that it is maintained. In some instances people with disabilities can get therapeutic work. They can earn extra income on top of the disability allowance. There is a stop in the system whereby people lose their disability benefits if they are able to get part-time work, which would have a huge impact on their lives and how they live their lives. The previous review was eight years ago. It is important that a review now takes place and we look at ensuring that someone who has a disability continues to have the medical card rather than lose it.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I fully agree that we should not have a situation where somebody with a disability can and wants to go to work, but if he or she does, he or she will go over the income threshold and thereby lose the medical card. We all appreciate how important it is, as the Deputy pointed out, particularly for people with disabilities to retain the medical card. In that regard, I will be happy to discuss it further with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. No doubt Deputy Moynihan will continue to do so as well. If there is a review and if there are specific barriers catching people in what traditionally would be viewed as a poverty trap, when going to work leaves them worse off, we need to make sure that going to work leaves them better off. Everybody, whether they have a disability or not, needs to be able to lead the fullest life possible. If there are such perverse incentives, we should certainly undertake a review.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** In regard to the medical card, there is one other issue on disabilities. I do not wish to list the disabilities, but I refer to a person with a diagnosis of a lifelong disability and who got a medical card in his or her younger years. At some point, there is a review. The person's income has not changed as he or she is on disability, and probably will be for life. Documentation comes back and the person must submit again a letter from his or her GP or consultant outlining the specific diagnosis. The diagnosis is not going to change. There should be an in-built mechanism within the medical card system whereby if a person has a disability or a chronic illness that is life-changing and for life, that should be noted. Families should not be asked whether the person is still disabled or whether he or she still has a specific diagnosis. This happens and it is completely unjust.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I am reminded of a session I was at a few years ago in the audiovisual room where this was brought up. Parents of children gave testimony. They had been through awful things. One mother said she had been asked whether her child still had autism. We all understand that is not an appropriate question. It is quite a ridiculous question to ask. My understanding is that some of this arises when a child transitions to adult schemes. When the child turns 16, there is another process regarding adult payments and supports. Some of it may be linked to that. It is an issue of which the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is aware. No doubt she will be happy to engage further. If we can find ways to alleviate that, we should do so.

### **Health Services Staff**

88. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the steps that he has taken to ensure that an organisation (details supplied) is granted the pay parity with their laboratory colleagues that they have been seeking for 21 years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37645/22]

92. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made in talks with laboratory workers who are members of an organisation (details supplied) to resolve their dispute; if he will be seeking additional funding to deal with historic issues of pay and conditions amongst these workers; the current number of vacancies among these grades in the health service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37685/22]

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** We saw during Covid-19, which is ongoing, the importance of laboratory scientists. A number of months ago those same laboratory scientists had to go on strike in relation to pay parity. What steps is the Minister taking to resolve this issue?

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**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 88 and 92 together.

I thank Deputy Kenny for raising the issue. Like the Deputy, I respect and acknowledge the huge work the medical scientists have done and continue to do. Following the strike action on 18 May and 24 May, health management and the MLSA attended an exploratory engagement at the Labour Court on 25 May for the court to establish whether or how it might assist the parties in finding a resolution to the matters in dispute. Following engagement at the Labour Court, the parties agreed to reconvene at the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, for a final engagement process. This process took place over a three-week period. Parties agreed that any outstanding issues which could not be resolved through the WRC process would be referred to the Labour Court for a final recommendation. During these talks an agreement was reached on a process to assess a claim it has had for 20 years. They have been looking for a resolution to this for 20 years.

