



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 20 Meán Fómhair 2022

Tuesday, 20 September 2022

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

Paidir.

Prayer.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 36. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. Workers across the country will be deeply alarmed and angered by the Government's latest plan for the State pension. Let us call this what it is: a Trojan horse designed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to move the pension age to 70 by stealth. The cat is out of the bag. The Government wants people to work until the age of 70. I suppose this will not come as a surprise to anybody because, after all, these are the parties that were hell-bent on raising the pension age to 67 and then to 68 until the weight of enormous public pressure made them climb down. However, instead of doing the right thing and bringing forward a progressive and fair policy, the Government is now presenting a ploy to force people into working until they are 70 years old with the promise of then having a decent standard of living. "Retire at 70 for an extra €60 in ... pension" is how one newspaper summarised it. This, however, is a scam. The pension deferral the Government is proposing means, in reality, that thousands of euro in pension payments will be taken from workers, payments they would now have as of right. We must be clear on this point.

It is not only those approaching pension age who are angered by this plan, but also young workers looking on now and wondering if they will ever get the chance to retire at all. Workers should have the right to retire at 65 with their pension, if that is what they want to do. The Government's proposal completely ignores the everyday reality of those who do hard physical jobs that take a toll on the body. Many of these workers started working at the age of 16 or 17, and some did so at a younger age. I am talking about factory workers, carers, retail workers, those on their feet all day in the service industries, nurses and many, many more. Hundreds and thousands of workers will be left out in the cold under this plan. They are not incapacitated and do not need an invalidity payment; they simply do not have anything left in the tank to keep working beyond the age of 65. They have put in their shift, they have done their bit and they are exhausted. Their right to retire at the age of 65 on a fair pension is not only a matter of

public policy, but also a matter of principle and basic decency. One is either for it or against it. Clearly, the Taoiseach's Government is not only against it, but it will move heaven and earth to ensure it does not happen.

Sinn Féin is for the right to retire at 65 with a decent pension. This is what we would deliver in government. By the way, if we were delivering the budget next week, we would back up this commitment with an increase in the State pension of €15. Tá plean ag an Taoiseach chun aois an phinsin a bhogadh go dtí 70 bliain d'aois. Tá daoine ag iarraidh go mbeadh an ceart acu éirí as ag 65 le pinsean réasúnta tar éis dóibh a bheith ag obair go crua ar feadh a saoil ar fad. It is the duty of any Government worthy of the name to provide a State pension that allows pensioners to live a good and secure life. People looking on today will be very worried. I have a straight question for the Taoiseach and I would like a straight answer. Why is his Government so dead against the right to retire with a decent pension at the age of 65?

The Taoiseach: My first point is a general one. People get anxious and worried when politicians tell barefaced lies. Generally, as politicians, we should not tell the public barefaced lies. We should tell the people the truth.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Look in the mirror.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is clear here.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Does the Taoiseach want a mirror?

The Taoiseach: The pension age is 66. I do not know where Deputy McDonald is coming from. The Deputy is not telling the truth in her presentation because the Government decision is that the pension age will not rise beyond 66. Under this system, people will still be able to retire at 66 and draw down their full pension in exactly the same way as they can today.

Sinn Féin has been in government for the past number of years in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin voted to increase the pension age to 66 and Deputy McDonald has the nerve to come in here and attack this Government for retaining the pension age at 66. I do not know how the Deputy does it.

Deputy John Lahart: Silently.

The Taoiseach: It is a spectacular feat that Deputy McDonald pulls off. Sinn Féin has been in government in Northern for well over a decade and its members voted for 66 as the pension age. This Government has decided the people will retire at 66.

We are creating choice for people as well because people always seek choice in terms of their pension options and in terms of the State pension. The Report of the Commission on Pensions has a range of sustainability measures also. There needs to be a collective engagement by the House on that in terms of making sure the pension system is sustainable over a ten-year, 20-year, 30-year and 40-year horizon.

The Social Insurance Fund is in surplus. It will be in surplus now, I think, to the tune of potentially €3 billion. Original estimates some years ago would have had it at a deficit. That can change too. That can change to the negative. I have to be clear and add that. Every politician in this House has a responsibility to the younger generations as well to make sure the pensions are sustainable. That will involve difficult decisions in the years ahead in respect of PRSI, etc.

Deputy McDonald is desperate to win more and more votes and become more popular than ever but I ask her not to put that one out there. The Deputy should not tell that basic untruth that somehow the pension age is not staying at 66 when she knows full well that the Government decision today is that people will still be able to retire at 66 and draw down their full pension in exactly the same way as they can today.

Let us not cause that anxiety to people. Let us not create a false story. Let us not fake it. Let us not create fake news here. Fake news can worry people and can cause anxiety. There is no need to cause it in respect of the pension age of 66, no need at all. Caithfidh mé a rá gur sin í an fhírinne. Ní chás d'éinne bréaga a insint faoin gcinneadh atá déanta ag an Rialtas maidir leis an bpinsean. Caithfidh mé a bheith dearfach faoi sin. Beifear in ann éirí as an obair ag 66 bliana d'aois.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: All of the anxiety that has been caused on this issue has been caused by the Taoiseach and people of his ilk who had plans, bear in mind, to ratchet the pension age up to 67, 68 and beyond. The Taoiseach cited all sorts of reasons and rationale for doing that. Our position has been and remains consistent that the appropriate and fair age to be given the choice to retire with one's pension is the age of 65.

What today's proposal sets out is a system of deferral, an enticement the Taoiseach might say, for people to work on until they are 70. I regard that as a move of coercion, not to incentivise but by stealth to-----

Deputy Simon Harris: Ageist.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----ratchet the pension age up to 70, and that is simply wrong. I am not one bit ageist. For sure, there are those who will wish to work beyond the age of 65 and they must be facilitated in that. More power to them. However, we live in the real world, gentlemen and ladies, and we live in a world where people who have worked from a young age in very physical jobs simply are not able and do not wish to work beyond 65.

Let me repeat my question to the Taoiseach and he might answer without evasion or insult towards me. Why is he so against the simple premise of a retirement age of 65 by choice and why is the Government's proposal today-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. You are way over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----not simply to set that out?

The Taoiseach: Who made this up for the Deputy? The Government decision is clear. Anybody will be able to retire at 66 under the Government decision, just as they can do so today. Does the Deputy not get that?

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: Scaremongering.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald is deliberately not telling the truth on this one, it seems to me, in respect of the age and the deferral. She moves to the Trojan horse - I do not who made it up-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Then the Taoiseach should address-----

The Taoiseach: I have addressed it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He has not.

The Taoiseach: The core issue is the age, which is 66.

As for the second issue to which the Deputy referred, she said we all want to facilitate people who want choice and who might wish to stay working.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We in Sinn Féin introduced legislation on that years ago.

The Taoiseach: That is what the Government is doing. It will facilitate people who may want to defer whatever they want to do.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Okay. The Taoiseach does not want to answer. He will not stand over his own proposal. Fine.

The Taoiseach: The full pension will be available to people at 66. That is the Government decision - no question about it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And an enhanced pension at 70.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has an obligation to the public watching in to be faithful in how she describes the decision the Government is taking.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes. I have described it accurately.

The Taoiseach: In addition, as for the 65-year-olds, the Minister has got sanction from the Government to explore avenues to facilitate those who have worked 40 years of their lives, in manual work in particular, and are not in a position to continue working. That is also a decision the Government took today.

An Ceann Comhairle: We need to move on now to Deputy Shortall.

The Taoiseach: It is unbelievable what Deputy McDonald-----

An Ceann Comhairle: May we have respect for Deputy Shortall, please?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Along with the triple crisis of the cost of living, energy and housing, there is another crisis that demands urgent Government action, and that is the crisis in our health service, specifically in our emergency departments. Yesterday the president of the Irish Association for Emergency Medicine, Dr. Fergal Hickey, said that this winter was likely to be “hell on earth” for patients as well as staff and that we face what could be an Armageddon-type situation. We know there have been 40,000 breaches of waiting times this year. That is 40,000 patients waiting more than 24 hours. Last Wednesday there were 596 patients, including 20 children, without a bed. Dr. Hickey went on to say that emergency departments have become warehouses for admitted patients and that this is a 365-days-a-year problem. The Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, described the situation as an entirely predictable surge and called for a laser focus on recruitment and retention.

Staff vacancies arguably pose the greatest threat to our health service. There are almost 900 consultant vacancies and no sense of urgency from the Taoiseach’s Government on agreeing a new consultant contract. Our non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs, are leaving Ireland in their droves due to the serious issue of excessive working hours, with doctors not even getting paid for that overtime and many reporting burnout, lack of career progression and bullying.

Nursing is equally under pressure to retain staff. Faced with the pressures on our health services, the cost of living and the prohibitive cost of housing, it is no wonder so many go away to work abroad in health services that actually function properly and provide care for patients who need it.

In addition, and importantly, our acute bed capacity is 2.8 per 1,000 population, while the OECD average is 4.3. Ireland has the lowest number of hospital beds in the EU. Over 300 of the beds which were to be delivered by the end of last year have yet to materialise.

Incredibly, yesterday's meeting of the emergency department task force was the first since January. How will the Taoiseach prevent what is likely to be an Armageddon in our emergency departments when Covid and the flu put even more pressure on our emergency departments this winter? Will he announce a fully funded winter plan along with the budget next week? What will he do about the recruitment and retention crisis in our health service, which needs urgent attention? What action will he take to urgently increase the number of beds to a safe level?

The Taoiseach: I will first say that the health system went through very tough times during Covid-19, as we all realise. I have long articulated my admiration for all those who worked on the front line during the various stages of Covid. We saw on our television screens the enormous challenges and pressures that Covid put on our health system. Our health system proved itself resilient in the face of an unprecedented pandemic. Over the past number of years since the start of the pandemic, we have dramatically increased the level of funding to our public health service and increased capacity significantly. Approximately 900 acute beds and about 340 community beds have been provided. The number of ICU beds has gone up from approximately 255 to about 306, which is a significant increase.

It will be a very challenging winter. We have watched what has happened in the aftermath of Covid in places like Australia and New Zealand. We did not have the flu for the past two years, essentially, as Covid was dominant. There is now a real prospect of the widespread spreading of flu and Covid-19 during the winter period. Therefore, vaccination is the first line of defence in terms of people's lives and their health. I urge people to get vaccinated, particularly those who are recommended, with both the Covid booster dose and the flu vaccine. I think the flu vaccine campaign will commence in early October.

We have also increased home support hours with about 20.5 million hours delivered in 2021. That was 2.9 million more hours than in 2020, a 17% increase, and there is a higher target for this year. There are issues in terms of home care teams with them having expanded so quickly and in such a significant way. That created a strain and pressure on home care teams.

There will be a winter plan, for which funding will be announced in tandem with the budget. The HSE task force is meeting on a daily basis to prepare for winter. It will be a challenging winter.

I point out that overall staffing numbers have increased by 15,000 in the past two years. That is the largest ever increase on record since the HSE was established. That figure includes 4,500 nurses and midwives, 2,300 health and social care professionals, and 1,400 doctors and dentists. The health service is recruiting at a level it has never recruited at before. That does not mean that there still are not challenges in the recruitment of key professionals. There are but everything will be done to make sure we support the health service in the coming winter.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am not sure what "everything will be done" means. I asked the

Taoiseach for specifics.

The Taoiseach: I gave the Deputy specifics.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Does the Taoiseach not believe what the president of the Irish Association for Emergency Medicine is saying? He is saying that we are facing a potential “Armageddon” in our health service this winter, particularly in emergency departments. There are almost 900 consultant vacancies. What is the Taoiseach doing about that, to finalise the negotiations on the consultant contract? What is he doing about the significant loss of NCHDs - about which the Minister has been well warned - because of the dysfunction in the health services, because of burnout, because they are not being paid, and because there is no career progression? What is he doing to hold on to nurses and other key health professionals? This is all coming together. There is virtually no workforce planning going on within the health service at the moment. We have no idea how we will hold on to people and ensure an adequate number of training places. There is a huge shortage of placements in the health service. The HSE stopped them a number of years ago. I am looking for specifics from the Taoiseach. What exactly will he do to avoid the hell on earth that is being predicted this winter?

The Taoiseach: I gave the Deputy specifics on beds-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: You did not.

The Taoiseach: I gave you specifics on ICU and home care hours-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: No, you said what had been done and not what you will do.

The Taoiseach: I gave you specifics on a whole range of issues in terms of preparing and upgrading the health service. The number of college places has been expanded for all of the professions over the past two years. The Deputy cannot just shake her head. They have been increased-----

Deputy Róisín Shortall: There has been a huge problem with placements. People need placements for college places.

The Taoiseach: -----and in terms of career progression. The winter preparedness plan has adopted a bottom-up approach. It has gone to every hospital group and local plans have been sought. Sanction has been given to hire emergency consultants if the groups so wish. In the plans that have come from the various hospital groups, flexibility will be applied in sanctioning the teams they want to hire. As the Deputy knows, we are implementing measures to help with the flow by avoiding people going to emergency departments and providing GPs greater access to diagnostic tests. This has been significant in a range of areas. We have developed community integration teams and integrated care teams for older people. Enhanced community care has been very effectively rolled out. All of this prevents people from going into emergency departments in the first place. The other key issue is the flow of patients through hospitals and subsequent discharge. This is key to keeping the emergency departments freer to take people.

Deputy Denis Naughten: Last week, I spoke with the mother of a long Covid sufferer who until she contracted the virus was a young and fit woman working as a doctor in a busy hospital. She has not stood on a hospital ward in more than 11 months because she is still recovering from the illness. Based on research conducted in Ireland and the Netherlands, 336,451 adults are experiencing or have experienced a long-lasting impact of this illness, known as long Covid.

Long Covid encompasses a broad range of illnesses following Covid infection and is based on three clusters of symptoms. These are fatigue, respiratory issues and cognitive problems. They can range in severity from those who cannot recall the PIN for their bank card to people who are unable to get out of bed. The vast majority of these people did not require hospitalisation at the time of the original infection, with many experiencing only mild symptoms.

The HSE has recognised the need to support these patients and last September, it finalised an interim model of care for long Covid to provide a national approach for the provision of services and supports, yet up to last month only 20 of the 60 health service staff to be recruited to these regional centres for the management of prolonged conditions associated with Covid-19 were in post. We are told that until these regional centres are fully operational, we will not see the establishment of GP referral pathways. Even now there are still no plans to provide a dedicated service for children with long Covid. The eight planned regional clinics will primarily focus on fatigue and respiratory-related issues with a single consultant neurologist appointed to deal with cognitive problems. This is despite evidence presented to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health indicating that cognitive and neurological problems are emerging as the most significant long-term issues for those with long Covid.

The only clinic supporting those with long Covid neurological issues, which is at the Mater Hospital, is set to close its doors at the end of next week because of the failure by the HSE to fund it. I firmly believe the failure by the HSE to put in place a comprehensive strategy for those with long Covid is contributing to the record figures we witnessed last month with almost 10,000 patients on trolleys in our hospitals. Unless the interim model of care is revised to reflect the emerging evidence on long Covid and such a strategy for all of our patients, regardless of age and illness, is then delivered, this will compound a dire prognosis for our health service this winter.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue that is affecting quite a number of people. I have tremendous sympathy for those suffering from long Covid. It is one of the reasons that during the height of Covid, when we had the lockdown, I was insistent on taking strong measures. It was not just about mortality. This was a deadly disease. When a person got Covid, it could lead to long Covid and affect a person's health and quality of life for quite a long time afterwards. People were saying we could get by, but this was a disease we had to try avoid people getting, at least, until vaccination arrived. Vaccination has prevented the disease from impacting more severely on people than was the case prior to people becoming vaccinated. Vaccination was the game changer.

That said, there is an interim model of care, as the Deputy described, to provide long Covid services nationally. We want to see a more uniform framework. Considerable research is going on. In the nature of medical research, we will need more research, not just on identifying the features or, indeed, the duration of long Covid and the length of time it will impact on a person. Presumably, the research will also have to look at the model of care. If someone develops cardiac or respiratory issues and there is a long Covid centre in a hospital, ideally, the specialists in the centre of excellence for respiratory issues should then perhaps have to deal with the person's issues. It will at some stage need an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to some of the issues that manifest themselves as a result of long Covid. I will follow up on the matter. The Deputy is correct on the cognitive and neurological implications of long Covid. I do not believe they are disputed. We will follow up on that.

There are long Covid clinics in St. Vincent's Hospital, Beaumont Hospital, University Hos-

pital Galway and, I think, in Cork University Hospital. There are post-acute Covid clinics in Galway and in Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown. Tallaght University and St. James' hospitals are operating a combined post-acute and long Covid clinic. There is a tertiary neuro-cognitive clinic in St. James' Hospital, led by a consultant neurologist with a background in neurocognitive disorders, which is accepting referrals from long Covid clinics throughout the country.

We are happy to work with the Oireachtas and the Joint Committee on Health on this. I do not dispute the issues he is raising. They are very serious issues. In the forthcoming health budget, we wish to see whether we can increase the level of resources available, specifically, in a ring-fenced way, for long Covid. Approximately €2.2 million has been allocated so far. An epidemiological survey is being planned that would provide insight into the prevalence of long Covid in the population.

Deputy Denis Naughten: With regard to the prevalence of long Covid, based on my analysis of the social welfare payments for Covid-related illnesses lasting 12 weeks or more following the initial infection, 21,000 people are unable to go to work due to long Covid. This figure does not take into account the tens of thousands who are suffering with less severe forms of long Covid who are going to work but not contributing to the same extent that they did prior to the illness, nor does it take into account the thousands of people who recovered from the initial infection but had a subsequent relapse. Not only is this having a significant impact on our labour force but, as an Australian long Covid study put it, even low rates of Covid-related permanent illness or disability could still lead to significant future burden of disease. We need to act now in a comprehensive way.

The Taoiseach: I do not disagree with the Deputy. There were clinics on HSE sites that were operational before the model of care was rolled out. The intention is to align all of them towards a national service. It is intended that the interim model of care will be expanded to put in place eight post-acute Covid clinics and six long Covid clinics within hospital groups nationwide. Additional aspects of the service have been delivered, including supports within the GP and community settings and online supports. As I said earlier, epidemiological survey is planned that will provide insight into the prevalence of long Covid in the population. Again, the HSE is putting together the metrics, including waiting lists, number of patients treated and number of clinics operating to fully understand the extent of the need. The executive also recently commissioned a HIQA review to further inform development of the service.

I am told the incidence of long Covid in children is rare and of short duration, but that is something we must keep a very watchful brief on. At present, for children and young people suspected of having long Covid----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: As the Head of Government, will the Taoiseach explain to the people why the Government continues to take VAT on goods and services that are at an inflated rate? I will break it down into three simple examples and explain to him how his Government is crippling businesses in the country, putting our householders into poverty and going to drive the country into a recession.

The first example is one I gave him last year but I will give it again. The tax the Government takes on fuel, which is €57 of every €100, is based on tax once you break down all the different charges. At that time, I and the Rural Independents asked the Taoiseach to cap the price on which the Government would tax fuel. We understand the Government needs tax to run the

country but it is taking tax at an inflated rate and getting in more earnings.

The second example is the cost of electricity. We saw recently that for the first six months of the year the ESB made a profit of €390 million. Over 12 months that will be €780 million. Under the laws that are there, the Government will automatically take 12% of that, which equates to approximately €93.6 million. The Government will take 12% in tax as it does from any company that makes a profit. The Government reduced the VAT on electricity to 9% but its intake is still up 30% on this time last year. I will break this down to simple brass tacks for the Taoiseach. Last year, a householder who used 1,341 units at a price of 13.2 cent per unit had a bill of €244.03. The same person today for the same usage will pay a bill, including VAT, of €457.83. The Government's 9% VAT take on that bill alone is up 30% on this time last year, so the Government loves inflation. Everyone else in this country is on the poverty line trying to survive. A business that had a €600,000 electricity bill last year is now faced with a €2.7 million charge this year. It employs 100 people and has told me it is not viable. Every business in the country is under pressure to put food on the table and keep the employment they have and our Government's VAT take on energy is up 30%. The Government is the only business in this country that is up 30%. Everyone else is down 30% as they try to keep people at work and have children go to school and college. What does the Government do? It has 30% more than it had this time last year.

The Taoiseach: First, the Government is not a business.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You can chalk that down again.

The Taoiseach: That is an important point. The Government is not a business-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: If you ran your business like I run mine, you would not be in business.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach without interruption.

The Taoiseach: We are facing the worst global energy crisis ever. It surpasses the 1970s.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We are completely overtaxed.