As the Deputy will appreciate, because this is an ongoing industrial relations process, it would be inappropriate to discuss the funding of any outcomes that are yet to be determined. It is positive that the MLSA agreed to lift its strike action and that parties reached agreement on a process to assess the claim. I acknowledge the recruitment challenges in relation to medical scientists. The HSE aims to recruit 160 new medical scientist roles in 2022 and in each subsequent year. We are investing in and expanding this really important professional group. A recruitment campaign is planned along with other initiatives to address the various challenges that have been raised.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I welcome the fact a settlement may be possible in regard to the ongoing discussions. These laboratory scientists have waited for more than 20 years for pay parity. Some of their colleagues doing similar work have been paid about 8% more than them. They were very patient indeed. The strike was hugely popular, publicly. Obviously the laboratory scientists did not want to be on strike. They were compelled to go on strike because of that issue around equal pay for equal work. It is important that not only the pay issue is resolved but that so too are other issues to which I will allude in a supplementary question.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There were various parts to this. An assessment was done in regard to the grade and the following year that was changed as part of benchmarking which led to one of the anomalies. Another anomaly relates to medical laboratory aids. The medical laboratory aids were uplifted from band 2 to band 1 under a job evaluation scheme. This led to an anomaly whereby they were paid more than medical scientists in year 1, even though they are on a different level. In year 2 the anomaly rectifies itself. The medical scientists earn considerably more at every point of the scale thereafter. However, it is just one example of an anomaly which has caused real frustration and needs to be addressed as part of the ongoing discussions.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** Hopefully, this anomaly can be resolved. The workers have been waiting a considerable amount of time. Another issue the laboratory scientists have touched on relates to vacant posts in the profession. They said one in five posts are vacant. That is obviously worrying in the context of qualified staff such as those. Hopefully, those posts can be filled.

The Minister cannot predict what could happen with regard to the WRC talks, but they sound positive. Hopefully, the matter will be resolved and some of these posts will be filled as soon as possible. As we saw during the pandemic, front-line staff such as laboratory scientists are crucial. In fact, the Minister will have seen that when they went on strike.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** There is a pressing need to hire a substantial number of additional medical scientists. The workforce stands at a little over 2,100 whole-time equivalents. However, the HSE has done an analysis of the numbers that need to be hired and projected a requirement to recruit nearly 400 this year because many replacement posts need to be filled. The HSE is estimating a need to hire 400 this year and 160 every year after that. The chief clinical officer, Dr. Henry, is leading a piece of work looking at the future direction of this. As we invest more in technologies as genetics and the various scientific disciplines come more to the fore, we will need to build out and continue to invest in the profession and in this workforce.

*Question No. 89 replied to with Written Answers.*

### **Health Services Staff**

90. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure that all positions within the children's disability network teams, CDNTS, are filled and that there are no staffing gaps. [37487/22]

**An Ceann Comhairle:** On Question No. 90, I call Deputy Cullinane on behalf of Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I am taking this question on behalf of an Teachta Ó Laoghaire. It relates to the resourcing of the CDNTs but, more specifically, the staff positions and the high numbers of vacant positions, and seeking an update on plans that have been or will be put in place to try and fill all of those vacant posts.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** It is important to clarify the position on the reply to a parliamentary question that Deputy Ó Laoghaire received a number of weeks ago, which attracted many headlines. At the time, the Deputy referred to 714 vacant posts. Let us be clear that 555 of the posts in question are vacant. Some of that figure relates to people who are on maternity leave, a total of 120. The Deputy would have got the breakdown, but it is important to lay out the position.

On recruitment and the filling of those posts, in the context of workforce planning, we in the Department of Health are, in conjunction with the Minister and the HSE, putting a number of measures in place. First and foremost, we want to bolster the teams. How we plan on doing that is by looking at targeting international recruitment. This involves: national and international recruitment to the CDNTs being targeted; an apprenticeship programme for therapy grades; employment of graduates to therapy assistants as they await their CORU registration; and an expansion of the therapy assistant systems within the HSE. My colleague, Deputy Brendan Smith, explored the position regarding the latter earlier on.