The Taoiseach: It was fundamentally brought about by the war on Ukraine; there is no question about it. The price today for United Kingdom gas on the wholesale markets is 287 pence. By the way, it was 463 pence last week.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am talking about tax, Taoiseach; VAT.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please let the Taoiseach answer.

The Taoiseach: This day two years ago, the price-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Tax.

The Taoiseach: -----was 40 pence a therm.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Tax.

The Taoiseach: That also illustrates what has happened in respect of gas prices and other energy prices.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Tax.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He will not answer.

The Taoiseach: The future markets do not look good, either, as a therm of gas to be delivered in January will cost 533 pence and March deliveries are priced at 506 pence. That all indicates the enormous crisis not just Ireland but every country in Europe and, indeed, across the world by and large is currently facing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: A big tax take.

The Taoiseach: The Government has taken measures and we have reduced the excise duty on petrol, diesel and green diesel until mid-October. We will deal with issues in the budget relating to all of that. People save between €9 and €12 each time they fill their tank. We have also given energy credits back to people to cut their bills. I refer to the €2.5 billion basically that was allocated between the budget and the cost-of-living packages. We are planning a multibillion euro cost-of-living package now in the forthcoming budget to alleviate pressures on households, to protect jobs in terms of the cost of this crisis on enterprise itself, and to support a range of entities that provide services to the people in terms of education in particular, in terms of schools. The Deputy said Government loves inflation; Government hates inflation. Inflation corrodes people's disposable incomes but also damages the economy in the long run. It presents challenging issues to Government and is providing challenging issues to governments across Europe. The challenge for us is to maintain and, in some instances, expand services and reduce costs to families, which we will do and have done. We have reduced costs on public transport.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: If people have access to public transport.

The Taoiseach: Lots of people do use public transport.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: If they have it.

The Taoiseach: For those people we have reduced costs. We have also reduced costs of health services. The drugs payment scheme, DPS, monthly threshold has gone to €80, which is a significant decline on what it was two years ago.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is amazing; he believes it himself.

The Taoiseach: Through a variety of measures, including pay and tax reductions, we have taken efforts to reduce the pressure on the public and protect jobs. In the forthcoming budget and cost-of-living package we will take measures as well to alleviate the pressures on people who are feeling it heavily out there; there is no doubt about that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach has just said one true thing, which is that the Government is not a business. He has explained that he does not understand business and neither does any of his Cabinet. If he understood business, he would understand how to live in this country. These are the Taoiseach's own records. I see Deputy Niall Collins over there having a good laugh, the same man who turned around and told the hotels in this country they were gouging. It was the Dublin hotels that were gouging, not the Limerick ones and the other ones. However, no, he did not get his facts right either.

I refer back to the Taoiseach. The VAT take so far this year is a staggering €15.4 billion,

30% more than this time last year, which means the Government has taken in €4.6 billion more in VAT this year than last year. That means in business terms that the State has a massive profit. That means everyone else in this country is at a massive deficit, whether they are in business or wherever they are working; whatever they do, they are in a deficit. That is because the Taoiseach and his Cabinet do not understand business; I do. I am in business. I live it every day in real life. If I ran my business like the Government runs its business, I would not be in business.

The Taoiseach: Again, Government is not a business.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Exactly, it does not understand business.

The Taoiseach: Does the Deputy understand that point?

Deputy Niall Collins: No, he does not.

The Taoiseach: It is a very fundamental point in terms of how society----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Is it?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: So you dictate to everyone else's business.

The Taoiseach: No. The Government has to be the key instrument of the social contract in making sure that when a child is born in this country, that child has access to early education, the best of health services, and has an opportunity to progress to primary school, secondary school, further education and third level. That costs money.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You are taxing their families out of existence.

The Taoiseach: Tax does contribute and revenue generated----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Some 30% more, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Deputy, you have been interrupting non-stop every time I get up to speak.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Yes because you are not getting it.

The Taoiseach: I have not interrupted you.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Because you cannot hold a candle to me.

The Taoiseach: At least have the basic decorum that this Parliament demands that you allow people to answer your question.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You are not able to.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is this in terms of the revenue that we have raised, the country is in significant debt. We borrow, and borrowed during Covid. The Deputy can go to any enterprise or business out there. I meet his businesses all the time and I meet businesses that provide services to all of us. What do they say about Government? They say, "Thank you for helping during Covid-19."

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: My God.

The Taoiseach: They acknowledge the intervention the Government made in an unprecedented way-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Some 30% up-----

The Taoiseach: -----to keep jobs and enterprises intact.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: -----from last year.

The Taoiseach: The proof of the pudding-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Income.

The Taoiseach: -----is that we kept them intact.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You did.

The Taoiseach: We kept them intact. Do you know what? We will do everything we possibly can to protect jobs again in this unprecedented crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It is an unprecedented energy crisis. What I find shocking is the inability of the Deputy's group ever to acknowledge the war in Ukraine-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: That was the first thing that made the Taoiseach angry-----

The Taoiseach: -----as having any impact-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: -----and lose his temper.

The Taoiseach: -----on the crisis that we are currently experiencing. The Deputy never acknowledged it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach is getting very loud now-----

The Taoiseach: For some reason, he does not want to acknowledge it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: -----for the first time in a long time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please. I think the public watching us would expect us to behave a little more calmly and rationally when we are dealing with these matters.

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 Sittings and Business of the Dáil (without debate)
- Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Second

Stage, resumed)

- Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2022 [Seanad] (Second Stage)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re National Retrofit Plan, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 and the Planning and Development (Solar Safeguarding Zone) Regulations 2022 (without debate)

- Screening of Third Country Transactions Bill 2022 (Second Stage)

- Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill [Seanad] (Second Stage)

- Taillte Éireann Bill 2022 (Second Stage)

- Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Bill 2022 (Report and Final Stages) (to be taken no earlier than 6 p.m. and to conclude within 60 minutes)

- Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 90 minutes)

Private Members' Business shall be the Motion re Tackling Ireland's energy security – a Roadmap for Self-sustainability, selected by the Rural Independent Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill [Seanad] (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded)

- Screening of Third Country Transactions Bill 2022 (Second Stage, resumed, if not previously concluded)

- Tailte Éireann Bill 2022 (Second Stage)

Thursday evening business shall be Second Stage of the Pensions (Amendment) (Transparency in Charges) Bill 2021.

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) proceedings on any second reading motion on a Government Bill shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted either at 5.30 p.m., or one hour and 40 minutes after the conclusion of Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1), whichever is the later, and Government business shall not be resumed thereafter; and

(ii) private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall, in any event, be taken on either the adjournment or conclusion of Government business as provided for in paragraph (i), with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications and for topical issues; and

2. the Motion re Sittings and Business of the Dáil shall be taken without debate.

In relation to Wednesday'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) Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1) shall not be taken; and

(ii) the sitting shall be suspended pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) at the time when Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach would normally be taken;

2. the Motion re Referral to Joint Committee of proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2022 and the Planning and Development (Solar Safeguarding Zone) Regulations 2022 shall be taken without debate;

3. proceedings on any second reading motion on a Government Bill shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted either at 6 p.m., or three hours and 56 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later;

4. in relation to proceedings on the Bretton Woods Agreements (Amendment) Bill 2022, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) Report and Final Stages shall be taken either at 6 p.m., or on the adjournment or conclusion of proceedings on the second reading motion on a Government Bill three hours and 56 minutes after the conclusion of the SOS, whichever is the later; and

(ii) Report and Final Stages shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after one hour by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance;

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Transport; and

6. the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Road Traffic and Roads Bill 2021.

In relation to Thursday's business and the business for Tuesday 27th September, 2022, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders

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shall be modified on Thursday to the extent that topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall be taken either at 7 p.m., or on the conclusion of Government business, whichever is the earlier; and

2. oral Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 46 shall not be taken on Tuesday, 27th September, 2022.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Order of Business agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last January, the HSE published a review of a junior doctor's treatment of child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, patients in south Kerry. That review found that 46 children suffered significant harm as a result of inappropriately prescribed medication and a further 181 children were put at risk of harm. The HSE confirms that it has commenced a review of the files of patients treated by this same doctor in north Kerry over five years. A five-year review is far too narrow and will not get to the bottom of the scandal. These failures were systemic and date back well beyond the five-year timeframe. Since 2007, approximately 7,000 children have been through the CAMHS system in Kerry, so the sample needs to be extended to a full review of all north Kerry CAMHS cases over the past 15 years. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that this happens so families finally get the answers they deserve.

The Taoiseach: First, again, in the Maskey report, Dr. Seán Maskey, who carried out the lookback review at south Kerry CAMHS, previously reviewed not just files in south Kerry but also a small number of files in north Kerry. Dr. Maskey included 35 files from north Kerry CAMHS in his review. For completeness and as matter good practice, the HSE is currently screening files in north Kerry so it can identify any remaining files where the doctor involved may have had an involvement at any level. The HSE expects that many of these files will have previously been identified. This is not a review; it is a preliminary screening. Once files have been screened, any cases where there may be a potential for a clinical concern will be examined by Dr. Maskey. The HSE has asked Dr. Maskey to do this work given his experience, knowledge and his familiarity given the work he has already done. Dr. Maskey indicated that he will be available to undertake this work in the coming months. The HSE is currently approximately halfway through the preliminary screening.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. His time is up.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Over the next three days, thousands of SIPTU members working in the community and disability services and section 39 organisations will be taking targeted strike action in counties Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Galway and Donegal. While many public servants are balloting over the Building Momentum agreement, section 39 and community workers remain outside any formal pay negotiation mechanism and have not seen any restoration or, indeed, increase in their pay in nearly 14 years. What will the Government do finally, if anything, for these workers in order to ensure they stay in this sector providing services for the most vulnerable in our society? These organisations are losing workers to the HSE and to people and organisations outside the sector. We are facing an absolute crisis in the sector heading into this winter and into 2023.

The Taoiseach: Every effort should be made through the normal industrial machinery mechanisms in this State to resolve this issue. The HSE believes this industrial action will significantly impact on the children's disability network teams and other multidisciplinary services, potentially leading to appointments having to be rescheduled and so on. I acknowledge the

important role that section 39 workers and organisations play in our health and disability services. They have a key role to play in providing services to people, both those with disabilities and older people. As the Deputy is aware, it is a complex area, with about 2,240 organisations under section 39 across the country employing about 100,000 staff. In our view, it is just like previous occasions in that when issues arose they were resolved between union and employer negotiations involving the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and others.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: House prices have never been so high. The number of people who are homeless has never been so high. Young people living at home in their late 20s and into their early 30s are talking about emigrating to find somewhere affordable to live and be able to move out of home, and increasing numbers of them are doing so. In the most recent election, Fianna Fáil promised 10,000 affordable homes each year. Last year, zero affordable purchase homes were delivered by the Government. This year, the Government has promised more than 4,000 affordable and cost-rental homes will be delivered, yet the capital expenditure on housing is running at more than 20% less now than it was at this time last year. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is not answering questions about how many affordable homes have been completed this year. Will the Taoiseach answer the question? How many affordable homes have been completed so far this year?

The Taoiseach: The Housing for All plan that the Minister published last year represents the most substantial policy response and funding response to the housing crisis that we have seen in the past decade. No political party in the Opposition has produced anything near the substance of the Housing for All plan.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: The Government is not delivering on it.

The Taoiseach: None of them has done so.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach have an answer to the question?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Sinn Féin launched its housing plan yesterday.

The Taoiseach: They most certainly have not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the number?

The Taoiseach: In addition to the importance of the plan, there is the legislation that has been passed in the past two years.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the number?

The Taoiseach: Covid did hit construction in terms of the two lockdowns-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has been asked for a number but he is not providing it.

The Taoiseach: -----and then there is the current situation in terms of energy prices but, notwithstanding that, we expect to reach our target this year-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is that target?

The Taoiseach: -----of about 25,000 houses built in the country.

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Deputy Mattie McGrath: Which target is that?

The Taoiseach: On the affordable side, very good progress has been made on affordable housing-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How many?

The Taoiseach: -----despite the opposition of Deputies to the Land Development Agency, LDA, and various other organisations.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: Very good progress has been made on affordable housing and also on cost rental, in terms of social housing and right across the board.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is the number?

The Taoiseach: Can Deputy McDonald give me the number of houses to which Sinn Féin has objected?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Taoiseach was asked a very simple question.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: That is not a result. Sinn Féin opposed planning applications.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, can we stop bickering and get on with the questions?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: One would expect a bit of decorum from the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: A Cheann Comhairle, may I make a point of order? I have noticed in the past half hour that every time I get up to speak there are interruptions and heckles and the Deputies are not being pulled up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There are insults from the Taoiseach's side of the House.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I have a copy of the Sinn Féin housing policy that was launched yesterday-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not want to see the Deputy's housing policy. We are listening to Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are many groups that have good reason to come out onto the streets in a cost-of-living demonstration this Saturday but one group that has better reason than most comprises the thousands - probably tens of thousands - of residents in multi-unit apartment complexes who are locked into contracts for district heating systems. This week in my area, hundreds of tenants in areas such as Honeypark and Cualanor were shocked

to find that their bills had gone up by 140% overnight. They cannot switch provider. They are not regulated by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. They cannot query their bills. They are completely locked into these arrangements. Tuath Housing, Respond and Clúid Housing wrote to the Minister in May, saying that many of their tenants have faced increases in recent months of 600%, way in excess of what anybody else has faced. Companies like Kaizen Energy and Veolia Ireland are charging unit rates of three, four and five times the highest rates of the other providers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach take urgent action to control the cost of energy for people on district heating systems?

The Taoiseach: I will engage with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, who has responsibility for energy, regarding the specific issue the Deputy has raised in terms of district heating. The Government will have a whole series of measures to try to reduce pressures on households and protect jobs, as I have said. We have already allocated about €2.5 billion over the past year. We will have a cost-of-living package next week along with the budget, which is designed to take pressures off people. In regard to this specific issue I will engage with the Minister on it.

Deputy Denis Naughten: More than 9,600 people in fuel poverty have been waiting some two and a half years to access the retrofitting programme under the warmer homes scheme. While this scheme is great for those who are lucky enough to avail of it, it is of little use to address the cost of electricity today. There are 2,900 participants on the rural social scheme, many of whom are involved in outdoor maintenance work which normally winds down during the winter months. I ask that these staff be redeployed as an emergency measure to install attic insulation, attic door covers and lagging jackets in the homes of those in fuel poverty over the coming weeks. These are the simplest and most significant measures that can be taken to reduce the cost of heating this winter, saving older people and families money, reducing their risk of illness and reducing overall energy demand in the country.

The Taoiseach: The Government is investing in retrofitting on a massive scale. Some €8 billion will be allocated out to 2030. The revenue has to be generated to allow that to happen. That is giving certainty to the industry and allows the supply chain to scale up, creating thousands of high-quality jobs and delivering a critical national objective. Demand across Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, retrofit schemes has been exceptionally high since the Government's announcement. As of the end of August, more than 30,000 applications for support had been received, a 140% increase on the same period last year, and 13,500 home energy upgrades had been completed, which is up 70% compared with the same period last year. Of this number, 2,769 homes had been upgraded under SEAI energy poverty schemes, which is almost three times the number of homes upgraded in the same period last year. Latest projections from the SEAI indicate that the target of 27,000 home energy upgrades will be delivered this year. That compares with 15,000 upgrades last year.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: I could continue with more details. Everything that can be done is being done to expedite these issues.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I ask the Taoiseach again today about discrimination against bus

drivers aged over 70. I salute every man and woman in Bus Éireann and private companies who bring our children and grandchildren to school and home safely. There is chaos at the moment in regard to tickets. Many companies have two or three drivers who are approaching 70 and they will no longer be able to carry children to school when they reach 70. This is discrimination. We have raised this issue countless times. The Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, said the Department would look at this and change it. Drivers are willing to do two medical examinations a year, or three if necessary. It is not a question of having unsafe people driving. These people who are retired and like to undertake part-time work are fit, well and able to do it and they provide a valuable link in the current circumstances. They can bring kids to swimming or matches but they cannot bring them to school. It is nonsensical. It needs a change, a stroke of a pen, to allow over-70s with medical certificates to drive school buses and private buses.

The Taoiseach: I have sympathy with Deputy McGrath's position on this issue and what he advocates. There were obviously safety reasons for that age limit being introduced in the first instance but the world has moved on in that people are living longer and have better quality of life as they age. That should be taken into consideration. The Minister is looking at the issue and I will engage with him again on it.

Deputy Marian Harkin: At a recent meeting of Leitrim County Council, a number of councillors proposed and passed a motion that the HSE immediately reopen day care centres for older people which were closed due to Covid-19. I fully agree with Councillor Enda Stenson's statement that it is time to put Covid-19 to bed and reopen day care centres for the elderly throughout County Leitrim. I am not going to name the closed centres but many day care centres for older people throughout the country as well as in my constituency have not reopened. This is unfair and unacceptable. Many older people are not getting out of their homes and are developing mental health problems and becoming depressed. As one older person said to me, day care for the elderly is at the bottom of the pile. That seems to be the case. I ask the Taoiseach to do what he can to reinstate these vital services.

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I thank the Deputy for her question. At this point, Covid-19 should not be used as a reason to keep day-care facilities closed. A great deal of work was done to reopen these facilities and many supports were provided. There may be other local operational reasons for that but at this point, while this may not be the case in the future, Covid should not be a reason. I will engage with the HSE on exactly the points the Deputy has just raised and will ask it to look at the centres concerned.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The HSE's national women and infants health programme has recommended that women only be able to avail of home births if they live within 30 minutes of a maternity service. If this recommendation was implemented, it would eradicate the choice of home birthing for a large proportion of women living in Ireland. For example, in west Cork, where I am from, any woman living west of the town of Bandon would be affected, including in the towns of Clonakilty, Bantry, Skibbereen, and they would not be able to avail of a safe supervised home birth. My sister, who lives in New Zealand, has availed of four safe, successful home births. She lives an hour and a half from her nearest maternity service. We cannot allow this recommendation to be implemented. Women deserve choice and we need to ensure they have the choice of availing of a save home birth, no matter where they live in Ireland.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: The Deputy will be aware that there is an unprecedented level of roll-out in maternity care, including midwifery-led care. The next phase is home birth. The service is now being supported and has been integrated into the hospitals. We are aware of the recommendation in respect of geography and it is a matter on which I am more than happy to continue the conversation with the HSE. This is occurring in the context of a very rapid expansion of maternity services, which is critically expanding choice for women as regards birthing options.

Deputy David Stanton: The Taoiseach will probably have passed the old engine site near Midleton on his visit to the town recently. There are 56 ha of highly serviced land lying idle for the past 12 years. It cannot be used because the road outside needs a major upgrade, which was planned but has been stalled. Thousands of houses were also planned for the area and the road is quite dangerous. Will the Government revisit this issue to see if the upgrading of this project can be restarted?

The Taoiseach: I have memories of that site. Ultimately, Amgen was not in a position to locate there. In the first instance, it is a very valuable site that will ultimately land a significant project. In turn, it will become a catalyst for acceleration. The Deputy is asking that the road be done now and have it approved and upgraded. I do not disagree with him but there are constraints on the funding, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and all of that. Nonetheless, I do not disagree with anything he said and I take his point.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This Thursday, Cork City Council will open a portal for affordable housing in Tower in Blarney. Some of these affordable housing units will be sold for over €300,000. As the Taoiseach knows, house prices in Dublin are much higher than they are in Cork but still, South Dublin County Council and Fingal County Council can sell similar sized houses for €30,000 less. I have a simple question for the Taoiseach. What is the maximum price that a three-bedroom affordable family home should be sold for in Cork?

The Taoiseach: I believe the price in the Boherboy affordable scheme is much lower.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am talking about the Tower scheme.

The Taoiseach: The Boherboy scheme is in Cork also, as the Deputy is aware, and the prices are lower. Obviously, it depends on location and a whole range of factors, such as input costs and such matters. I pay tribute to Cork County Council for moving on the affordable schemes a bit faster than other local authorities. That is what we want. There is no one uniform price.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A price of €300,000 is not affordable.

The Taoiseach: There are different levels of affordability in different locations, taking into account the costs involved in developing a particular site and so forth. Our main aim and target is to get housing as affordable as we possibly can for people and, through other schemes such as the first home scheme, to make houses that young people wish to buy affordable also. It is not just the affordable housing scheme the local authorities are doing but also the first home scheme, the shared equity and help-to-buy schemes and a range of other measures that we are deploying to make housing more affordable for people.

Deputy Thomas Gould: At what price does the Taoiseach consider these houses should be selling?

3 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not auctioneers.

Deputy Thomas Gould: They are supposed to be affordable housing, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not here to provide auctioneering advice. I call Deputy Mythen.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: As the Taoiseach is aware, hundreds of children were turned down for discretionary tickets for school buses for this year alone and my own constituency of Wexford is no exception. For example, Mairéad has two children, Aoife and Michael, who have been travelling for the last five years to the same school. Aoife has had open heart surgery and lung surgery. Mairéad will have to work fewer hours in order to bring her children to school. Anna, who is a teacher, travels 30 km to work each day. It is not possible for her to collect and drop off her daughter to school each day. Her daughter has travelled for the last three years on the same bus. Then we have Ben, who had a brain tumour as a child and has mobility problems which he has surmounted and overcome. His position in a mainstream school is very important to Ben and his family but he has been refused a discretionary ticket. I ask the Taoiseach to look further into supplying additional school transport as there are many cases like this replicated across the country and in many parts of rural Wexford.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, the Minister waives all fees for the school transport scheme. This measure is saving families up to €650 a year. This very substantial cost-of-living measure should be acknowledged in any comment on this scheme. It was coupled with an increase in the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance and the extension of the school meals programme. Over 124,000 tickets have issued, an increase of 21,000 over last year, and it is higher again if we include special needs children. We have 21,000 more children on school buses this year, which is a 20% increase. There are issues as a result of that, particularly in terms of those who may have applied late with regard to tickets and so on, but we are doing everything we can. The Minister will be engaging with the education committee tomorrow in the House and working across government in terms of improving the situation for those who still have not got discretionary tickets. Because of the increase, some people lost out, which I acknowledge, but we are trying to resolve that.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: Two and half years ago, Covid struck our shores and thousands of people have died since. Some 63% of those who died in the first four months of Covid in Ireland died in nursing homes. That figure compares to 41% in the UK and 47% in Sweden. The fact remains that we need an investigation into these deaths. If these were children, I would not have to stand here to ask this question. The Taoiseach said in January of this year that he was considering a variety of options to meet the needs and concerns of families whose 22 relatives died in Dealgan House nursing home in Dundalk, so why has nothing happened? I have put down questions to the Minister for Health. As far as I am concerned, his reply to the last question was a stonewalling answer to the families. It is insulting them and they feel very much aggrieved by the Minister for Health's lack of action in dealing with this issue. It is unacceptable. If these were children, we would have had an answer long ago. I think people will accuse the Minister at this stage of being ageist in his approach to all of these deaths-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. We are over time.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: -----and his lack of accountability to the Oireachtas in dealing

with them.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: I thank the Deputy. As he will be aware, I have met the families. There has been extensive engagement and extensive work has been done. The issue we have in Ireland, as the Deputy will be very well aware, is that any review that seeks to make findings against people becomes very legalistic very quickly and, ultimately, does not give the families the answers they want. I have stated here several times and I will state again that these families deserve answers. They are asking very reasonable questions and they deserve answers to those questions. I am engaging with the Department. The Department is seeking a way of doing that in a way that gets the families the answers they deserve but does not end up getting bogged down in years and years of legal debate, injunctions and so forth, which, unfortunately, can happen if this is done incorrectly.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: One of the objectives of the programme for Government was to ensure that early intervention services for young children with disability would be available universally across the State. This is particularly important in terms of the various therapies that children get as outpatients. I accept that this is not just for one Department. What is being done by the Government to reduce the length of time it is taking to recruit people to provide these therapies and to make sure that, for example, absences such as illness or maternity leave are covered fully? There are huge gaps in the service, particularly in my constituency, where there are waiting lists to which we see no end.

The Taoiseach: First, I accept the points the Deputy is making. There are huge gaps. In my view, the roll-out of the progressing disability services, PDS, model has been very problematic and challenging over the years. I would have had my own views prior to coming into government in terms of the PDS model. I have engaged with the Ministers for Health and Education, the Minister of State with responsibility for special needs education and the Minister of State with responsibility for disability services, Deputy Rabbitte. We have had a number of meetings. Our first decision was to make sure special schools would have therapy supports restored to them that had, as part of the wider PDS model, been taken from them and spread to that wider model. There is a philosophy behind the PDS model, which I have to acknowledge, but I believe there needs to be strong multidisciplinary teams in education settings. That is a view I have. Recruitment is an issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up.

The Taoiseach: Within different parts of the health services, therapists can be recruited more easily than seems to be the case for the disability sector. That is a challenge. We are meeting regularly now to try to deal with this and the HSE is part of those meetings.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I have heard what the Taoiseach has said on the issue I raise but I am really at my wit's end in trying to get answers from Bus Éireann for parents in Roscommon and Galway regarding school transport. I acknowledge the waiving of fees. It would have been a roaring success had the capacity been put in to make it work. It would have worked very well. I have one case, for example, involving a child whose mother died last year. The mother would usually have done the application and Bus Éireann told the father that, under the circumstances, it would issue a ticket. That ticket has not issued and I cannot even get hold of someone in Bus Éireann to get an update. I ring Athlone and Galway and am given a number for Dublin. When I ring Dublin, nobody can speak to me because of the general data protection regulation. The communication has been really poor. I do not know whether additional resources were put into

Bus Éireann before the announcement on waiving school transport fees was made. It has been a real mess. I ask, in regard to additional capacity for school transport and also in respect of communication, particularly with parents, that things be done far better as we move forward.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I would appreciate if the Taoiseach would not respond with reference to the figure of 21,000. Contact is the issue.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy cannot raise this issue and pretend there is no extra 21,000 places, which everybody in the Opposition seems to want to do. I am not saying she is doing that.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am asking about contact with Bus Éireann. I acknowledged the waiving of fees.

The Taoiseach: In that specific case, the Deputy acknowledged the person should be getting the ticket.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I cannot speak to anyone in Bus Éireann.

The Taoiseach: If Bus Éireann said it was going to give the person a ticket, it should give them the ticket. I do not dispute that. It is a matter at a local level in terms of operations. The more fundamental point, to be fair, is that the company needs more buses, and it is securing more places on buses, because of the exponential growth. The easier thing would have been to do nothing and everybody would have gone along normally with the normal places.

Deputy David Cullinane: Doing it right would have been a better option.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I have acknowledged the waiving of fees.

The Taoiseach: These are decisions that will be long lasting and will leave a legacy in terms of how we deal with climate change and getting people out of cars and into buses. The decision was taken to do it and we did it. It has caused challenges; I do not dispute that. We will sort those challenges out in the coming short while.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am very concerned that the citizens information service is being downgraded in Carlow-Kilkenny. I know this is happening because my local service in St. Catherine's community services centre has been totally downgraded and has no development manager. Why was it decided to limit and dilute this service for the community that was traditionally provided by trained volunteers? Why were the volunteers who were operating so successfully not communicated with in advance? Is there a future for local citizens information centres when they are being closed? The decision to have paid staff leading the service, taking over from expert volunteers, is nothing short of a reduction in service. I want to know why that decision was made. It is unacceptable and the people of Carlow-Kilkenny are absolutely up in arms over it. We really need to address it.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is, in my view, a serious development that needs review. The citizens information service was one of the more outstanding services provided. I said last week in the House that when I was Lord Mayor of Cork, I gave the freedom of the city to the late Maureen Curtis Black, who was a pioneer of the citizens information service and a volunteer in it. Civic engagement is always very important in society

and where we have volunteers, we should cherish them. I will go back and raise this with the line Department.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I appreciate that.

Deputy David Cullinane: Earlier today, the Taoiseach commended public servants on their response in handling Covid-19, and rightly so. Many of those public servants, however, have still not been paid the pandemic bonus payment. Members of the Defence Forces and the fire services have not been paid, and then there are tens of thousands of agency workers, nursing home staff and many others who have also still not been paid. My understanding is that the Government is now looking at hiring a consultancy firm to figure out how those staff are going to be paid. We have still not worked out how they are going to be paid, never mind when they are going to be paid. This stings for those workers still waiting. Can some clarity be given regarding the timeframes for when these workers will be paid? I ask this because the situation is unacceptable.

Deputy Stephen Donnelly: As the Deputy is aware, the vast majority of HSE and sections 38 and 39 staff have been paid. I am not satisfied that other arms of the State, including the fire brigade and the Defence Forces, for example, have not been paid. I have communicated in recent days with the Deputy and the HSE regarding this point. When it comes to paying private businesses, I am not satisfied with the pace at which this has happened. However, the HSE is concerned, and it is right to be, that if it makes payments to private businesses and it overpays, representatives of the organisation will be dragged in here and in front of the Committee of Public Accounts and made to account for not having the requisite processes in place. What the HSE is trying to do is the right thing. It is trying to ensure that there is absolute transparency and that the money paid out is the right amount. I agree with the Deputy that the pace at which this has happened has not been fast enough and I am engaged with the HSE to that end.

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: Last but not least, I call Deputy Higgins.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I raise with the Taoiseach the serious backlog in national car test, NCT, appointments. The Covid-19 lockdown obviously had a part to play in creating the backlogs, but these do not seem to have been caught up with. The fastest appointment it is possible to secure at my local testing centre in Fonthill is in March 2023, some six months away. People are contacting me because they are concerned about being stopped by members of An Garda Síochána with an out-of-date NCT certificate on their vehicle, even though they have an appointment booked for the nearest available date. In fact, one of my constituents was stopped by members of An Garda Síochána and was issued with penalty points for having an out-of-date NCT certificate, despite having an appointment booked. Given the circumstances and the backlog, this seems unreasonable and unfair. At the height of the pandemic, we extended the validity of NCT certificates and it is clear we need to do something now to support people in this situation. What can we do to assist the Road Safety Authority, RSA, in providing a timely and efficient NCT service?

The Taoiseach: I take the Deputy's points and I will talk to the Minister regarding this issue. A priority waitlist for test appointments has been established to allow vehicle owners to avail of any test cancellations. The average waiting period for a test appointment is now just under 24 days. The Deputy referred to an appointment in March, so I will need to follow up on

this. The average waiting time now compares with 12 days pre-Covid-19. The pandemic was responsible for much of this situation, as the Deputy is aware. I will, however, come back to her concerning the overall point. The RSA has statutory responsibility in this area. I am told the average waiting time for an appointment is 24 days, but I will check this in the context of the case highlighted by the Deputy and perhaps someone in the RSA might be able to shed light on this issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to make a point in light of comments made at the start of this. It has become very much a part of daily life here that the Chair is routinely ignored by people who should know better, regardless of who is sitting here. I took the comments made by the Taoiseach and the Chief Whip earlier to suggest that I was not doing enough to protect them-----

The Taoiseach: No, that-----

An Ceann Comhairle: -----from the Opposition. Now, I will review the video of the contributions together with the Clerk of the Dáil and I will correspond with the Taoiseach afterwards.

Sittings and Business of Dáil: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, or in the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders, and unless the Dáil shall otherwise order, the following arrangements shall apply in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on 27th, 28th and 29th September, 2022:

(1) (i) the Dáil shall meet at 1 p.m. on Tuesday, and at 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday and Thursday;

(ii) on Wednesday, the Dáil shall adjourn not later than 9.24 p.m.;

(iii) on Thursday, the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues;

(iv) Leaders' Questions within the meaning of Standing Order 36 shall not be taken on Tuesday, and on Wednesday and Thursday shall be taken as the second item of business after Oral Questions to a member of the Government other than the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1);

(v) there shall be no Order of Business on Tuesday within the meaning of Standing Order 35;

(vi) within the meaning of Standing Order 35A, there shall be no Questions on Policy or Legislation on Tuesday or Wednesday, and on Thursday Questions on Policy or Legislation shall be taken immediately following Leaders' Questions;

(vii) Oral Questions to a member of the Government other than the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1) shall be taken on Wednesday and Thursday at 10.30 a.m.; Oral Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 46(1) shall

not be taken on Wednesday: Provided that written questions pursuant to Standing Order 50(2) shall appear on the Questions Paper and be answered in the normal way;

(viii) private members' business shall not be taken;

(ix) topical issues pursuant to Standing Order 37 shall not be taken on Tuesday or Wednesday and shall be taken on Thursday as the last item of business;

(x) leave may not be sought under Standing Order 42 to adjourn the Dáil on a specific and important matter of public interest;

(xi) no Committee report shall be taken on Thursday evening pursuant to Standing Order 159(2);

(xii) any divisions demanded on Tuesday shall be taken immediately; and

(xiii) the weekly division time pursuant to Standing Order 80(2) shall be taken on Tuesday night, as outlined in paragraph (2)(iii);

(2) in relation to the sitting of the Dáil on Tuesday, 27th September, 2022, the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) the Dáil shall sit later than 10.30 p.m. and the motion for the General Financial Resolution shall be moved not later than 12 midnight;

(ii) subject to subparagraph (iii), the business to be transacted shall be the Budget Statements and Financial Motions by Deputy Pascal Donohoe, Minister for Finance, and Deputy Michael McGrath, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and statements made pursuant to subparagraph (b), and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the Budget Statements of Minister Donohoe and Minister McGrath shall not exceed 45 minutes each;

(b) following the Budget Statements of the Ministers, statements may be made by the spokespersons on Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for the parties and groups in Opposition in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Sinn Féin – not exceeding 60 minutes in the aggregate; and

— the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group – not exceeding 45 minutes in the aggregate for each party or group; and

all members may share their time; and

(c) following the statements made pursuant to subparagraph (b), the sitting shall be suspended for 30 minutes, and on the resumption of the sitting, a Minister or Minister of State shall move an allocation of time motion for the Financial Motions; and

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(iii) upon the moving of the General Financial Resolution, the debate shall be adjourned and the weekly division time shall be taken immediately, and the Dáil shall adjourn forthwith on the conclusion of the weekly division time; and

(3) in relation to the sittings of the Dáil on Wednesday and Thursday, 28th September and 29th September, 2022, the business to be transacted shall be the business outlined in this Resolution along with the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution, to which the following arrangements shall apply:

(i) on Wednesday—

(a) after Leaders' Questions, Leaders' speeches shall be taken, in the following order and in accordance with the following arrangements:

— Taoiseach and Tánaiste – not exceeding 30 minutes each;

— Green Party – not exceeding 20 minutes;

— Sinn Féin – not exceeding 30 minutes; and

— the Labour Party, Social Democrats, People Before Profit-Solidarity, the Regional Group, the Rural Independent Group, and the Independent Group – not exceeding 15 minutes for each party or group; and

all members may share time; and

(b) the sitting shall be suspended for an hour on the conclusion of Leaders' speeches and shall not be otherwise suspended pursuant to the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders;

(ii) on Wednesday and Thursday—

(a) apart from the Leaders' speeches, the resumed debate on the General Financial Resolution shall be conducted in 135-minute speaking rounds, in accordance with the arrangements contained in the report of the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform adopted by Order of the Dáil on 30th July, 2020; and

(b) when there are no further members offering, the debate shall adjourn, and, in any event, on Thursday, 29th September, 2022, the debate shall adjourn not later than 6.15 p.m.; and

(iii) on Thursday—

(a) any member may move for leave to introduce a Bill in accordance with Standing Order 174; and

(b) the sitting shall be suspended for 40 minutes on the conclusion of Questions on Policy or Legislation and shall not be otherwise suspended pursuant to the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders.

Question put and agreed to.

Dáil Éireann
Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent to which he has had discussions with other European and NATO leaders in regard to EU Security and Defence issues; and if defence and security issues were discussed at a recent dinner in Madrid. [35894/22]

2. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the EuroAtlantic dinner in Madrid. [45761/22]

3. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his meetings with European Union and NATO leaders on the margins of a recent NATO summit in Madrid. [45762/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, together.

I attended a meeting over dinner in Madrid on Wednesday, 29 June 2022, hosted by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, which brought together leaders of EU member states and those of NATO member countries. While the event took place alongside a NATO summit, it was a separate event and not a part of the summit. The discussion covered current political and security challenges in Europe, not least the need for a strong common response to Russia's illegal and immoral war against Ukraine. There was remarkable consensus that the issues at stake include not only Ukraine's right to freedom and sovereignty, but also our shared democratic values and the vitally important rules-based international order on which they depend.

Ahead of the meeting, I had the opportunity to meet bilaterally with the Austrian Chancellor, Karl Nehammer. Our discussions covered a range of issues including how we, as fellow neutral EU member states, can best contribute to efforts to support Ukraine and to ensure Russia's aggression does not prevail. At the event itself, I spoke to many fellow leaders, including Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre and Icelandic Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. I also met with President Joe Biden; the President of the European Council, Charles Michel; and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.

In my contribution, I made the important point that while Ireland is militarily neutral, we are not, and have never been, politically neutral and we have made a significant contribution to the EU's resolute response to the war. I pointed to our unwavering commitment to international peace and security, including through our role on the United Nations Security Council. I also noted the ongoing review of Ireland's security and defence arrangements to ensure we are ready to meet new threats and challenges.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach for that comprehensive answer. Has any consideration been given to the threat to neutral countries posed by aggressive nations, having regard to the experience of the Second World War and that more recently of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which that country seems determined to continue until it has suppressed Ukraine?

Deputy Seán Haughey: I believe the Taoiseach was right to attend the EuroAtlantic dinner. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has major implications for Ireland and the world, especially

concerning energy, food and migration. It is important at this time that Ireland shows solidarity with like-minded democracies and advocates a rules-based international order. In this context, Ireland should continue to commit to the evolving Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, of the EU. As the Taoiseach is aware, we have been an active participant in civilian and military CSDP missions and operations, and I take it we are open to the idea of the proposed mission to provide military training to Ukrainian personnel. It is clear that participation in CSDP does not alter our defence policy of military neutrality. For a start, this would be incompatible with our commitment to the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Therefore, has the Taoiseach further considered his suggestion that a citizens' assembly should examine the whole issue of non-alignment at this time?

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach is on record as saying he wishes to have an informed debate about military issues and this country in future. The NATO summit in Madrid committed not just to an arms race but to a nuclear arms race. The strategic compass declares full support for the “forward deployment of” US nuclear weapons on European soil. At a time when millions of ordinary Europeans face the threat of being frozen in their homes this winter or struggling to put food on the table, it is outrageous that NATO is committing to spend billions on a new nuclear arms race. The Taoiseach attended the EuroAtlantic summit dinner that took place immediately after the NATO summit. It was held in the same city and had a huge overlap in participation. Therefore, will the Taoiseach join with me in opposing what so many of his EuroAtlantic summit partners signed up to, namely, a fresh “forward deployment” of US nuclear weapons on European soil?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government appears to be making a habit of attending NATO meetings and meetings of NATO allies. I do not believe it is an accident at all, but part of a conscious drive to integrate this country with a process of militarisation led by US imperialism. I asked last week whether the State was represented at the fifth so-called Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting, which happened in Germany a couple of weeks ago. When I asked about it last week, the Taoiseach told me that he was “not aware of the specific meeting in question,” and that he “does not believe ... [I am] correct ... [in my] analysis that ... [they] are using the war in Ukraine to drive the militarisation of the world or NATO.” I want to ask again as this is important. Was the Irish Government represented at the Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting which took place at the Ramstein US air base, which is also NATO headquarters in Germany, on 8 September?

There are images on the NATO website of the Irish delegate present at a previous Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting. I reiterate that the US Secretary of Defense has described this as “our NATO alliance.” It was also mentioned that there were nearly 50 countries present for this fifth meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. I am opposed to this integration into a NATO alliance but this House, at the very least, has the right to know whether the Government is participating in this military alliance. We need to have clear answers about our participation and should really have a debate about it.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Durkan was the first to raise this matter. It was interesting that after the immoral invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which was an unprovoked and savage attack on the people of Ukraine with missiles hitting civilian targets and killing innocent people, including children, Finland and Sweden, which had a different position prior to this war, decided to join NATO. It was their decision. They are closer to Russia than we are and felt vulnerable. Around that time, I visited Finland. I had my visit organised before their decision. Both the Prime Minister and the President of Finland were in a position to articulate to me the entire sea

change that this invasion caused, in terms of the national psyche of Finland in the first instance. They said that everything they were told as children in terms of fearing a potential invasion of Russia had transpired in terms of the invasion of Ukraine, so much so that public opinion had changed dramatically in favour of joining the military alliance that is NATO. The same happened in Sweden. That is the impact so far in terms of how those countries feel threatened and vulnerable.