We are also looking at the recruitment of behavioural therapists. Behavioural therapist is not currently a grade within the HSE. The executive is working through the plan of giving it a particular pay grade. We are training these therapists but we are not recruiting them. When one is looking at the spectrum within disability teams, it is important to have everything from occupational therapists to the physiotherapists. We also need to have behavioural therapists on those teams. We are looking at that model.

In the context of social care workers, we are looking at link workers as well. We are ex-

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panding the range of what should be within the team also to recruit into it. We are not only looking at a medical model; we are looking at a social model and a more holistic approach. Disability teams no longer need to look only at the medical aspect. We need to meet all the needs of all the children.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I accept that the number of vacant posts changes and fluctuates because people who are on maternity leave come back and because the HSE is constantly recruiting. However, I would be interested to hear what the accurate figure is. At a recent meeting of the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, we had a good discussion on all of these issues. We talked about the CDNT census, which identified 542.5 whole-time equivalent posts as being vacant at that point. In budget 2022, an additional 190 posts were funded. How many of the 542.5 posts that were identified in the census are still vacant and how many of the 190 additional posts are vacant? Maybe that figure can be given. What we really need to know is how we will fill those posts and what additional measures can be taken, in terms of international recruitment, domestic recruitment and other ways, to fill them.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** If I was to talk specifically about what is happening around the CDNTs in the various CHOs, I would say that CHO 4 - if Deputy Ó Laoghaire was here I would have explained - is piloting recruitment within Ireland to the colleges. As they are exiting, they give them the opportunity and show them the attraction of work. One of our biggest challenges is the fact that in our CDNTs the population of clinicians is so low and we do not have a critical mass of clinicians. We are failing to grasp the opportunity to give that training on the ground. Perhaps next year, one of my plans is to work with the Department of Education on special education where the summer programme will give the opportunities for trainee therapists to have practical engagement so that they can build towards their CORU hours. That is a practical way we are looking to build on.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I thank the Minister of State. I would say to the Minister for Health as well that we need to increase training places in this area. Obviously, we need more of a pipeline of staff coming through.

I welcome that this is an area that was added to the critical skills lists as well in recent times, which means that international recruitment is now an option. The reply I received recently to a parliamentary question referred to a relocation payment that could be provided as well to entice some people to come here from abroad. That should not be a substitute for dealing with the many reasons why we have disparities in some of the teams because there are 16, 17 or 18 different providers of services. The HSE is the biggest provider for these teams but there are many section 38 and 39 organisations. There are pay parity issues at play which need to be resolved as well.

The HSE says it is looking at a sponsorship programme, an apprentice programme and other measures. All of those are needed. Everything that can be done should be done to fill those vacant posts because there are far too many hours which are not being delivered to the children.

## **Emergency Departments**

91. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the future of the 24-hour status of the accident and emergency unit in Portlaoise hospital given the

situation regarding Navan hospital. [37480/22]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I want to raise with the Minister the issue of the emergency department in Portlaoise. As the Minister will be aware, the Dr. Susan O'Reilly plan, which was handed to me in October 2017, was to close the emergency department. That was put on the shelf. What is the current update on this because this is important for Laois and the surrounding counties?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I assure the Deputy that no plans have been presented to me and there has been no discussion with me about any considerations to downgrade any of the services currently in operation at the Midland Regional Hospital Portlaoise, including the emergency department. Since 2014, the focus has been on supporting the hospital to develop and enhance management capability, implement change required to address clinical service issues and incorporate the hospital into the governance structures of the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group. I am fully committed to ensuring that these efforts continue. The Deputy would agree that great progress has been made by the fantastic healthcare professionals we have working in Portlaoise hospital.

The budget for Portlaoise hospital this year is over €71 million. The Deputy will be happy to hear that is an 11% increase on the 2019 figure and nearly a 60% increase on the 2012 figure. There has been a very significant increase in funding. Staffing levels are now at 824 whole-time equivalents. To give the Deputy a sense of it, that is a 50% increase on 2014. If we go back to 2014 and ask what has happened in the past eight years, we have seen a very significant increase in funding in hospital and a 50% increase in the workforce in the hospital. That is a really clear statement of intent from Government that this hospital is a priority and ongoing investment in the hospital will remain a priority.