The same applies, by the way, to the European Continent in terms of what could happen in the future and the degree to which the EU on its own, or at least certain countries within the EU, would be in a position to repel significantly attacks of this kind. Hence, the countries on the east see this as an existential threat because of their history. Countries like Estonia are clear that this is existential to them. When I speak to the Prime Minister of Estonia, she points out that the only time of freedom her parents got was that time between the First World War and the Second World War. She speaks about Stalin, who was brutal in terms of what he did to Estonia, Poland and other countries, and Hitler. These people's life experiences are far different from ours. Sometimes we should be less arrogant in the House in proclaiming what they should and should not do. If we had lived through what their parents and grandparents lived through, we would have a different perspective in terms of the potential of Russia to violate their territorial integrity and their nationhood, as has happened in Ukraine. I hope I have answered Deputy Durkan's questions in that respect.

I agree with Deputy Haughey that the broader aspects of this war bring in energy and migration. It is a terrible tragedy that migration has become a weapon of war of cynical countries, such as Russia and Belarus. The latter encouraged people to fly in from the Middle East, and indeed flew some of them in, and then brought them to the borders and left them in over the borders pretending to them that it was Germany. That is what is going on. I have no doubt that Putin knew what he was doing by bombing entire cities so that the people would flee Ukraine into Europe. We have had the biggest humanitarian disaster since the Second World War in terms of up to 7 million more displaced, with the vast majority having to flee into Europe. On the food issue, there has been an improvement made in terms of the opening up of the Black Sea but there are real concerns, between a combination of climate change and the war, in terms of future hunger in the world.

With the evolution of the Common Security and Defence Policy, it is the best place for Ireland to be in right now. That is my view. It has evolved. We have contributed to peace missions in that context and to interoperability training missions, etc., which make sense, particularly when we are in serving with the UN in Lebanon. We work with Polish troops and work with other countries which are members of the EU, and it makes sense that the same equipment is used and that there is interoperability. That is how our policies have evolved. We are not a member of NATO. That is clear to NATO. It is clear to us. We are not politically neutral but we are militarily neutral.

On the possibility of a citizens' assembly, hopefully the existing ones will come to a conclusion shortly. I would like to think that sometime next year, we could commence a citizens' assembly in relation to the broader issue of neutrality and defence, etc., because we have issues around cybersecurity and broader issues in terms of our vulnerability at sea. In terms of all of the data that goes under our seabeds, we must be mindful of the economic presence in Ireland. We also must be mindful of how vulnerable are we in terms of radar. That is why the Commission on the Defence Forces has articulated the need for a significant increase in defence spending to protect ourselves as a country. We would have the lowest level of military expenditure

across Europe and I smile at times when the Deputies opposite talk about militarisation. The one thing Ireland has not done in the past 20 years, 30 years or 40 years is to militarise.

Deputy Paul Murphy: How much is the Government increasing the military budget by?

The Taoiseach: I said that over the past 40 years we have not militarised as a country. We should stop pretending that we have because we have not.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government is trying to do it now. It is playing catch-up now.

The Taoiseach: That is not what we are trying to do now. I would point out that the defence commission has made recommendations. The Government has accepted those recommendations, not in their entirety but in terms of the middle tier of ambition which by any yardstick is not militarisation, but getting the bare essentials in place that we can protect vital assets, protect our seas and protect ourselves from a cybersecurity perspective, and also be conscious that we do things at a more reasonable level than we have been doing. Frankly, that would be our view on that.

I do not agree with Deputy Barry's view of NATO. NATO is not interested in an arms race. It is interested in defence. It is a defence alliance. It is not an attack alliance.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Tell that to the people in the Middle East.

The Taoiseach: What is extremely insightful in the contributions that I have heard today is that it is all about NATO. NATO did not start this war on Ukraine. The reason for the EuroAtlantic EU-NATO dinner and engagement was because of the war on Ukraine. NATO did not start that war. Most of the leaders of NATO who I know did everything they possibly could to stop the war from ever starting. They spoke to President Putin. They asked him not to commence the war. They invited him to talks around the security architecture of Europe if he felt there were vulnerabilities for Russia. It is a needless war that was caused by Russia. It is interesting to note, in particular, from the far left, that right throughout this war the protests are being organised around NATO. There are no protests around Russia.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have been at protests outside the Russian Embassy and I did not see the Taoiseach there.

The Taoiseach: It is all about NATO. It is all about NATO's aggression, allegedly, and NATO's militarisation when actually it is Russian aggression that has created this world crisis that we are in. No one wants to be in this. The members of NATO want their economies to work.

Deputy Mick Barry: The question is about new US nuclear weapons in Europe. Will the Taoiseach please answer?

The Taoiseach: We favour nuclear non-proliferation and we work at the United Nations to try to achieve that. We have been one of the most consistent member states of the UN to advocate for nuclear non-proliferation and are perceived as such.

Deputy Mick Barry: The Taoiseach is for it.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Paul Murphy----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can I just get one word in?

The Taoiseach: I will come back to the Deputy on the specifics.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, the time is up. We need to move on to the next question, which is Question No. 4.

Ukraine War

4. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to Ukraine. [38168/22]

5. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the second summit of the Crimea Platform. [44785/22]

6. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent participation in the international Crimea Platform. [44816/22]

7. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his visit to Ukraine. [44817/22]

8. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to Ukraine. [45725/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 4 to 8, inclusive, together.

I made an official visit to Ukraine on 6 July at the invitation of President Zelenskyy. I was honoured to be the first Taoiseach to do so.

During my visit I visited the towns of Borodyanka, Bucha and Irpin, north of Kyiv, where I heard about and saw at first hand the abuses and destruction inflicted by Russian troops. As the Ukrainian army has recently liberated parts of eastern Ukraine that have been under Russian occupation, we are, unfortunately, learning of horrific and brutal acts carried out in these regions also, with the uncovering of mass burials of victims in Izium.

While in Kyiv, I visited an exhibition of artifacts from the war and artworks inspired by it. I laid a soft toy at a memorial to the children killed in the war since February.

I also visited the national memorial to the Holodomor, Ukraine's catastrophic man-made famine of the 1930s.

At my meeting with the President, we discussed the security and humanitarian situation in Ukraine and its economic impacts. I congratulated President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people on achieving EU candidate status on 23 June. He thanked Ireland for our strong support and advocacy for Ukraine's EU aspirations and for the welcome and support provided in Ireland to Ukrainians fleeing the war. I invited President Zelenskyy to visit Ireland when he is free to do so.

I met separately with Prime Minister Shmyhal. We discussed the pathway to EU membership for Ukraine, sanctions, the ongoing situation in the war and plans for reconstruction.

On 23 August, I joined President Zelenskyy and EU and global leaders at a digital meeting

of the international Crimea Platform. Participants in the Crimea Platform remain committed to Ukraine's sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, extending to its territorial waters. We reiterated our resolve to maintain pressure on Russia to end its occupation of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol without delay and to restore Ukraine's control over its sovereign territory. I reiterated Ireland's unwavering support for Ukraine in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity. I also expressed strong support for its EU membership. I highlighted Russia's cynical exploitation of hunger, energy and migration to weaken the resolve not just of the Ukrainian people but also of those in the international community who stand with them. Russia will not succeed. I expressed my grave concern about Russian military activity at the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, which should be under Ukrainian civilian control, supported by the International Atomic Energy Agency. I welcomed shipments of grain and other foodstuffs from Ukrainian ports through the Black Sea grain initiative. I also expressed concern about the gross violation of human rights, in particular against indigenous Crimean Tatars.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: To what extent did the Taoiseach see at first hand evidence of the atrocities we hear so much about? What was the reaction of his colleagues with whom he had discussions at a later stage? What is the possibility of introducing some mechanism whereby countries subject to this kind of aggression from Russia - or anywhere else, for that matter - might expect to receive assistance in a meaningful way to protect themselves?

My last point is about experiences of the past, when big countries decided to overlook national or international boundaries and decided to take it upon themselves to impose a law on allegedly subservient countries. Did any discussion on that take place?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Taoiseach for his fulsome response and for travelling to Ukraine on behalf of all of us. It was an important undertaking by him and other members of the Government over recent months, at a difficult time in the conflict. It is fundamentally my belief that as soon as this conflict is ended and, crucially, as soon as Russia is defeated, we will be able to draw a line under the serious challenges this is presenting to every household in this country, socially and economically, as well as the extremely worrying security threats that have come with it.

Further to the Taoiseach's response, I wish to ask about the collective European commitment, and indeed the Irish commitment, to providing finance to address not just the current challenges Ukraine faces but also the future challenges it faces in rebuilding, following this vicious invasion, on a path that will allow Ukraine to swiftly join the EU. Are we doing enough as a member state and as a collective Union, or could we do more?

Deputy Seán Haughey: As we know, the horrors of the war in Ukraine continue. The spirit of the Ukrainian people is extraordinary, and we are in awe of their courage, bravery and resolve in defending their country.

We should all be concerned about the threat posed by the recent military activity around the nuclear plant at Zaporizhzhia, as the Taoiseach said. The Ukrainian authorities, aided by the International Atomic Energy Agency, must be allowed to take control of this site and to defuse this serious threat. What is emerging near Izium is also shocking, as the Taoiseach said. There, a mass grave containing more than 400 bodies has been discovered. Evidence of torture by Russian forces of Ukrainian prisoners is also unfolding.

In that context I welcome Ireland's third party intervention before the European Court of Human Rights in the case of *Ukraine v. Russian Federation*. Russia has to be made accountable for its unlawful invasion of Ukraine.

Ukrainians are heading into a long winter. What is the Taoiseach's assessment of the course of the war at this stage? Clearly, Russia is not winning it. Does he agree that we should continue to support Ukraine in every way we can in order that its sovereignty and territorial integrity can be restored?

Deputy Paul Murphy: From the start of Putin's horrendous invasion of Ukraine, we have raised the need for the State to call clearly for debt cancellation as a significant act of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We tabled a motion in the Dáil to that effect, pointing out that, annually, 12% of all Ukrainian state budgetary income is currently going on debt repayments and that that was utterly unsustainable. At the start of the war the IMF said that Ukraine's economy could contract by as much as 35% in 2022 but that the debt would remain sustainable if there were a fast end to it. Unfortunately, and tragically, there has been no such fast end to the war, and the result is a deeper crisis for Ukraine. The consequence, in the absence of a full debt cancellation programme, is that Ukraine has been forced to apply for a new special IMF loan programme, which will come, as we understand from our own experience, with onerous restrictions, if the country is even able to get it. Is it not past time, therefore, for cancellation of Ukraine's debt? Let us look at who the debt is owed to. The biggest creditor is the IMF, which was due to be paid more than €2.5 billion in 2022. Then there is a series of private creditors, hedge funds, including the likes of BlackRock, Fidelity International, Amia Capital and Gemstock Limited, all holding Ukraine's foreign debt. Is that not a real act of solidarity that could be made with the Ukrainian people to lift this unsustainable and odious burden?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Durkan raised the first question. What was interesting about the three towns just outside Kyiv that I visited was that none was a military town and, therefore, there was no militarism there. There was no need to undertake the atrocities carried out by Russian forces on the people of those towns. I went to the town of Bucha and to the church there. I met with the priest and the people there. They had a photographic exhibition of young men, hands tied behind their backs who were murdered. It was quite horrific, graphic and shocking. If a young man was caught with a mobile phone in his hand, the Russian forces might suggest that he was ringing somebody in the Ukrainian army. He would be taken out and killed; summarily executed. In Irpin, likewise, there were just residential blocks bombed. There was no military context whatsoever. In many of the cases, citizen defence committees were trying to hold things together. The economic prospects of these towns is very bleak. Much of our meeting focused on reconstruction and how the EU can help as it is committed to that. Other countries are helping out Ukraine. There are the issues of immediate supports and then reconstruction.

We have given assistance in a variety of ways. We have given direct humanitarian funding to Ukraine. We have provided funding to the Red Cross. In the context of international war crimes, we have allocated an extra €3 million to the International Criminal Court, which Deputy Haughey and others raised, to improve its capacity. There must be careful gathering of evidence of war crimes by the courts and the International Criminal Court has the expertise to do that. That needs to be followed through on. Deputy Richmond raised a similar issue and asked whether we are doing enough. We are in my view. The Ukrainian Government asked EU member states to help specific regions, almost in a twinning relationship, to recover and reconstruct basic services, such as schools and hospitals and so forth. The Government is examining

that proposal, as well as providing supports more broadly with our European colleagues.

On the financial issue raised by Deputy Paul Murphy and others, EU leaders agreed to support Ukraine via exceptional macro financial assistance of up to €9 billion in 2022. Disbursement of the first €1 billion was agreed before the summer break. EU finance ministers recently agreed to accelerate the next tranche of €5 billion, which is in addition to the €1.2 billion emergency loan provided to Ukraine earlier this year.

The EU will be the key player in the reconstruction of Ukraine. Along with international partners, we will work with our EU colleagues. Through our Presidency of the Council of Europe, Ireland has worked with the other 45 member states of the council on an action plan to assist rebuilding work in Ukraine. We made a €1 million contribution to a specially established Ukraine donor fund in the Council of Europe Development Bank.

On the liquidity questions, it is not as simple as saying that the debt should just be cancelled. There are various mechanisms, via the IMF, World Bank and so on, whereby Ukraine is being facilitated. Its economy has collapsed by approximately 50% so efforts have been made, in the allocation of European funding to Ukraine, that they will be able to pay the basic wages of citizens.

One of the biggest challenges facing Ukraine is that many of its workers are on the front line fighting and many millions have left Ukraine. This in itself is having an impact on the country and, therefore, President Zelenskyy is anxious that people will come back to Ukraine to provide childcare and various services.

We will do everything we can to pursue the war crimes issue. I pay tribute to Ms Justice Siofra O’Leary, on her elevation to the position of President of the European Court of Human Rights, which is significant and fantastic achievement for an Irish woman. I had the privilege of meeting her on my recent visit to Strasbourg. It is tremendous news indeed.

Looking at what has happened in recent weeks, two nuclear plants have been threatened by Russia. A bomb fell within 300 ft of a plant. This is deadly and dangerous stuff in Ukraine with nuclear plants being put at risk as a result of Russian aggression, bombs and so forth. A reservoir dam was also destroyed in retaliation.

I think I have covered most questions. We will continue to work with the Ukrainian Government to do whatever we can to support Ukraine, in particular its application to the EU, reconstruction and in respect of its interaction with the IMF, EU and World Bank. All member states have a role on those bodies in terms of guarantees we give. One cannot say, “Let’s cancel this.” That would have repercussions across the system. There are structured ways to deal with this and help Ukraine financially, which people in all organisations have been responsive to at all levels.

Housing Policy

9. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [43922/22]

10. Deputy Cian O’Callaghan asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met. [44366/22]

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [44841/22]

12. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will meet next. [44917/22]

13. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing last met. [45726/22]

14. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [45764/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 14, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on housing has met six times to date in 2022. The last meeting took place on Thursday, 15 September, with the next meeting planned for Monday, 10 October. The committee works to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the implementation of Housing for All and the delivery of programme for Government commitments regarding housing and related matters. Housing for All is the most ambitious housing plan in the history of our State and contains a range of actions and measures to ensure more than 300,000 new homes will be built by 2030, along with delivering fundamental reform of our housing system.

The 2030 target includes 90,000 social, 36,000 affordable purchase, and 18,000 cost-rental homes. The plan is backed by the highest ever State investment in housing. The progress of Housing for All is overseen by the Cabinet committee on housing and government, with progress reports published quarterly. On 14 July, the Government published the fourth quarterly report, Q2 2022 progress report. It shows significant progress and sets the course to significantly increase the supply of housing and provide a sustainable housing system into the future. Of the 213 actions in Housing for All, a total of 156 have either been completed or are being delivered on an ongoing basis.

While the war in Ukraine and consequent cost pressures have placed great pressure on the sector, there are strong signs of momentum in housing delivery. Between April and June of this year, planning permission was granted for 11,374 new homes, which is a rise on the same period in 2021. Building started on more than 7,000 new homes during this period and 7,654 new homes were completed, an increase of more than 50% on the number of homes completed in the same period of 2021. We are confident that the target for delivery of 24,600 homes in 2022 will be met.

Under the plan, we have introduced four significant affordable purchase initiatives: the first home scheme; the local authority purchase scheme; the local authority home loan scheme; and Project Tosaigh. These measures have been implemented to increase supply and make homes more affordable. The Croí Cónaithe cities fund has also been established to address current viability challenges and activate housing supply at density in city centres through the delivery of 5,000 homes for owner occupiers. In tackling vacancy issues, we have launched a number of measures, including the Croí Cónaithe towns and villages scheme and a new town centre first policy, as well as changes to the fair deal scheme to remove disincentives to renting or selling vacant property.

Employment in the construction sector is now greater than pre-pandemic levels, and apprenticeship registrations are increasing significantly. International recruitment initiatives are under

way while there is an entire work stream on modern methods of construction. Far-reaching reforms, including to our planning laws and our land management and activation mechanisms, are well under way. The actions outlined in the plan are backed by in excess of €4 billion in annual guaranteed State investment in housing over the coming years.

When Housing for All was published, it included provision to review and update the plan on an annual basis to react to any changes or emerging challenges. This review is under way and it does not seek to change the policy direction, but affords us the opportunity to react to the many challenges that have emerged since the plan was published, most notably, the ongoing inflationary pressures.

The review is focused on measures to activate and accelerate supply, and a final version of the update will go to Government in October. The Cabinet committee will continue to focus on delivery of the Housing for All plan and any other housing-related priorities.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Will the Cabinet committee on housing discuss home income thresholds for social housing supports, which have not changed since 2011? There is a scarcity of available properties for renters and those that are available have rents that many simply cannot afford. Homeownership is unattainable for many people, especially throughout Limerick. The safety net is meant to be the social housing support, but the income thresholds are too low for most at €30,000 for a single person and €36,000 for a family in Limerick, and they have not changed since 2011. The move to raise income thresholds for eligibility for social housing in counties Clare, Carlow, Laois, Galway, and Westmeath is welcome, but they were not increased in areas with acute affordability issues such as Dublin, Cork, and my home place of Limerick. Why were they not changed in Limerick, Dublin, and Cork, where the need is greatest? People cannot rent or buy or get social support. Where are working people supposed to go? When will the income threshold review be published? It has been with the Minister since last December.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is almost two months since the Government received the report from the working group to examine defects in housing. That report is extremely stark in terms of the situation it sets out with regard to defects, primarily fire defects in apartments and duplexes. The report states: “The Working Group estimates that of apartments and duplexes (or associated common areas) constructed between 1991 and 2013, the number that may be affected by one or more defects, i.e. fire safety-, structural safety- or water ingress defects, is likely to range between 50% and 80%, which equates to between 62,500 and 100,000 apartments/duplexes.” It means if people live in a Celtic tiger-built apartment block or duplex the chances are that there are serious defects in the construction of the home and they will be faced with a substantial bill. The average bill is €25,000 and I believe this will increase. Many are facing bills of significantly more than this at €68,000 and more. People simply cannot afford to pay this. This is not the fault of the residents. They did everything they were supposed to do when they their homes were built. Now they are faced with these massive unaffordable bills to make their homes safe. The only just and workable solution is a 100% redress scheme. The question for the Taoiseach is when the Government will respond to this report. Will he give a commitment now that whatever scheme is introduced will be retrospective?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Housing for All mentions student accommodation only once. The student accommodation emergency was brought into focus last week when the French embassy warned its students against coming to Ireland. We are in a shameful situation, with students who have worked hard and families who have sacrificed to get their children to college now finding they are locked out of their courses and career of choice. They are crippled

with high rents, they are open to exploitation, and they are forced to commute crazy distances. We need an urgent capital intervention in the budget to enable educational institutions to get advanced building projects started. This is the only way these projects can proceed in order that they are affordable to ordinary students and families and financially viable. Will the Taoiseach now admit that the Government has failed students by designing a system that hands over student accommodation to the private market? Will the Government finally commit to real capital funding in this year's budget to unlock these projects and deliver affordable accommodation for students? Will the Taoiseach commit once and for all to a new accommodation strategy for students?

Deputy Mick Barry: Last year, the Taoiseach said in the House:

All the measures the Minister has taken in placing restrictions on evictions and so on have borne fruit. The tsunami has not happened that the Deputy said would happen a year ago.

The Deputy he referred to was my good self. This morning Threshold came before an Oireachtas committee and reported that it has been notified of 462 notices to quit per month this year. This has increased from 263 in 2019. It is an increase of 76% on pre-pandemic levels. The tsunami the Taoiseach denied would happen is happening now before our eyes. What will he and the Government do about it? They could reinstate the ban on evictions. They could follow the example of Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands and ban evictions on the ground of sale of property. This ground were responsible for 58% of the evictions notified to Threshold this year. Will the Taoiseach do this or will he once again bow to the landlord lobby, so heavily represented in his parliamentary party?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One of the many reasons people will be out on the streets for the cost-of-living demonstration next Saturday is the housing crisis. I ask the Taoiseach in advance of the budget to listen to what people are calling for. As Deputy Barry said, we have had a massive spike in evictions on the ground of sale. The Government should reintroduce the eviction ban. If the Taoiseach will not do so there is something else he could do. He could instruct local authorities to purchase every property where there is an eviction on the ground of sale. If this is done, people will be housed, the social housing stock will be increased and it will save the State money on the rental accommodation scheme, housing assistance payment and homeless payments. It is a simple measure. The Government could use the extra tax receipts available to it for capital expenditure. This would be prudent expenditure.

I reiterate the next question yet again for the umpteenth time. Will the Government please publish the review on social housing income thresholds? It was promised since December last year when the review was completed. The ESRI states we have gone from a situation where 47% of households used to be entitled to social housing to 33%. It is a massive stealth cut in the housing support available to people who cannot afford the extortionate rents and house prices in the private market.

The Taoiseach: To respond to Members generally, the State is the biggest actor in housing now. One would not think that from the contributions made regularly in the House and some public commentary and analysis. The State is the biggest actor in housing, be it social housing, affordable housing, cost rental, Croí Cónaithe, the town centre first policy and trying to bridge the gap in viability on brownfield sites. The State is the biggest player now in house building. We need to build far more houses than we are currently as a country. No doubt Covid 19 hit

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construction with the two lockdowns. The increase now in commodities and prices has been quite significant, at well over 20% on some materials in the building industry. There has been one big storm after another facing the construction industry and the Government's plans. Notwithstanding this, we feel that we will make the target of 24,600 this year. This is not enough and we need to be at approximately 35,000 per annum. On all fronts, in terms of workforce, planning and better construction methodology, we are doing what we can to get construction going.

Student accommodation proposals are coming forward. It is not a failure. Thousands of student accommodation places have happened in recent years. They are not a failure. Again, it is about scale. We need more. We need higher volumes. There is an affordability gap after Covid and there are inflationary issues. The educational institutions say they cannot make it work. The Government is examining this. The Government is doing an awful lot on housing, without question. We will also deal with the student issue. The Minister is examining the increase in income thresholds for social housing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have heard that for a year.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It has been going on for a year.

The Taoiseach: I have been in discussions with the Minister on this.

On the defects in housing, the Minister established the working group in 2021 under Mr. Seamus Neely, former chief executive of Donegal County Council. He received the report and published it. As Deputies will be aware, the working group estimates the average cost of undertaking the remediation of defects is likely to be approximately €25,000 per apartment duplex. This would be an overall potential cost of between €1.56 billion and €2.5 billion. It is estimated that remedial works have been completed in respect of up to 12% of the affected properties, and up to 34% of the affected properties may now be in a process of remedial works being carried out. The Minister is examining the report and will report back to the Government on the response. He is also looking at the lessons learned through the development and operation of other schemes such as the pyrite remediation scheme and the defective concrete blocks scheme.

On Deputy Barry's question regarding notices to quit, landlords are leaving the market in significant numbers and have been for the past four to five years. I would argue that at times much of the rhetoric from his good self and the ideas he has brought forward are leading to an acceleration of this exit.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Buy the houses.

The Taoiseach: Many people do not feel it is worth their while to be landlords anymore. They may have purchased a house or two in the past with a view to renting them out. They are now selling.

(Interruptions).

4 o'clock

The Taoiseach: The value has become high but also-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Buy the houses.

The Taoiseach: If one talks to people-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I do talk to them.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is interrupting me again. The point is landlords are getting out of this.

Deputy Paul Murphy: So what? The State could buy the houses.

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why not?

The Taoiseach: The State will not buy every house.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The State could buy the houses to keep the families in them.

The Taoiseach: However, the State has said that local authorities are allowed and have the capacity-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach should tell them to do it.

The Taoiseach: -----and the firepower-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach should tell them to do it.

The Taoiseach: -----to purchase houses from people who could rendered homeless as a result. The councils have been told that they can-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They can.

The Taoiseach: -----buy the houses where someone could be rendered homeless if-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They should.

Deputy Mick Barry: They are not doing it.

The Taoiseach: There are in some cases where they are.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would you lads not stay quiet when you are asked?

The Taoiseach: However there is an issue to reflect on as well. There is no point in saying “buy every single house”. These kinds of simplistic answers to everything are not the way to solve the housing crisis-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is a win-win.

The Taoiseach: -----because we need people to let existing housing stock. Many people do not feel it is worth their while and yes, because of the value now, they feel it is timely to get out. That is not good enough for the housing-supply issue because we need the supply at present. Many approved housing bodies are saying this to us. They want us to take action to encourage landlords to stay in the system.

Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. This Bill presents welcome amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 and the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act 2020. I and my party will support the Bill. These amendments will address barriers which prevent holders of British medical degrees from taking up interim training posts in this State. This is essential for attracting more internationally-trained doctors into the HSE and for increasing and deepening all-island co-operation in training medical professionals.

However, we are currently experiencing a shortage of interim posts despite the increase in recent years from 727 in 2016 to 854 intern posts this year. While all-hours graduates are entitled to one, many international students who want to stay and work in Ireland cannot get one and we also need to increase the number of medical graduates in the coming years.

The Bill also makes other registration-related amendments required to ensure the continued provision of a route to registration on the general division of the Medical Council’s register for certain cohorts of internationally-trained doctors. These amendments are vital to ensure that internationally-trained doctors can continue to register and practice in this State. Many issues of unfairness are also faced by international doctors in assessing medical specialist training posts which this will not resolve. That is an issue of capacity.

The Bill will also ensure that social care workers who must register with CORU are subject to the same relevant standards as other regulated health and social care professions. This Bill, while welcome, speaks to a weakness in Government policy when it comes to the medical profession. For a number of years, the HSE has been overreliant on international recruitment to fill posts. The Medical Council’s medical workforce report 2021 published over the summer illustrates this significant reliance, with more than twice as many international graduates as Irish graduates first registering with the Medical Council in 2021. Likewise, we have a significant overreliance on international recruitment to fill nursing posts. In 2021, 62% of first-time registrants with the nursing and midwifery board were non-EU workers. Migrant workers contribute vitally to the Irish health service and are the only reason that staffing levels have not collapsed. However, we must develop a sustainable supply of domestic graduates and retain those we train. The problem we face is illustrated in the fact that by the end of May, Australia alone has already issued 402 visas to Irish doctors, compared to 272 in 2019.

Not only must we train more Irish doctors and make it easier for internationally-trained doctors to come to work here, but we need to stem the bleed of Irish graduates abroad. It is a disgrace that again, we are seeing considerable numbers of doctors and nurses leave, not because they want to - many do want to go to develop skills and some will come back and some will not - but, unfortunately, my experience of dealing with some junior doctors and people who would want to come to work in the Irish healthcare system are opting to emigrate out of

necessity and because they feel that the public system is not delivering for them in the way that they would like.

To address all of that will take serious work, to address working conditions as well as the housing disaster and the cost-of-living crisis which is driving talented graduates from our shores. The ongoing dispute with non-consultant hospital doctors is not growing confidence in the ability of this Government to deliver on health. Speaking at the medical professionalism conference 2022, the CEO of the Medical Council, Leo Kearns, stated that the council's 2021 medical workforce intelligence report, "will definitely highlight the need for a workforce strategy for healthcare".

I have been talking about this for some time. We need a comprehensive workforce strategy that gets real about training more graduates and about retaining and recruiting more and dealing with the myriad industrial relations issues, contract issues, capacity issues in the system which make it difficult for medical professionals to work on the frontline in healthcare and, of course, the cost-of-living and the housing crisis do not make it any easier.

I will also discuss a matter which this Bill does not address; the regulation of homecare workers. This is important from a safeguarding point of view, as well as for employment standards and pay. There is a dire need for greater regulation across the homecare sector, which has been highlighted by HIQA time and again. The non-regulation of homecare as a profession does a disservice to care workers in my view, as it means the State does not truly value the work that they do as a professional career. It is also a disservice to those in receipt of homecare and their families who should have confidence that the care worker delivering their care is a fully-regulated professional.

Homecare workers are, more often than not, caring for people who are at a higher risk of abuse or neglect. Anyone who is working so closely with people in a vulnerable position should be a regulated professional. This lack of recognition for homecare is at the root of the shortage of homecare workers. There are many different reasons, but I think we will all accept that working conditions and pay in this sector are among the main reasons we cannot recruit the numbers that we need to fill the million of hours that are made available every year under the Estimates process.

It is not recognised, unfortunately, as a valuable, meaningful career by the State, which is evidenced in the HSE's outsourcing of homecare to private providers. They are not given the secure, well-paid employment which they deserve and their employment conditions often leave them with little or no pension, unreliable hours and insecure employment.

I welcomed, a number of years ago, as I imagine most Deputies in the House did, the considerable number of additional home-help hours that were made available in the budget a number of years ago. Unfortunately, many of those hours were not delivered, simply because we could not recruit the staff. I also know that we have the same problem with children's disability networks teams. We have the same problem in many different areas of healthcare. On paper, people are entitled to a service. We are being told the funding and the money are there but we cannot get the staff.

There was a big announcement in the budget again last year and big numbers from the Minister. The Government said it would recruit 10,000 staff. Five and a half thousand were recruited but it is way behind what we should have recruited. Critically, they are in those areas of

primary care and community care which are very important for staffing and the network teams which are supposed to be working on the ground to provide for people in the community, care for people in the community to take pressures off our acute hospitals.

It really is about time that we got serious about workforce planning and healthcare. It really is about time that we looked at fully implementing the safe staffing and skills mix framework. It is about time we deal with all of the contractual issues which have bogged down recruitment and retention in the health service for so long. It is about time we treated healthcare professionals and people who work in the public or private sector delivering healthcare better. One clear example I can give, which I raised directly with the Taoiseach earlier, is the pandemic bonus payment. It affects people under the Minister of State's brief given she has responsibility for older people. I listened intently to Tadhg Daly of Nursing Homes Ireland this week. He quite rightly challenged the Government on the failure of the HSE to deliver the pandemic bonus to all the staff in nursing homes. We talk about Covid and the huge pressures staff were under, which was absolutely the case in acute hospitals, but nursing homes bore the brunt in the first couple of months. It was traumatic for people working in nursing homes. It was beyond belief what they had to go through to ensure people were kept safe. Despite this, they are the very workers who still have not got the pandemic bonus payment. Bizarrely, and in a failure of governance on the part of the Government, we hear now that the State is going to employ a consultancy firm to find out or figure out how to pay non-HSE staff. Some consultancy firm is going to be hired and it will be paid well, as these firms are. I do not know how long this will take but it is beyond a joke that this is where we are at nine months after this bonus was first announced. Members of the Defence Forces, fire service workers, cleaners, security staff and, as I said, people who work in nursing homes and agency staff still have not been paid. That is unacceptable.

This Bill does a number of good things, which I welcome. We must properly regulate the healthcare sector. Regulation in staffing is important and professionalising healthcare is something we should always strive to do. The removal of barriers, as provided for in the Bill, is welcome but the bigger challenge is convincing the people who are training to come and work in the public system. This Government has much to do if it is to win over graduates to come and work in the public system. That is deeply unfortunate.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: This is a welcome Bill despite its technical nature. It addresses a number of registration-related issues affecting certain registrants with the Medical Council and CORU. The Bill makes a small number of amendments to the Medical Council's complaints investigation process and to liability in civil proceedings for specified persons. It makes a number of amendments to support the performance by the Medical Council of its triage, investigation and adjudication of complaints functions under the 2007 Act. It also seeks to ensure social care workers applying for registration with CORU are required to meet the same safe standards as all other CORU professions. In addition, it provides that the Minister may vary the qualifications to be listed in Schedule 3 to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005.

The Bill will remove roadblocks to people who hold a British medical degree from availing of medical intern posts in this State and ensure a route to registration on the general division for international doctors. These are small but important steps that will help us attract more doctors from abroad. However, it is no replacement for addressing the fact that Irish doctors have been emigrating in their droves over the past few years. The Government must speak to newly-qualified doctors and ask them why. I accept some choose to travel but in my experience the vast majority are leaving this State because of our health system. They are leaving because of the housing situation, their inability to buy or even rent an affordable home and the spiralling

cost of living in a country where people are choosing between food and fuel. This is a country where people are waiting until they have two or three medical issues to see a GP because of the cost. That is not to mention the difficulty of getting an appointment to see a GP.

This Bill is a missed opportunity because it does not provide for regulation of the home care sector. This sector is in desperate need of professional regulation. The Minister of State should not take my word for this. HIQA has called for regulation of home care services and so too have unions and workers in the sector. It is vital we have adequate regulation in home care to prevent unregulated workers intimately caring for vulnerable people.

Other issues such as low pay, non-recognition of the vital service that home care and home support workers provide and the HSE's overreliance on private home care providers must also be dealt with. The HSE spends €20 million a year on home care support. It should be directly employing these carers and ensuring they have good pay, good conditions, pensions and a clear career path.

In the past few weeks, I met the National Community Care Network and Family Carers Ireland. They are both saying we have a recruitment crisis, as are service users. The Government is doing very little to address the matter. Sinn Féin in government will work towards a sectoral industrial relations solution for pay and conditions to provide a basis floor with standards that will attract or retain the workers in this sector. We will make home care an attractive career opportunity and provide training. We will add home care sector workers to the critical skills list for employment visas and permits and prioritise direct public sector service provision in the sector.

Approximately 35,000 home care hours per week are not being delivered, with more than 4,500 people who have been granted funding on waiting lists for carers. We need to make this sector an attractive career. We need to move away from nursing home care to care in the home. Recently, I met Alone and last week I met Age Action Ireland. Everyone favours our older people ageing in place, that is, in their homes and communities. Older people deserve better and Sinn Féin in government will ensure that.

The Minister of State has sat in on many a meeting with me around our older persons' advocacy groups and everything else. She is well aware of how difficult it is for these people to attend to people who are in that sort of need. This sector needs to be looked after much better and our old people certainly need to be looked after much better.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: Sinn Féin welcomes this Bill, which we see as a positive initiative that should create a more professional and protective system for the public and staff alike. We also welcome the removal of the bureaucratic anomalies that prohibit people who hold British medical degrees from availing of medical intern posts and establishing a route to registration for the non-consultant doctors on the general division of international doctors. However, I encourage the Minister of State to address the outflow of our own qualified doctors who are, worryingly, emigrating in large numbers. For example, by May of this year, Australia had issued 402 work visas to qualified Irish doctors.

In my region, 25% of GPs are destined to retire within the next five years. We have five locums in place and these circumstances are replicated throughout most other regions. Many urban doctors are not able to take on the numbers of patients presenting, many of whom are elderly people who are left without access to family doctors for weeks due to the retirement of

neighbouring GPs. Many rural areas are left without any doctors at all. I ask that immediate action be taken by the Minister on this alarming public health issue before it becomes a national emergency.

I welcome that the title of “social care worker” will become legally protected on 30 November 2025. It is only right and fitting this should happen. As we know, social care work involves work with the most vulnerable people in our society, from people with disabilities and the homeless to women in prisons and their children and those living in poverty. I am glad these workers will finally be recognised as a cohesive professional partner with their fellow social workers.

This Bill should also provide professional regulation of the home care sector. This part of the sector is fundamentally connected and in many cases overlaps with the work carried out by the social workers and care social workers of Ireland. Some 35,000 home care hours are not being delivered. At the start of the year, 600 families were waiting for home supports in County Wexford. I ask the Minister to establish a national database on respite availability that would give a comprehensive practical view on the age, details and specific requirements of each region. The key public aim of the registration of medical, health and social care professionals is to protect the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence through statutory registration structures and processes. Professional regulators are important and part of the reason we have such a high and well-regarded standard of healthcare professionals in Ireland.

There is no doubt that the level of professionalism experienced in care provided by our healthcare professionals is outstanding and we saw this in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is for this reason that the pandemic employment bonus is so bitterly disappointing. Nine months on, workers are still waiting on their well-deserved reward. The complete lack of a controlled and planned roll-out of the bonus by the Minister and Government is unacceptable. Will the Minister of State outline a definite timeline setting out when all front-line workers will be paid?

Sinn Féin welcomes the Bill and sees it as a vital part of protecting the public interest, especially in the sphere of social work and care workers having to meet the same safety standards as all other CORU-registered professionals. We welcome the new route this Bill provides for registration of international doctors and plead with the Minister to accept the importance of the points raised on the emigration of our doctors and the significant numbers of our family doctors who will be retiring in the not-too-distant future.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for being here today and recognise the seriousness of this legislation. Although it is quite prescriptive, it is very finite. There is a lot in it but it will make a significant difference collectively across other work the Government is doing in the area of health. It will address a lot of issues around trying to get foreign medical professionals involved in our health service. I do not need to tell the Minister of State or any other Deputy in the House about the challenges facing the healthcare service. We have a swiftly growing population as is indicated by the results of the most recent census. There is significant pressure being placed on the health service, with significant growing pains. It is important that we do absolutely everything we can to ensure we have an efficient healthcare service, including trying to get people from a multitude of different countries to come here and work. Many other developed countries of the same standing as Ireland from an economic point of view have been doing so for a long time.

There is one area I would like to highlight and in which I would like to see a little bit of work being done. I have encountered a number of people who came to Ireland to become pharmacists from countries such as South Africa. I understand that a significant portion of them are still encountering difficulties. They were told there were delays as a consequence of Covid and they are still waiting for further information. I believe it is under the remit of the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, PSI. Perhaps that is something the Minister of State could check with the Secretary General of the Department of Health and the Minister in their respective capacities. It needs to be looked at. I am sure the Minister of State will agree it is remarkably unfair that people who have been here for three and four years are not able to work in the capacity in which they came here. In the cases to which I am referring the people came here as pharmaceutical technicians. I am very familiar with the pharmacy sector in general as I have two siblings who work in that profession. I am kept well briefed on the issues pertaining to it. I look forward to meeting the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, next week at its budget briefing. Those provisions are very welcome.

The other point we need to get serious about, and Mr. Watt as Secretary General of the Department of Health is better placed to do this than anyone else, since he did it for himself, is pay for our healthcare professionals. It is exceptionally important that we look at the substantive issues when it comes to paying consultants whom we desperately need to bring down our waiting lists. There has been Trojan work done by the Government in that area but we need the medical professionals to do that work, whether it is children with spina bifida or multiple other long-term illnesses that need serious surgeries. We need the surgeons to be here in Ireland and we are competing with countries that are paying far in excess of what surgeons can be paid here. That has to be said. Every citizen in this country wants to ensure when making contributions to the State that we will have a health service that is fit for purpose and can deal with the challenges in the event that people fall ill.

It breaks my heart a little that we have so many people who come to Ireland to study medicine but do not stay here. It costs hundreds of thousands of euro to train people to become doctors, which we do exceptionally well. We have centres of excellence such as the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland just down the road from Dáil Éireann, Trinity College, University College Cork, the University of Limerick and the National University of Ireland Galway. There are fabulous schools of medicines in those universities. It is important that we look at the exodus of young doctors, people who go as junior doctors to travel abroad. I understand that it is compulsory to get training abroad in order to become a consultant. That is not what I am necessarily saying but I am aware of that. It is a shame that we lose so many people. Quality of life is a factor but pay is also a factor. In Australia and Canada, for example, they earn multiples of what they can earn here.

I recognise Deputy Mythen's point on rural GPs. It is the same in east Cork. The doctors' surgeries cannot take on any more patients. A growing population is a factor and we have a slightly higher growth rate than the national average in east Cork. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is very familiar with my area. This is a major concern for rural Deputies. When people move into an area, they struggle to get in to see a general practitioner. This shows why this legislation is needed, if it is going to help us bring in those medical professionals. We certainly need to pursue more legislation in this area.

On home help, home care assistants and carers in general, a serious amount of work done has been done in this area throughout the pandemic, often in very difficult circumstances. That has to be recognised, as the Minister of State has done. I agree on backlogs. When it comes to

the Covid payment that was made to healthcare professionals, I would like to see outstanding issues resolved and I know the Minister of State and the Minister are working on that issue.

The legislation is welcome, as is recognised by all sides of the House. We need to look seriously at pay. My message to the Secretary General of the Department of Health is that if he could address that, it would make an enormous difference to the quality of healthcare on this island and build upon the health service we have. It is a profound concern that many people have. The Minister of State and the Minister are acutely aware of that challenge.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome many aspects of the Bill and am happy to speak on it. Unfortunately, it does not do anything for the appalling conditions under which our non-consultant hospital doctors are working in terms of the gruelling hours and careless, slapdash and sometimes downright insulting institutional approach to their pay and conditions. That they have to take to social media to highlight this is shameful. It is no wonder doctors are emigrating in their droves or planning to do so, as are swathes of medical staff generally. Deputy Mythen has already outlined a 45% increase in the number of work visas Australia has issued to Irish doctors. This is a brain drain of the highest order.