Furthermore, €20 million in capital investment is enabling the reconfiguration and extension of laboratory services and a new respiratory assessment unit, and more besides is going on at the hospital.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister for that reply. I acknowledge the investment and the increase in the budget. I lobbied the Minister and previous Ministers in regard to the respiratory assessment unit, the laboratory and other facilities. That is all positive and more than welcome in the area. I have no problem doing that and I always will.

The Dr. Susan O'Reilly plan is there and has been put on the shelf and no other plan has been presented. That is fair enough but a plan for the future is what we want to nail this down once and for all. There has been a significant population increase, according to the census, not just in Laois but also in surrounding counties, which affects the Laois accident and emergency service. There are two motorways and significant national primary routes and two massive prisons across the road. There is huge demand for the services and it is the second-busiest accident and emergency unit outside of Dublin.

In the context of Navan, we want to find out who is in charge. There are three Ministers present tonight for this discussion, which I welcome. What is the situation if the HSE says it wants to downgrade?

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I give the Deputy the assurance in regard to Portlaoise that nothing has been brought to me and there has been no conversation with me in the past two years about anything in Portlaoise hospital other than ongoing investment. I am fully com-

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mitted to investing in the services for the people in the area, investing in staff and investing in infrastructure. As we said, more than €20 million in capital spend has gone in over the past two to three years. I acknowledge the Deputy's advocacy. I have had many conversations with the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Fleming, in this regard. There has been an expansion of services, including, as the Deputy will welcome, the new ambulatory gynaecological "see and treat" centre opening this month in the hospital. The impact that will have locally in the coming months and years will be very substantial.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I want the Minister to say the magic words that the future of the accident and emergency services are guaranteed in Portlaoise. I welcome all of the progress but the concern is a possible downgrade. We see the situation in Limerick and what happens when emergency departments are closed, as happened in Ennis and Nenagh. The problem is pushed on and is made worse, and it was made worse in Limerick. We do not want this happening in Laois.

The Minister is right about the networks and we agree with him on that. The networking that happened with the grouping of the hospitals is good and it has worked very well in maternity. All of the figures show that and the patients are telling us that, as well as the staff. I acknowledge the work of the staff and management, particularly Michael Knowles, the manager, for pushing for some of these improvements and capital investment. He has been instrumental in this regard.

We all agree there is not enough capacity in the system across the country. Portlaoise is very busy and we need to maintain the level of care that we have. It is not a parochial argument. I know we cannot have everything at every crossroads but this is a significant regional hospital and is the second-busiest accident and emergency unit outside Dublin. Along with welcoming all that has happened, which is good, I would love to have a statement from the Government that this is here to stay. That is what we want to hear.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** On top of what I have already said, we can point to additional investment in the emergency department. For example, the nursing complement in the emergency department in Portlaoise, from post-pandemic to now, has increased from 28.5 whole-time equivalents to 36.5 whole-time equivalents, so not only is the service not being downgraded and not only have I had no conversations about that, in fact, if we look at the hard figures, what we see is that money is going in and services, including in the emergency department, are being increased.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** They were under fierce pressure. One of my neighbours is an accident and emergency nurse.

**Deputy Stephen Donnelly:** I fully accept that. There is an emergency department plan being put in place for every hospital. There are pressures all over the country. The influx that has been caused by Covid is immense. As we were discussing earlier, May of this year is the highest year on record for attendances to emergency departments, and I emphasise that is in May. We are planning for the winter now.

*Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 88.*

*Questions Nos. 93 to 95, inclusive, replied to with Written Answers.*

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Disability Services**

96. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if consideration is being given to the recruitment of additional therapy assistants in the delivery of healthcare services; if therapy assistants will have a role in the provision of healthcare services for persons with a disability, particularly in areas in which there are unacceptable delays at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37494/22]

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** As I mentioned earlier, I have tabled this parliamentary question in the context of the shortage of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists. My concern is about the delays in children getting assessments and follow-up treatment. I understand that in Britain much more extensive use is made of therapy assistants, not just in general hospitals but in the provision of services for children with a disability as well. I also understand that our colleges of further education provide necessary courses to enable people to gain those necessary skills or to upskill.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Deputy for giving me the chance to answer this question. He is right. Therapy assistants work with, and report to, therapy managers and children's disability network managers, and work under the supervision and direction of nominated supervisors, as appropriate to the healthcare area and role. While a FETAC level 5 qualification or an equivalent qualification from another jurisdiction is desirable, some staff are employed in therapy assistant roles and are undertaking further training to develop therapy assistant skills and a FETAC level 5 qualification. As part of the ongoing development of the team, all staff, including healthcare and therapy assistants, should participate in ongoing training and development. Within HSE services, there are many ways that staff benefit from education and training from on-the-job learning and HSE courses.

On the question asked, there are opportunities for care assistants and therapy assistants to make up the complement of the teams within the disability network teams. In fact, what we want to do within our disability network teams is create a pathway for employment and career progression and training people on-the-job, coming in at a base level. It does not always have to be a senior clinician post and there are various opportunities along the way, and the therapy assistant post is one of those under consideration.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I very much welcome that response. The Minister of State will recall a meeting I attended, along with other colleagues, with the Minister of State and the Cavan Monaghan parents committee. One of the very strong demands they outlined that day was the need, due to the shortage of therapists, for the HSE to employ therapy assistants. The Minister of State took it upon herself at that meeting to follow up on this matter and I am very glad she is indicating to us tonight that there will be progress and that additional services will be provided.

Again, I cannot emphasise enough the desire of all of us to ensure that delays are eliminated in children getting assessments and follow-up treatment. On that day and at other meetings in counties Cavan and Monaghan, the Minister of State listened to the passion, concern and worry of many parents who are doing everything possible to give the best chance to children with a disability. Sadly, today, too many children do not get an appropriate school setting because of delays in getting assessments and treatment. Hopefully, that can be reversed.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** As I said, it is a whole-of-Department of Health response and I am

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ably supported by the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in trying to find those solutions and putting proposals to the Department of Health and the HSE to take this on board. That is why we met Paul Reid a number of weeks ago in terms of trying to redesign the progressing disability services, PDS, programme and that transition piece and the gaps that are there, trying to work it all out as to the various complements to ensure children get timely access to a service, to assessment and, most importantly, to intervention. This is about having the proper clinical oversight and support and supporting the therapy assistant levels, whether in psychology, in occupational therapy or in physiotherapy. We are totally open to that proposal.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The Minister of State in her introductory answer referred to on-the-job learning, continuous training and upskilling. I very much welcome that. There are a huge number of very talented people within the general health service who could benefit from upskilling and on-the-job training, and who would then be able to provide additional services to people and enhance the overall delivery of services. There would be a win for everybody, particularly for the people who need the services, who are the most important people in the discussions we have had here tonight with the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, and the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** There is a clear desire within the Government to ensure that all of our teams are filled. There is a clear desire among the Deputy's colleagues in government to attract as many staff into the service as possible. It should not be just in urban areas and we need to ensure we can get staff out to rural areas. Creating a career pathway and ensuring people have the ability to engage with these teams, support the families and, most importantly, deliver intervention is what we want to achieve.

*Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [www.oireachtas.ie](http://www.oireachtas.ie).*

*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Ministers, Deputies and members of the House staff for their co-operation. Some 25 minutes later than scheduled, that concludes the day's business.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12 meán oíche go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 13 Iúil 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 12 midnight until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 July 2022.