I am also concerned that the Bill fails to deal with the regulation of the home care sector. This failure is bad for the superb people we have working in the sector. It leaves them unprotected when they are working in other people's homes, certainly in the area of intimate care. They have been calling for such regulations, as have HIQA and their unions. We have a major problem when the HSE is spending over €20 million a year on private healthcare providers when it should be providing home care directly and providing decent pay, conditions and pensions for workers. This is vital as we move away from the nursing home care model and facilitate older people to stay in their own homes. We need people to be able to happily choose careers in the home care sector and we need the public to be able to depend on the system for the quality of service and availability of workers. I know people in north Kildare who are desperate for carers and home care. It is no surprise given that 35,000 hours a week are not being provided and more than 4,500 people who have funding are waiting for care while their quality of health and life and their independence deteriorate.

I do not know what obsession the Government has with profiting from and monetising the basic essentials of life such as housing, energy, childcare, healthcare, elder care and now home care. We need public funds to directly benefit the public and to be used for the public benefit. Instead, public funds are having to wrangle their way through middlemen and middle women so they can cut their slice of the profits. This will be a priority for Sinn Féin in government. It really should be a priority for this Bill, too.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I am happy to support the legislation. It is overdue in many respects. There is no denying the importance of regulation, particularly in the health and social care area. As we know, the legislation dates back to 2005 in respect of the inclusion of social care workers. At the time, that was highly significant. The work of dealing with children, older people and some of the most vulnerable people in our society is very important. It is essential that the people working in that sector are properly regulated. We have to ask why there has been such a delay. It is very important that the State has a regulatory system that we can have confidence in and that we legitimise the profession, protect the public and provide a structure for appraisal and approval of training and qualifications.

However, as I said, the progress has been painfully slow. I do not know why that is the case.

We are just moving at a piecemeal, slow pace when there are several professions that need to be regulated. I do not know why we could not have done that by statutory instrument on an ongoing basis and why the progress could not have been quicker than has been the case. I do not know why that is. Is it a funding issue with CORU? Is there a problem with CORU? Why is it not able to move through the professions more quickly? Alternatively, is it the case that it has requested the Minister to move on different professions and the Minister or, perhaps, successive Ministers have been slow to do that? It is important we know the reason for what would appear to be a completely undue delay in regulating the professions. As I said, health and social care professionals should all be regulated. Why is it taking so long and why is it so slow?

On social care workers, clearly the register is still not operational. We are told that it is set to open in November 2023. However, there are other requirements in terms of experience working in the sector. Therefore, it is likely that with qualifications and experience, people will not be able to register until 2025. Was this not foreseen? Why was provision not made for this? People have been working in this sector for years on end. Are we talking about post-qualification experience? What is it? There is huge confusion about how one actually qualifies in this area. Why have we not sorted this out before now?

It is undoubtedly a complex environment for a couple of different reasons. The previously unregulated status of social care work has been a problem in respect of new regulation. The range and diversity of titles, practices and routes into the sector has been diverse and wide and all of that needed to be brought into line and streamlined. Again, why that is only happening now?

In 2018, a Social Care Ireland survey regarding registration awareness noted that respondents indicated 80 different job titles in that sector. There have been some tangible developments in recent years. In 2015, the social care workers registration board was established with CORU. That was a certain amount of progress. More recently, the code of professional conduct and ethics and the standards of proficiency in education and training were published. However, there is still no clear pathway for fully regulated and recognised roles within social care.

Obviously, serious problems arose in relation to those students in the Dublin Business School. That was very bad practice all around. It was a devastating blow for the students. This course was established four years ago in 2018 and it is still not accredited by CORU. Why was there not clarity about that? The Dublin Business School has serious questions to answer in relation to that. Students must now be provided with clear options to strengthen their qualifications. The Minister raised the issue of refunds for students. I do not know if that has happened, but it should happen. However, more important than getting refunds is having a clear pathway to early recognition of the academic work that they have done and, indeed, for many of those students, the previous work experience they have had in the sector.

There is no doubt that an acute shortage of social care workers is looming now. Despite a relatively strong supply of graduates in this area, there is a shortage. That is because the importance of social care was not recognised in this country until relatively recently. There have been debates on this in the UK for the past 20 years. We are very much fixed on the idea that we are talking about expensive healthcare and very highly qualified people. We talk about consultants, GPs and nurses. However, actually a huge amount of care in the general health area relates to social care. That is where the big demands are. We hear all of the publicity around long hospital waiting lists, and they are a scandal. However, the reality is that most people who contact us as public representatives with regard to waiting lists are asking about older people,

in particular, but also about young children and people with disabilities. Effective and well-resourced social care is needed in all of those areas. That is where the big demand is. Very often, if people cannot access social care locally in their community, they are left in situations where their condition inevitably gets worse and they inevitably end up having to go to a consultant or be admitted into hospital. A whole range of services needs to be properly recognised and resourced at community level.

That, in many ways, is what Sláintecare is about. It is the lowest level of complexity. People start off with different conditions that are not complex and need care and support. That is the whole social care area. If that is addressed, it has downstream effects. It slows down conditions getting worse and becoming a bigger burden of demands on the health service. We need to get back to early intervention, early diagnosis of conditions and providing appropriate staff in the appropriate place. We have not been good at doing that in this country.

In 2019, 14 educational providers were providing 34 social care programmes or pathways into social care. This was happening. The educational systems, particularly post-leaving certificate providers, were gearing up for that. However, unfortunately, there was not the necessary recognition of those qualifications, which are very often level 5 qualifications, and then clear pathways provided into higher level qualifications, recognition of that and regulation.

Between 2015 and 2019, Tusla experienced a 30% increase in referrals, but only a 1% increase in the social care workforce. The austerity period brought very significant challenges with cuts, embargoes and moratoriums. Of course, many of those cutbacks and austerity measures were very short-sighted because they resulted in even more serious problems and a lack of an adequately qualified and available workforce in this very important area. The cost of living and spiralling rents, of course, added to that.

This is a predominantly female profession. Some 86.7% of respondents to a Social Care Ireland recruitment and retention survey in 2021 were female. Increased privatisation and the use of agency workers to bolster the service provision has undoubtedly been a factor in this. In many ways, we are seeing creeping privatisation in the social care area. That is largely to do with the fact that at HSE level and at Department of Health level there is no recognition of the importance of social care. It is seen as some kind of afterthought that should be farmed out to the voluntary sector. People were doing it on a voluntary basis for a long time.

That sector cannot operate on a shoestring, which is what the expectation was. It was not professionalised and put onto a proper financial footing. We are paying a big price for that now. Due to the lack of recognition of the importance of social care, we ended up with a very expensive model of care in this country. Services were dictated, in the main, by consultants, when we should have been looking at services at local level led out by social care professionals.

Sláintecare recognised that healthcare and social care are inextricably linked. That has to be recognised. Services and facilities have been disconnected or competing for far too long. We should be operating a system of integrated care. There has been recent recognition of that and I very much welcome the integrated care hubs that are being developed. They make absolute sense. They take work out of hospitals and they recognise the importance of health and social care professionals and the fact that they play, and are capable of playing, a key role in the delivery of health services and that can happen at community level.

The current disconnect between healthcare and social care is very evident in waiting lists.

The health system waits until conditions become serious before intervening and that inevitably ends up with long waiting lists for hospital services. On 5 July, there were 102 people across the acute system awaiting a discharge home, with 61 of them waiting for a carer to be assigned. I do not have the up-to-date figures in that regard but what we have seen through the years is that there have been several hundred people in very expensive acute hospital beds ready to be discharged but there was insufficient funding at community care level to provide the kind of home supports they needed. That issue, more than any other, typifies the dysfunction within the health service. There are people using hospital beds who want to go home and are ready to go home and it is in their healthcare and other interests to do so. It is a much cheaper model of care yet there is that disconnect between the acute hospital sector and social care. It is the way we should be going. There is no justification or defence for a situation where there is not an adequate budget for home care and then people end up staying in hospital beds which, in turn, has an impact on waiting lists. More important, at the end of May there were 4,720 people waiting who had been assessed and approved for home support but were awaiting a carer to be assigned.

Deputy Mary Butler: We have the funding.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I know that. That is what I am saying, however - they were assessed. The bar is quite high to get approval for home care. These were nearly 5,000 people who were approved for home care but the staff were not available. This has been raised with the Minister of State. In fairness, I know she is very committed to her portfolio but this has been raised with her on umpteen occasions. One has to ask why this issue is not being addressed properly and why are we still in this indefensible situation. From an organisational and financial point of view, it is indefensible. The key thing, however, is that there are 5,000 people in their own homes, many of them in their late 80s and 90s and many very infirm, left in dangerous situations on their own at home. It is inevitable that many of those people will end up going into nursing homes because there are not basic supports available to them at home. That issue has to be addressed as an absolute priority. When is the Minister of State going to resolve this? It is dragging on far too long. She promised a statutory right to home care. When will we see that? When will the staffing shortages be addressed?

There is an issue there relating to the disparity in the contracts and the terms and conditions of employment in the community, voluntary and private sector home care areas. The HSE funded and employed home care workers are on a regular and relatively decent salary. They have security and all the other entitlements that permanent workers have. People employed in the community sector or, more important, the private sector, however, are getting far less than they would as HSE workers. The terms of the contract do not even recognise things such as travel time. That can all be addressed by the Department. It seems that the most recent tender was specifically designed to drive down the cost. It represented a race to the bottom, essentially, and we are now paying a price for that. In the new tender, the Minister has to address those issues and equalise the pay. Ideally, far more of the home care staff should be employed by the State because it is a key area of health and social care provision. We should seek to have those staff employed by the State. I am concerned about the privatisation that is going on in this area in particular and the downgrading of that work. We are paying a price for it now because of the staff shortages. There is also the issue of the need for an employment regulation order to cover this. I would very much welcome such an order.

The same issue pertains in the disability sector, of course, in terms of the dire shortage of staff. I refer to the children's disability network teams. More than 17,000 children with disabilities are still awaiting their first contact in what was supposed to be a new system that would

address their needs. Of them, 8,000 are waiting more than a year. The vacancy rate in the teams across the sector is approximately 28%. That has to be dealt with as a priority.

In the few minutes I have left, I note that the Medical Council's medical workforce intelligence report was published this month. It lays bare major problems relating to non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs. This issue has to be addressed. There has been really good research done on this whole area, led by Dr. Niamh Humphries in the hospital doctor retention and motivation project that has been running in recent years. Dr. Humphries and her colleagues appeared before the health committee earlier in the year. I raised the matter with the Minister for Health on umpteen occasions. That research sets out clearly why the majority of Irish-trained doctors are leaving our shores as soon as they can. I raised this issue earlier today. NCHDs are leaving Ireland in their droves. They are leaving as a result of their poor treatment in their training. Career structures are very poor and they have to move every six months. Imagine doing that with a family and the crisis in housing. How would one do it? Some 25% of NCHDs are breaching the European directive on working hours. They are forced to do that and cannot avoid it because hospitals are insisting that they work over the 48-hour limit. Some of them do not even get paid for that work. Imagine having that kind of gruelling regime and not even getting paid for it. They complain of burnout, bullying within their profession and a general lack of respect. They are leaving our shores in droves. Is it any wonder that is happening? There are currently almost 900 consultant vacancies. Attention was drawn to this yesterday, particularly in the context of the impact of those vacancies on emergency departments, EDs, and the shocking conditions and waiting times that exist there. That comes about largely as a result of major levels of consultant vacancies right across the board. One can imagine the impact of those 900 consultant vacancies. Is it any wonder that the health services cannot recruit to those posts, given the experiences of NCHDs early in their careers? In addition, only 50% of the internationally trained healthcare graduates have access to a training programme in hospitals. We are hugely dependent on them but they are being treated extremely badly.

This is at the centre of the problems within the health service. There are major problems in respect of recruitment and retention of staff and unless the Minister gets serious about this, sets up an urgent task force, ensures adequate placements in the health service and ensures adequate training places in colleges, the health service will continue to deteriorate.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Bill has several important components that will remove unnecessary barriers in terms of registration with CORU, particularly for social workers. Removing the requirement for two years of continuous work will be a big benefit. As we know, life gets in the way and sometimes it can be hard to source two continuous years of employment. However, given the huge shortages of therapists, social care professionals and other important health care professionals, I hoped the Bill would be even more ambitious in speeding up the registration process for those seeking CORU registration from overseas. Figures released to me recently via parliamentary questions show that the average processing time for registration has increased from 8.8 weeks last year to 9.6 weeks this year. More worryingly, since 2020 some 697 qualified people, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and physiotherapists, have waited for more than three months for registration. These people are ready to work and want to do so. They are able to work in complex fields but are being delayed. We leave them waiting for months, unable to contribute in their chosen professions. This is particularly the case for those coming from other countries. I note there is provision for UK degrees. We should examine the possibility of extending these provisions for people who are properly qualified and accredited in other countries. The reality is that children's disability

network teams, CDNTs, in particular are scandalously understaffed and this understaffing has a huge knock-on effect. Existing staff are facing burnout, or have burnt out. Last year the CDNT in my area had one occupational therapist for 893 children. How is that acceptable in this day and age? The pressure that person is under is unimaginable. At the same time children fall through the gaps due to a lack of therapists, social workers and so forth. Their chance of early intervention is lost because it takes years to have them assessed, to have the school places and to get them to therapies they desperately need.

This Bill has the potential to impact positively on staffing levels for disability services. I want the Minister to liaise with the Department to see what improvements can be made. I am on the ground meeting with families and groups like Families Unite for Services and Support, FUSS, that are campaigning nationally for children with disabilities. They are begging the Minister. We need more action now, especially for families and children with disabilities.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I am sharing time with Deputy Boyd Barrett. We welcome and support this Bill. It is amazing to think that the Brexit referendum, which led to many anomalies, happened six and a half years ago. As a consequence of Brexit, there has been a correction in regard to medical interns studying in Britain or the North of Ireland to come back here. That is a good thing. If we can attract professionals back into the Irish health system, it is a good thing. There is also a downside to this. I am probably preaching to the converted because the Minister of State knows the downside with regard to keeping people in the Irish public health system, which is the most important thing. If graduate doctors, nurses and other allied professionals who are qualified at the highest grade in the world feel compelled to leave the country at the end of that process, we have a big problem. We have to challenge that.

At the moment, there is an enormous number of vacancies. For example, there are vacancies for 900 medical consultants. Such a void has consequences in regard to health care. Other Deputies alluded to the junior doctors who issued an extraordinary statement a number of months ago regarding their conditions. If doctors are saying that their working conditions in certain environments are unsafe, we should be concerned not only in regard to their own well-being but also patients' well-being. We are talking about life and death in some circumstances. If they say these circumstances are extremely stressful and detrimental to the profession, this is a serious problem. Like many other Deputies, I have said on several occasions that this issue has to be addressed immediately. That is down to retention, recruitment and respect in regard to workers who have graduated and want to play their part, but circumstances go against them.

I would like to refer to a statement that Dr. Fergal Hickey, who is the president of the Irish Association for Emergency Medicine, made on a radio show yesterday. He painted a stark picture of emergency departments this year and beyond. He stated that we need a plan for the whole year, and not just a winter plan, for sudden surges of influenza or Covid-19. The Irish health system is not prepared for any sudden shocks. It seems we were lucky a year and a half ago in regard to Covid-19. If there had been a situation where there was an absolute oversurge in relation to emergency beds and acute beds, the Irish health system would have been in serious trouble. Happily, that did not happen but it is still a possibility.

My final comment relates to overall recruitment, retention and respect. There are a number of reasons people stay in a country or in a job. People are motivated to help their fellow human beings in the health system. That is why they go into healthcare jobs, and stay in them, but there is a huge issue in regard to staff retention. The reasons that people leave the Irish health service have to be addressed. They are passionate about their jobs but they look at the related issues of

cost of living and burnout. I have friends who are nurses in the Irish health system. They are motivated but find it difficult to stay in the system, particularly due to the cost of living. It is detrimental to the Irish health system if we cannot keep these people. If we cannot keep them, other health systems get them, to the detriment of Irish society. We cannot afford to lose people like that. We must recruit them, look after them, respect them and retain them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We support the Bill. As I understand it, the Bill essentially deals with one of the outworkings of Brexit by trying to recommence a situation that was the case before Brexit whereby medical graduates from the UK and the North can do internships here. That would be beneficial for the health service here. We support what the Bill is trying to achieve. As others have said, it highlights the fact that we have a more general problem in recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals in multiple disciplines across the health service to the point that it is fair to say our health service is creaking at the seams. Many people in the health service are demoralised and burnt out, and are leaving the public health service to work in the private sector. Alternatively, they leave the country entirely or leave the health professions because they simply cannot bear the pressure, stress and conditions they face across much of the health services. Indeed, a family member of mine has been in hospital for several months. He sings the praises of all the staff who look after him but every time I go to see him he tells me that the nurses and health care assistants are run off their feet.

5 o'clock

They are burned out, are dealing with too many patients and they just cannot cope quite a good deal of the time. We have a problem. In broad terms, as Deputy Gino Kenny has said, we have to listen to the people on the front line as to what they think is necessary in order to resolve the situation and we are not doing that. I am not going to list all of the different groups of healthcare professionals that we should be listening to but I want to speak up for just a few that I have been talking to recently.

The first of these groups is physiotherapists. I hope that the Minister is aware that physiotherapists are making what seems to me to be a very reasonable request and it may be something that could even possibly be dealt with by amendments to this legislation. It certainly seems to be a very easy legislative change that could have a significant impact in addressing some of the waiting lists that we have in our health service. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy is saying that physiotherapists need to be included in the list of people who are allowed to refer for X-ray. I did not know this until up they informed me of it but physiotherapists cannot refer people for X-ray. As a consequence, they have to needlessly chase after other people who are on the legislative list, because it is set down in law, of either doctors or certain grades of nurses - there may be some other groups - who are allowed to refer for X-ray.

This is wasting the time of those doctors and nurses who could be doing other things when the physiotherapists know that somebody needs to be referred for an X-ray. This is adding unnecessarily to the stress on other healthcare professionals and it means longer waiting times for people to get the treatment they need. The simple measure they are requesting is that they be allowed to refer people for X-ray, as is the case, they inform me, in many other health jurisdictions and I believe it was in fact committed to as part of Sláintecare. That is very elementary stuff and I would appeal that this might be done.

The legislation that is referred to is a statutory instrument, SI 256/2018, that needs to be changed to simply include physiotherapists, as a group, who along with others - I believe

dentists are among them - who are allowed to make such referrals, and so on. Physiotherapists should be allowed to do this. That seems like a good measure and I recommend that the Minister of State might read their submission on this because the figures are quite stark. It says that the numbers that this could potentially deal with and the impact on waiting lists could be very substantial. I will not go through all of the details but this is about joined-up thinking and having the most efficient use of the skilled people that we have in our health service and not unnecessarily burdening others who are already overrun with demands on them, in particular, doctors and nurses. I hope that the Minister of State will listen to this request, please.

The second group I would like to speak up for is one I have spoken up for on many occasions. This has been well-aided and the Government should be aware of the issue of psychologists. As we know, we are in dire need of a great deal more psychologists to do assessments for people with disabilities, children with special needs, in particular, and then to provide services for children with special needs, and so on. There is a whole range of other areas, indeed, where there is a shortage of psychologists. We need them and the paradox and irony of this is that there are many young people who want to be psychologists but there are totally unnecessary obstacles being put in the way of these people who want to study psychology, who want to work with children with special needs, with people with mental disabilities, mental health issues, and so on. As we know, we have absolutely dire waiting lists where people are not getting their assessments in the time that they are legally entitled to get them and are not getting the services. We know in our mental health teams, our child and adolescent mental health services teams and community mental health teams, that there is a very urgent need for more psychologists. Yet, if one wishes to do a doctorate in psychology, one has big obstacles if one is doing this in the area of education or counselling psychology. Clinical psychologists who are doing their doctorates will get a salary for the placement work they do and will get a very substantial amount of the very high fees that they are asked to pay. These are fees of up to €15,000, which is extraordinary.

Many, and I have talked to these young people who want to be psychologists, if they are not being paid on placement through the counselling psychology doctorate, and if they have to shoulder fees of €15,000, as some of them have put it to me, if they are working class, on a low income and do not have the money, they cannot be a psychologist. They will be forced to drop out and it is just too much. Why do we have a situation where we fund some - not enough I would suggest - clinical psychology doctorates, to some degree, by giving them a salary and paying most of their fees and we do not do the same for educational and counselling psychology? It makes no sense.

Again, I refer the Minister of State to the Psychological Society of Ireland's budget submission and is not the first time-----

Deputy Mary Butler: I met the society.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State has met the society. To me it is a slam dunk that we should do this. I am coming across a considerable number of young people who are very interested in the area of mental health, they want to go into this area and we are putting obstacles in their way which makes no sense. The society says that the figures for extending the salary and the assistance with fees for education and counselling psychology is a derisory €1.7 million. It is nothing. It says that an additional 50 trainee psychological posts across the professional doctoral programmes for a five-year period would be an extra €2.45 million. That is €12 million over five years. That, again, is buttons compared to the wider

health budget but would have a very serious impact. It is also saying that in order co-ordinate the management and placement of current and increased numbers of trainees, the Government should fund with immediate effect the establishment of a national psychology placement office, as the HSE has recommended, which would require the funding of just a measly €770,000 per year. Again, this is buttons but could have a very real impact.

Incidentally, when one thinks about the sort of mental health issues, and so on, that we have in our schools, I believe that we should have psychology departments in every single school in this country. It would be a great assistance to our young people. who are significantly impacted by all kinds of mental health issues and need support. There are many young people out there who want to do this kind of work, to work with other young people, but we need to make it easy for those who want to do this, to get the qualifications and placements they need, and then to move into working in our health services.

One other group which I will quickly give a shout out for is the graduate entry level medical students, that is the people who have previous degrees, graduate entry level students. I believe there is a particular name for this group which the Minister of State's officials, I am sure, will know the name of. These are people who have done other degrees and now want to move on to medicine. They have not done a primary medical degree, have done another degree, and then go on to do medicine. There is a pathway for them to move from whatever other degree they have done into medicine but, again, they are faced with completely shocking fees. This is crazy. When we have such a shortage of doctors, why are we putting obstacles in the way of people who want to study medicine and who want to work in our health service?

The other broad point I would make on recruitment and retention, which came up with regard to the student nurses, could apply to a lot of healthcare professional areas where there are real difficulties in people just surviving day to day, whether they are studying nursing, midwifery or in other areas. The people I have mentioned often have real day-to-day cost of living and accommodation issues. Because they are studying, they are not paid properly and they cannot afford accommodation so they drop out. There are all sorts of pressures on them. We should introduce bursary schemes to incentivise people, essentially to fund them in these areas of healthcare where we have a dire shortage of people, whether it is in nursing, midwifery, psychology or elsewhere.

The *quid pro quo* could for such bursary schemes is that if people get a decent bursary, they would then commit to working for a few years in the health service after they qualify. We assist them in getting through their qualifications so they are not struggling, they are not paying shocking fees and they get some sort of proper stipend to sustain them and allow them to pay their accommodation costs and, as a *quid pro quo*, they commit to giving a few years in the health service, rather than leave the country, as so many do because the situation is so difficult for them. Those are a few practical suggestions.

We are theoretically committed to this under Sláintecare. We have a lot of the capacity we need in the health service but the problem is that a significant section of that capacity is privatised because we have a two-tier system. That is just crazy. I am infuriated when I hear the ads for private emergency departments and private hospitals. The implication of these ads that we hear on the radio every day is that if people go to the public emergency department, they will be waiting for half a day, a day or two days in a war zone, but "Come to us, if you can afford to pay, and you will get treated straight away." The capacity is there but it is only there if people can pay. There is significant additional capacity in the private system but only available to people

who can afford to pay very expensive private health insurance. That speaks to the obvious need to integrate and to have a single-tier, universal, publicly-run system, rather than the two-tier system that we have. We were forced to recognise the need to do that during Covid so surely we should make that a permanent state of affairs by having an integrated, single-tier, universal public health system.

Deputy Pa Daly: We support the Bill and some of the amendments, which are worthwhile. I want to take this opportunity to raise a number of issues. No dentist in County Kerry will take on medical card patients at the moment. There was one in Killorglin but the staff were so overwhelmed with requests from across the county that they had to stop taking new patients. I was particularly struck by the case of a man who came to me. He had been working abroad for approximately 30 years. He came home needing to have a crown fixed and he expected the same level of healthcare that he had in the country from where he had come to retire. He was staggered that even though he had a medical card, he was not able to get that service. He was searching around the Ring of Kerry, looking for a dentist, and he could not get one. He came to me and I had to pull a favour from a dentist I knew to get him the treatment he so urgently needed. That is not acceptable.

As the Minister knows, there has been a haemorrhage of dentists from the dental treatment services scheme because the services covered are insufficient to provide dental care and the reimbursement rates are so low that dentists are losing money and it is costing them more to keep the practice going than they receive for treating a patient. The number of dentists holding these contracts nationwide had been in excess of 1,000; it declined from 1,600 in 2017 and now only 600 dentists throughout the country are actively treating medical card patients.

Primary school dental check-ups are running two to three years behind schedule, which means children with orthodontic needs are delayed getting on the waiting lists. The dental clinics in Kerry have treatment waiting lists that are five years long and orthodontists are coming into the county to provide treatment. The physical and emotional harm being inflicted on young people as they wait while their teeth get worse during puberty is unacceptable. What is the Government doing, in particular for Kerry, to ensure there is at least one dentist taking on medical card holders in each local electoral area, LEA?

Earlier this week, I met with members of the INTO regarding their pre-budget submissions and one of their four main demands stood out, which related to mental health support for pupils. Other speakers have mentioned the necessity for therapies and psychological services to be made available in primary schools, where children can be seen without having the stigma of having to leave the school or the classroom to go to see a psychologist or speech and language therapist on the other side of town, if they eventually get that service. I was informed that the number of primary schools referred to CAMHS and other services rose 40% during the pandemic. Special education teachers are trying to act as a stopgap to perform the task. Early intervention therapies in schools are working but more help is needed.

With regard to the pandemic bonus payment, staff are still waiting ten months on from when the promise was made who are working privately in the public system. It shows the level of two-tier unfairness in the system that they are still waiting at this late stage for their payment. What is being done to sort that out?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am aware of a number of the issues that relate to this Bill, especially the case of the Dublin Business School, and I have been in contact with many of the

students in that regard. The school has hugely failed the students regarding their particular qualifications. Many of these students have spent big money and many have taken time out of their own jobs and have changed careers. Many have spent a lot of time on placement so they could qualify with the Dublin Business School, and they are now left in limbo without the proper, clear commitment that their issue will be fixed for them. I welcome any legislation that potentially helps their situation in the future.

I want to raise a couple of other issues that relate to this Bill and to look back on the historical nature of social care and how problems have existed with that. We need to make sure we have good legislation with good, strong regulation as well. I previously raised issues in the House regarding the internal case reviews and the practice assurance and service monitoring, PASM, reviews conducted by Tusla. In particular, I raised the case of Alice and I was shocked to discover at that time that the Government was not aware of the Alice report, despite the fact Alice had emailed and telephoned the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman’s, office on many occasions prior to my raising it in the Dáil. He also stated that he was not aware of the 13 other internal case reviews that were completed. Surely, given the gravity of these reports, they should be shared between the Department and Tusla. I can only presume that the Minister has sought them from Tusla since I raised them here.

I know he met with Alice a few months ago, along with my parliamentary assistant, Luke Silke, and I want to thank him for that meeting with her. Alice is obviously a pseudonym that Tusla ascribed to this woman, who was abused in foster care in the State, physically, emotionally and sexually, in the 1980s and 1990s. There are a number of other issues with the Alice case that I would like to raise. I have already raised issues specifically regarding whether the other 16 foster children who lived in the same home with Alice and her siblings were interviewed. This question has not been answered and it is a key question that has to be answered, either by gardaí or social workers. It has been some time since I raised the questions and I am incredibly frustrated that they have not been answered. I would also like to know what happens currently if a child makes a disclosure to a social worker or to other children in homes. Again, I asked that question of the Minister a number of months ago and it has not been answered.

Second, when Alice’s sister, Ms H, made a disclosure of sexual abuse within foster care, the Tusla report notes that the alleged abuser was interviewed, confessed to the abuse and a file was sent to the DPP, but the DPP decided not to prosecute. Again, I cannot comprehend this. In recent months, Ms H applied for her files under the general data protection regulation, GDPR, and the Garda wrote back to her to say it had located a PULSE record number but the file was empty. It appears that no file was sent to the DPP. There remains confusion and mixed messages over exactly what happened to the file. This has caused untold hurt to Ms H, who is now an adult. Her wounds have been reopened. Will the Government trigger an investigation to determine where these files have gone and to ensure they are located and returned to Ms H? A PULSE file that has potentially been emptied is a very serious matter, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree.

In the case of Alice and her family, the State completely failed them. Alice was taken from her parents, where she had been abused, and was placed by the State in a foster care home in which she and her siblings endured further abuse. It is a nightmare scenario for any child to have gone through. Her birth mother wrote to the social workers about this abuse prior to her death in 1989 but, despite this, Alice continued to reside with the foster care family until March 1992, at which point she left the home with £10 in her pocket, bought a bus ticket and applied for a job in a nursing home. She built a life on a ten pound note. It is important to flag that she

was never removed from that home. The only way she could escape it was by running away from the abuse. There were multiple case conferences and multiple occasions on which disclosures or additional information were made available to social workers and the Garda but no investigation was conducted for decades.

This case and the reports I have examined lead me to believe that either we have a cover-up in which the Garda and the social workers conspired to protect the foster parents from the allegations being made against them by the children, or else we have a country that loudly, clearly and collectively said it does not believe children simply because they are children. This report appeared to adopt an attitude of not believing any of these children. The problem is that since we have divulged this information here, the response of the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will be that the Government shall ignore it until it goes away.

In recent years, Alice triggered a Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, investigation into the Garda station that failed to act on her abuse disclosures in the past. During that investigation, the Garda station wrote to a local authority and falsely told it Alice had committed an offence. I believe this action had a negative effect on her housing application. I will repeat that to ensure we all understand what is going on here. Alice triggered a GSOC investigation into a Garda station that failed to act on the abuse disclosures she gave in the past and, as a result, the Garda station wrote to a local authority falsely accusing Alice of an offence she had not committed and this caused difficulty for her in applying for a council house.

These are some of the hurdles Alice has faced in her campaign for justice. They have been extraordinary. I believe she has been actively persecuted by the State for speaking out against the system. In recent years, for example, Alice was referred for counselling and psychological assistance free of charge after Tusla took charge of this historic case. At the mental health unit to which she was referred, Alice spoke about the social worker who had failed to disclose what happened to her. She found out that social worker is actively employed by the HSE as a mental health worker. One can imagine the pain for Alice of not being believed in a scenario where she is with a psychiatrist and being told the lady in the room next door was the social worker who wronged her in the past. This is just another example of how she has been wronged. Alice was later to discover, through her incredible and comprehensive detective work, that a social worker from her past is currently married to a GSOC officer. I do not suggest for a minute this had any bearing on the GSOC investigation but for a woman who has gone through at least five or six wrongs by the State, it is another incredible situation to arise.

One of the saddest things about this story is that when Alice brought the information to us, she told us she had found out her birth mother had died. She found this out simply from being at mass and hearing the priest tell the congregation who was recently deceased. One can only imagine finding out in this manner that one's birth mother had died. This story highlights the difficulties so many children go through in this State. It also focuses on how important it is to have social workers who are of the highest standard and are governed by the best regulation.

I refer to another internal case review conducted by Tusla. Again, I have the permission of the victim, to whom the pseudonym Karen was given. Like Alice, Karen was left in an abusive home, with the knowledge of the social workers, and had to take it upon herself to run away from that home to escape the abuse. The time period was the same, that is, the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Karen's case, the alleged perpetrator was never prosecuted, despite a file nearly a foot thick being sent to the DPP. Like Alice, Karen received a small settlement from the HSE in a very secretive and questionable manner outside the courts. Like the Alice report, the report

on Karen's case has discrepancies in what the Garda has said. I will focus on a couple of extracts from the report that I believe are important.

Karen first disclosed sexual abuse in 1984 at the age of nine. In a video I have seen of Karen as a child in 1986, in which she outlines to social workers the nature of the assaults on her, she describes how she was sexually assaulted repeatedly by her mother's partner. She was also sexually assaulted by the next-door neighbour. The Tusla review states that the neighbour was fined £75 for that incident. It is incredible that this was the level of justice achieved by Karen in that circumstance. Astonishingly, after the abuse disclosure, of which the local hospital, the local child guidance clinic, CGC, and the Garda were aware, Karen was sent back to the same home. In February 1985, she made further disclosures of sexual abuse. The local GP visited the home and Karen was admitted to the local hospital. When she was released after a short period and referred to the CGC, which was the equivalent of CAMHS at that time, she was released home again.

Karen escaped the abuse in 1986. The Tusla report states:

Karen had made numerous attempts to run away from home. On 31st August 1986, it was recorded that Karen ran away, stole a bike and travelled about a mile from her home before it rained. Cold and tired she saw a light on in a nearby house and when given access broke down and disclosed to the household owner about the alleged abuse.

One would hope this was the end of it but, no, it was not. Karen was put in the care of the State and after a brief spell in foster care, she was placed in an institution. In this State at the time, if you were a victim of sexual abuse, in many cases, you were placed in an institution. The review notes that Karen ran away from the institution and slept rough in Dublin, where she was exposed to prostitution and heavy drug use, although she did not partake in either.

This is the way children were treated in the past in this country. Every time we raise these questions, we are assured things are different now and that policies and safeguards have been strengthened. The legislation we are discussing must do right by the students of the Dublin Business School who have suffered, but it also must ensure we have the highest level of regulation of, and the best level of investment in, these resources and that we protect the children who currently are in the care of the State. That is not the case. I know this is not necessarily the Minister of State's particular area of authority but I ask that she or the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, meet with the two women I have discussed today. They and others like them have done their best to achieve a certain level of justice for themselves and, in many cases, after contacting Departments and State agencies and organisations, they were rebuffed and sent back home. In many cases, the only level of justice they might receive is that their case is discussed as a pseudonym case on the floor of the Dáil. That is wrong. We must ensure we meet and speak to these adults. Equally, we must ensure that all the different hurdles they had to surmount and the wrongs they suffered, as well as those instances where the State let them down and An Garda Síochána, GSOC and Tusla did not do their jobs, are investigated and justice is provided for them. That should be the baseline standard for people in this State.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Mattie McGrath next. We must adjourn this debate at 5.42 p.m. in accordance with the Order of the House from earlier today. If the Deputy is still speaking at that time, I will have to call on him to propose the adjournment.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I thought there was a Sinn Féin

speaker before me. I am delighted to be able to speak on this subject.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabh mo leithscéal, Deputy Ward is here.

Deputy Mark Ward: I have only trí nóiméad, so I will not be long.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry about that.

Deputy Mark Ward: I will speak on the regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists under the auspices of CORU. The Minister of State will be aware these regulations were made by her predecessor in 2018. Members were appointed to the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board in May 2019. The board has 12 very experienced members and it met three times in 2019, four times in 2020 and seven times in 2021 and it has met six times so far in 2022. Therefore, the board has met 20 times since 2019. Four years after the Minister of State's predecessor initiated this process and after 20 meetings of the board, we still do not know when counsellors and psychotherapists will be regulated through CORU. I have met representatives of groups, as I am sure has the Minister of State, such as the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and Therapists for Change. They are not able to tell their members when they will be regulated in respect of their concerns.

In fact, I sent an email to the Minister of State earlier this month on behalf of the Therapists for Change group, which I will now read. It states that the author is writing to the Minister of State as a member of Therapists for Change, that she may remember that the organisation wrote to her in June 2021 and April 2022 to ask if she could meet with its representatives and that, in good faith, the Minister of State responded with the suggestion that Therapists for Change contact CORU, which was appreciated. The email message continues that when the organisation wrote to CORU on 25 April 2022 seeking a meeting, CORU responded with a generic letter and did not address the request. The email points out that Therapists for Change wrote to CORU again on 10 June 2022 and notes that no response has yet been received.

It will be appreciated that counsellors and psychotherapists have many concerns about statutory regulation and how that will effect them, including whether the courses they are undertaking or have completed will be eligible for registration. As discussed already, we heard about the situation with students in the Dublin Business School who were sold courses for social care roles and now find they may not be eligible for registration with CORU. Some counsellors and psychotherapists find themselves in this situation too. Concerns also include how and if a grandparent scheme will be put in place. Psychotherapists need to make plans to ensure that what they are doing now meets the criteria for future registration.

A meeting with CORU to answer these questions would allay the fears of Therapists for Change and make the transition as problem free as possible. It would also be a gesture of goodwill. The group is writing to the Minister of State to see if she can meet with them or intervene with CORU to see if a meeting with its representatives can be arranged. The group would very much appreciate the Minister of State's advice and help with this matter so some clarity can be brought to the situation for the great many counsellors and psychotherapists who are anxious about their future. I note the Minister of State probably cannot answer now, but will she agree to have this meeting or could she intervene with CORU in respect of setting up a meeting?

An Ceann Comhairle: That is much appreciated. I now call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am pleased to be able to speak on this legislation. This Bill

seeks to bring some decorum or measure of change and adjustment to what is needed. This whole area needs massive change. We can have all the regulations and Bills like this and all the grandiose titles and amendments, memorandums and everything else, but people want services. The Minister of State knows that. A Teachta Dála living in any constituency knows this about the services having the required healthcare professionals to deliver these services in a professional and timely manner.

In most cases, the services are not timely. In some cases, unfortunately, there are questions about the profession too. We heard An Teachta Tóibín's contribution. This is not the first time I have heard his point and I have discussed it with him. We all have heard of cases where people are languishing on waiting lists for professional therapy and help, from the cradle to the grave, literally. It is most troubling when we see young people trying to get assessments in respect of special and particular educational needs, language needs and all kinds of therapies. Yet they cannot get them. This is where the real problem is. We can have all the legislation, aspirations and flowery words and sentences and acronyms we want, but that is all pointless if we cannot get the services.

Nothing is more frustrating for a family, whether there is one parent or two or a whole family with siblings, than when a child with special and additional needs does not have those needs determined because the family cannot get access to the professional services required. The lives of the children concerned and their families could change if it was possible to get a diagnosis and additional supports. Is mór an trua é sin. We can go on to the areas of autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, etc. My late brother was a paediatrician, and quite a good one from what I hear from his patients. He had a keen interest, God rest him, in children with learning difficulties and any kind of needs. He travelled the world and gained expertise. I still meet families today, and it is nice, who come up to tell me they miss him so much some 11 and 12 years later. The crucial thing is that the patient, whether young or old, must be at the centre of our healthcare system, but unfortunately that is not the case.

The system has seriously regressed since the dreaded Covid-19. Many people are not back to work in places and there are skeleton services and people working from home or whatever. I am not here to undermine or challenge the staff. Some great people are working in the HSE and other care areas, including in mental health. There are, however, some amount of cracks in the system, and needs, trauma and anguish. We saw people lobbying today, with music and entertainment on the street. I met a special lady, whose name eludes me, who gave us a rendition in the audiovisual room and a bit of a recital. Why are people like her punished and why is the system cruel to them? We must praise their ability rather than remarking on their disability. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Indeed, mol na daoine agus tiocfaidh sí. It is our abilities and what people can do that we must praise, and not our disabilities. There is a major opportunity here for learning and brushing up on what we do, instead of the slippage we have experienced.

I recently met a retired person who used to look after home care hours and applications. She told me she was delighted to be gone because there was no bother getting home care hours and packages now, but there was nobody to fulfil the hours. We have a flight of experts in this area. Home carers are experts in their own right. Many of them do not have degrees as such, but they have degrees in understanding, care, passion and supporting people who are sick. Ní neart go cur le chéile. I refer to carers as well. I always wear a carers' badge, but it is covered up by the mental health badge this evening. We have questions about the mental health budget as well. I met the people lobbying downstairs as well. In a proper system, these people should not have to lobby but, unfortunately, they have to. Maybe it is the big organisations, the more powerful

ones, that can lobby strongest that will get the best outcomes.

Unfortunately, as regards carers and home care packages, the approach is so short-sighted. It is easy to announce all the money. The Taoiseach, when anybody questions him, the Tánaiste and the Minister state there are so much in additional budgets but they are not there. Carers are run ragged and they are tired, with the distance now travelled, the cost of fuel and everything else. I am conscious of the impacts they make and the joy that they bring to people in their homes on home care visits. They keep them out of hospital and accident and emergency departments. A complete overhaul is needed to put more funding into community services. This Bill should be about enabling that but it is not happening.

Recently, a nurse told me that 67% of her class were in Australia. They have done so much learning here and done so much to join the wonderful and noble profession of nursing only to emigrate. The grá is there for some people and they will emigrate anyway because they want to travel.

Debate adjourned.

National Retrofit Plan: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the refusal of the Government to reduce and cap electricity prices leaves households facing into an extremely worrying and uncertain winter, and this is particularly the case for those who simply cannot afford to retrofit their energy inefficient homes;

— emissions from the residential sector amounted to 11.4 per cent of the State's total greenhouse gas emissions last year;

— poorly insulated homes require greater amounts of energy to heat, increasing carbon emissions and resulting in higher energy bills for households;

— energy poverty in the State is currently at its highest recorded rate, and the last Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty lapsed in 2019;

— there are currently over 9,000 homes awaiting works under the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme (BEWHS), with a wait time of 27 months;

— just 1,584 local authority homes were retrofitted in 2021;

— installing solar photovoltaic (PV) panels on homes can increase our renewable energy generation and help decrease electricity bills for households; and

— this is especially relevant in the context on the ongoing energy crisis and the level of energy poverty that households are currently experiencing, which is expected to increase over the coming months;

recognises that:

- many low- and middle-income households are excluded from accessing retrofitting under the Government's schemes, as they do not qualify for the BEWHS and do not have the disposable income required to afford a deep retrofit under the One Stop Shop service;

- the Government's national retrofit scheme prioritises those with means over those most in need;

- State funding should be proportionately allocated on the basis of need, so those least able to afford home energy upgrades and most at risk of energy poverty are given the greatest levels of support;

- a clustered, area-based approach to retrofitting can help speed up delivery and reduce overall costs;

- Ireland needs a progressive and effective retrofit plan, which will help meet our emissions reduction targets, while delivering wider social and economic benefits for workers and families; and

- the existing grant support for solar PV is inadequate and leaves this microgeneration option out of the reach of low- and middle-income households; and

calls on the Government to:

- reform and reorientate their national retrofit plan by redirecting the focus, funding and resources towards those in greatest need of retrofits;

- replace the BEWHS with a new scheme, including an area-based component for low- and middle-income households, in order to improve delivery times, thus, achieve cost efficiencies and get more retrofits to those in need;

- continue free home energy upgrades for currently eligible social welfare recipients and older people and provide tiered grants based on household income, in order to open up retrofits to more people in need of energy efficiency upgrades while limiting support to the highest income households;

- establish a dedicated retrofit scheme for low- and middle-income households who rely on burning solid fuels for heat;

- increase the budget for solar PV grants and provide higher grants for those on lower- and middle-incomes;

- commit capital investment to facilitate the installation of solar PV infrastructure on school and community buildings;

- increase funding for the retrofitting of local authority homes; and

- immediately publish an updated energy poverty strategy.”

I am sharing time with Deputies Tully, Martin Kenny, Ó Murchú, Gould, Clarke and Ellis.

The Government's retrofitting plan was announced to great fanfare in February but it was

clear from the start that it was deeply unfair. This should come as no surprise given who designed it. This winter Deputies can access retrofitting quicker than two pensioners burning coal to heat one room. That is deeply unfair. It is not right. The Government's plan needs to be overhauled. We need a plan at a time of crisis that is targeted, based on need not ability to pay, flexible and responsive and one that will be rolled out rapidly and efficiently.

The Government has stated that 58% of its retrofitting budget is going to energy poverty schemes but the truth is queues are getting longer and budgets are not being spent. In fact, the Government is siphoning off money to pay for diesel back-up generators. The Government's retrofitting plan is deeply inequitable. It fails the equity test and the just transition test.

I will make a number of points of specific criticism. People who need retrofits - those living in the coldest and poorest homes - cannot access them. For people who are eligible for schemes, more than 9,000 homes are on waiting lists for works under the better energy warmer homes scheme, with a wait time of 27 months, which is getting longer. Otherwise, strict criteria mean that people are not eligible for schemes and they do not have the upfront money. They cannot put their hands on the money. People who have less need - those living in warmer homes - can access retrofits because they have access to funds. There is wait of greater than two years or a closed door, on the one hand, while, on the other, there is access based on ability to pay. This approach certainly fails the equity test.

There is a shortage of workers and those workers are, as a result, being inefficiently deployed to demand-led, random houses here and there. Contractors say they have never been more burdened with paperwork and bureaucracy. People who want to access individual grants are being denied because of upfront costs. The bureaucracy involved means budgets will be unspent. As I mentioned, €40 million has already been siphoned off this year's retrofitting budget.

In solar photovoltaic, PV, people face barrier after barrier. There is significant potential here. On solid fuel, people have been browbeaten over turf but no alternatives have been provided.

Sinn Féin's plan would address all of these issues and it would do it without increasing carbon taxes. We would invest €503 million in retrofits in 2023. That is €153 million more than the Government's 2022 allocation – the outturn will be far less - and far ahead of its 2023 capital allocation. That money would be spent in a far fairer and more efficient way.

Sinn Féin would take a targeted, plan-led and area-based approach based on need rather than ability to pay. It would cluster houses together with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, as the lead agency working hand in hand with local authorities and other housing agencies and with one-stop shop contractors acting as delivery vehicles, commissioned by local authorities, the SEAI and private individuals, driving competition within the one-stop shop system and reducing costs. As we grow the workforce through expanded dedicated training in education and training boards, ETB, programmes, this area-based, plan-led approach would use existing resources efficiently and effectively. We would prioritise existing applicants on the better energy warmer homes scheme but we would replace that programme, broaden eligibility criteria for those on higher incomes and dedicate an additional €73 million to that. Works would be subsidised on a tiered basis based on income. We would also provide a 50% increase in funding for local authority housing, which would protect those most at risk of poverty and fuel poverty and the impact of the rising cost of energy.

Acting on the call of the Climate Change Advisory Council and the hundreds of thousands

of people who are excluded from individual grants because they do not have the upfront costs, we would ensure that applications for individual grants, for example, for attic and cavity wall insulation, are assessed quickly and that upfront grant payments are made. We are in a time of crisis. The money needs to get out as quickly as possible and contractors need to be put to work.

We also have proposals for a dedicated scheme for those on solid fuel and additional spending on solar PV. We have a clear plan. The Minister needs to change tack and support the Sinn Féin motion.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I thank my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, for tabling this important motion. The Government's retrofit plan is not equitable. It excludes a large proportion of middle-income households, specifically those who do not qualify for free upgrades but do not have the significant cash reserves needed to access the one-stop shop service.

The prioritisation of wealthier households also contributes to the growing delays for those living in energy poverty, as evidenced by the better energy warmer homes scheme. The scheme is aimed at the most vulnerable households but there are now 9,000 people on that waiting list and the wait time has shot up to 27 months. Between 2019 and the end of January 2022, only 118 homes in County Cavan and 85 in County Monaghan had been completed under this scheme.

It is critical that we put in place a fair retrofit plan that will help lower and middle-income households. Sinn Féin's alternative budget proposes a significant increase in the retrofitting budget for 2023 and targets funding towards those who need it most and the poorest, coldest and most carbon-intensive homes. We would replace the better energy warmer homes scheme with a new scheme for low- and middle-income households, which includes area-based components and increased funding from the current €109 million to €182 million next year. This scheme would see the continuation of free home energy upgrades for current eligible social welfare recipients but it would also introduce a tiered grant support, ranging from 65% to 100%-funded deep retrofits, for low- and middle-income households depending on income. We would increase the local authority retrofit budget by 50%, from €85 million to €127.5 million, as those in social housing are most likely to be at risk of energy poverty and, therefore, in greater need of home energy upgrades.

We also propose a new €50 million retrofitting scheme for homes that rely on solid fuels for heating, which would particularly benefit households in rural areas. It would help improve air quality and health and at the same reduce energy poverty. Sinn Féin aims to put alternatives in place first, unlike the Government approach to solid fuel homes which relies on punitive action, such as turf bans and carbon tax hikes.

We would also establish a local energy action fund that would provide €8 million for sustainable energy communities to fund local community-led retrofits and increase the funding for solar panels, bringing the budget for that purpose up to €24.5 million.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, on bringing forward the motion. It is very clear that the retrofit scheme the Government has in place is not working and not delivering for very many people the length and breadth of the country, particularly those on middle incomes, who may be paying down a mortgage and who have all the other various issues in life to try to deal with. They simply cannot afford to take out another loan, which is what the Government insists they have to do to be able to retrofit their house properly. It be-

comes unaffordable to them. As my colleagues have outlined, a scheme needs to be put in place whereby we would have a tiered system, those on the lowest incomes could get a larger grant and that would tier off as people would get onto higher incomes. I have come across numerous people in my constituency, as I am sure the Minister has in his constituency, who want to do this work and are committed to doing it but find they simply cannot afford it because the scheme in place does not fit their income thresholds and where they are in their lives. If the Government is committed, as we understand it is or as it continues to tell us that it is, to dealing with the carbon emergency and the climate emergency we face, not just in Ireland but globally, we have to be able to assist people to do the right thing.

The motion before us does that. It ensures that the money is put in the right place, ensuring in turn that the people who have the coldest homes, the homes that need the most energy-efficient retrofitting, have the means to pay for that retrofitting. That is why we appeal to the Minister to change tack. The way this has been done up to now is simply is not working. The fact that we are heading for a three-year waiting list, with more than 9,000 people waiting, tells us there is a problem here. It needs to be adjusted and the Minister needs to ensure that adjustment is delivered.

Finally, solar panels and solar PV panels are one of the projects that I know very many people around the country consider doing and would love to be able to do but, again, they find that affordability is the big problem. In many other jurisdictions governments put solar panels in place on people's houses for free. Then, after a number of years, the householder takes ownership of them. There is no imagination at all on this Government's part to deliver that idea of microgeneration such that people may produce their own power for their houses. That needs to change.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Regarding the better energy warmer homes scheme, it has already been said that we have 9,000 households awaiting works and an average wait time of approximately 27 months. That should tell the Minister straight out that this is not working. We all accept that we need to make huge inroads on climate action. I think everyone would accept that we are in a very different world now and we need to make sure we do all that is necessary in order that we are not all under water or in far worse conditions over the coming years. For us to do that, we have to ensure that we have fit-for-purpose grants and actions taken by the Government.

We are dealing with queues and difficulties and obstacles that people say are being thrown up as they attempt to do the right thing by retrofitting. That has been going on since long before we ended up in the situation we are in now. We know that we need to move away from fossil fuels, not just because it is the right thing to do or because we are addicted to them but also because, beyond that, we do not have the strategic autonomy that is required. That is the determination being made across Europe, so we need to look at this again and ensure we target those who most need these retrofits. The problem is we have put in place schemes and systems whereby those who have the most money and, in some cases, the best houses, including from the point of view of heat and energy retention, are able to go out into the world, put their money on the table and get the retrofits, whereas those who are living in the worst of conditions are not getting what is necessary. We have to address that.

We need a huge upscaling in local authorities to make up for underinvestment over the years. I am sure the Minister will hear many arguments. We need something that works.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A recent survey by Aviva showed that four out of ten householders say the grants available are insufficient to encourage them to upgrade their homes. We talk about solar energy and solar panels, for which grants of €2,400 are available, but to do it properly we are talking about between €7,000 and €9,000.

Where is the strategy on energy poverty since 2019? I do not know if the Minister remembers this, but a number of months ago he talked about retrofitting and the plans in that regard. As far as I know, there are roughly 172,000 social houses in the State. I think 36,000 of those are at an energy efficiency level that is adequate or better. Some 36,000, I think, are earmarked to be retrofitted between now and 2030. That leaves 100,000 homes of some of the most vulnerable and poorest people in the State with no retrofitting until at least 2030. I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity, but how could that be right?

My party colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, is trying to bring forward solutions and make a difference. Why is the Government and, in particular, the Minister, a person who cares about the environment and should care about the most vulnerable, not backing what we are trying to do? I have an example in Fair Hill, in Cork, where two houses were to get retrofitting, including wraparound insulation, windows - the whole lot. One family could get it done with the grant because they had the resources to pay for the rest themselves. The other family, two pensioners living on a fixed income, could not get it done. The people who needed it the most were the two pensioners but they were the people who could not get it done, and that is under the Minister's watch. He needs to be strong, he needs to be a leader and he needs to listen to others when we try to be positive and supportive.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Minister has heard from my colleagues about the failures to date. I will list another one. In early August 2020, Kevin and Yvonne Conroy left their home just outside Mullingar to have a deep retrofit programme done. Today, almost 26 months later, they remain out of their home. Words simply cannot describe the severe emotional and financial distress experienced by this family, whom members of the Government, including the Minister, and the SEAI are aware of. Their experience has been nothing other than utterly horrendous and has, to my mind, shown the SEAI in an extremely poor light.

The initial complaint was made in December 2020. It took until November 2021 for Kevin and Yvonne to be assured that they were a priority and that they would be back in their home without further delay. February this year brought more promises from the SEAI, but from March to September the grant agreement remained in limbo, with correspondence unanswered, delays, false promises and an independent project manager withdrawn. This is simply not good enough. There needs to be systemic reform of the SEAI to ensure confidence because we need an effective retrofit plan to help reduce emissions and deliver wider social and economic benefits. That is not the experience of the Conroy family, who want back into their home rather than to be facing their third Christmas out of it. Today there is no start date, contract or signed grant agreement, meaning that the estimated completion date of February 2023, which simply cannot be met without a signed grant agreement, is not confirmed.

The litany of failures in this case is matched only by the litany of broken promises and deadlines. Where is the oversight and accountability? This is happening with the full knowledge of the Government. The lack of intervention is utterly astounding and should not be tolerated. I ask the Minister to take a more proactive step. Will he come to Mullingar and see for himself the impact the SEAI's delays and the effect that dealing with a cowboy builder who leaves a house in tatters has on a family? I am talking about a builder who the family sourced from the

SEAI's own website.

6 o'clock

This afternoon, before coming into the Chamber, I learned that they are not alone. There are other families who had the same builder in similar circumstances.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Like many urban settings, Dublin North-West has a mix of dated and modern accommodation. Over the years, there was a great expansion of areas such as Ballymun, Finglas, Santry, Whitehall, Glasnevin and Meakstown. These areas saw substantial growth in housing estates, which contributed towards rapid growth in the population of north Dublin. Many older houses in such areas were constructed of brick or cavity blocks, and insulation was not even a consideration at the time of their construction. Houses these days are generally built to a high energy standard and require little work, if any, to improve their energy efficiency. Older houses, be they private residences or council owned, are the houses in most need of retrofitting. Their method of construction results in excessive heat loss through the walls and roofs; therefore, heating the house is both inefficient and costly to the resident. There is an urgent need for old housing stock to be brought up to a satisfactory building energy rating, BER, of at least B2. These houses will require a deep retrofit to bring them up to an acceptable energy standard.

Studies have shown that Irish households consume more energy per household than the EU average. This is a direct result of a poor standard of construction that leads to poor energy efficiency. Retrofitting will result in improved energy efficiency and lower energy bills, which is becoming an important consideration in the face of escalating domestic fuel, gas and electricity bills. However, the rising cost of living means that many households on low incomes and people with privately owned homes will be less likely to be able to afford retrofitting. In particular, a cohort of homeowners are stuck between not qualifying for free upgrades and not being able to make use of the 50% matching grant support as they would not be able to afford it. Renters can also be adversely affected as many face high energy bills because some landlords do not upgrade their properties or are unwilling to incur the costs associated with retrofitting. No protections are in place for such circumstances.

I would also like to highlight an inefficiency with the retrofitting programme itself. It is ridiculous that the funding for the retrofitting works programme for Dublin city will stop in October and will not resume in April, resulting in months lost waiting on next year's scheme. It also means that contractors can be left without confirmation of future contracts, and the council can ill afford to lose such experienced workers.

There must be more joined-up thinking when councils are working in an area. There are cases where a row of terraced houses gets wraparound insulation but a single house in the middle does not because the residents had bought their property from the council. This is inefficient, costly and displays a degree of inflexible thinking.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Deputies for raising these important matters of our time.

Clearly, the current situation we are witnessing regarding significant increases in energy bills and the cost of living is a matter of serious concern. The Government is keenly aware of the growing pressures this is placing on families and businesses, particularly households on lower and middle incomes. The increasing cost of energy is an issue that affects not just Ireland

but all EU member states. Increased international gas prices because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have had a serious knock-on effect on the rate of energy poverty. The Russian Government is doing its best to use energy prices as a weapon against EU citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Making people cold and turning them against governments is their precise desired outcome.

It is imperative that the Opposition and all parties here focus on issues the Government can address and what needs to be done. I will outline what we have done and what supports are in place for retrofitting, so that it is crystal clear what supports are available to homeowners. As Members will be aware, in response to this situation, the Government has already put a €2.4 billion package of support policies and measures in place. We understand that further action will be needed, and this will be forthcoming in the budget announcements next week. Given that energy poverty is influenced not only by the cost of energy and a person's income but also by the energy efficiency of his or her home, I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a statement to the House about the measures introduced by the Government which will make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades.

First, in response to the war in Ukraine, we increased the grant aid for attic insulation to 80% of the typical cost, with up to €1,500 available in grant support. The data is not conclusive, but between one third and one half of homes could benefit significantly from this measure. This will likely pay back in less than one year, and I understand credit unions and banks are supporting people if they need to bridge the gap. Similarly, for cavity wall insulation, up to 80% of the cost, up to €1,700, is available to help householders. We are seeing more uptake to the end of August than in the whole of last year. The SEAI has said that it had the busiest start to a winter ever. We are seeing a large increase in the interest in and application of solar PV on people's roofs. We have a target of less than 19,000 individual home upgrades this year, and we will deliver in excess of that target. We also opened this scheme to landlords to stimulate their investing in homes because those in the rental sector must also be protected.

Second, we have more than doubled the monthly output of the warmer homes scheme. However, it is still working through the backlog that built up during Covid. We are targeting a significant increase next year and, in line with the national development plan and with the receipts from the carbon tax that fund this, we must increase it significantly as it is a critical measure. In February, we announced reforms to the better energy warmer homes scheme so that it could better target free energy upgrades for those most in need. Since the announcement, the scheme now accepts applications from homeowners who previously had work done under the scheme so that they can benefit from the deeper measures now available. The eligibility criteria for the scheme were also extended to encompass people who have been in receipt of disability allowance for over six months and have a child under seven years of age. In addition, the scheme is now targeting the worst performing properties by prioritising homes built and occupied before January 1993 and with a BER of E, F or G. This scheme is working. The output has tripled. As is the case with so many other schemes, the level of response from the public and the industry is beyond compare, and it will continue to rise as we go into next year and subsequent years.

The third element of our retrofit plan is the national retrofit scheme, which launched in February and went live in April. This seeks to support homeowners by delivering deeper, decarbonisation measures. It hit a chord with homeowners with more than 20,000 people already engaging with one-stop shops. This programme is a long-term plan and is designed to build competence and capacity over time. It is a 30-year project. We will not reach the maximum

of this scheme in one year; it will take five years of steady growth and good planning. Having spoken to those in the industry, I am aware that they are investing in new employees, training and hardware, and are rapidly scaling up their industrial capabilities. This was never possible before because there was much stop-starting in the support given in previous years.

The national retrofit plan is designed to address barriers to retrofit across four key pillars: to drive demand and activity; to provide financing and funding; to improve supply chain, skills and standards; and to improve the governance of the scheme. Barriers were identified for each pillar, and time-bound policies, measures and actions were put in place to address them. The initiatives in the plan are also guided by a number of key principles. First, we are seeking to ensure fairness to all and support a just transition. Second, we seek to embrace a universal approach covering all housing types and consumer segments. Third, we seek to design customer-centric solutions to reduce the costs and complexity, making the process easier for those investing in retrofitting. Fourth, we are seeking to encourage retrofits to cost-optimal level and maximise emission abatement. Finally, we seek to stimulate and support the market to instil the confidence to invest, grow and take on more workers. We are now delivering that for the betterment of the people.

A further element of the plan is how we work with local authorities and approved housing bodies. This last plank in our retrofitting plan is critical. I have been to many local authorities around the country, asking them what they are doing and making sure they are scaling up their capacity and competency to deliver higher targets. We have also underpinned the upgrades in the rental sector with opening all these grants to landlords to upgrade properties for tenants. In addition, as part of Housing for All, the Minister with responsibility for housing has detailed that these retrofits will become compulsory for lower-performing homes in the coming years.

I am happy to report that SEAI data shows that since the launch of these new measures, demand across the retrofit schemes has been exceptionally high. As of the end of last month, more than 30,000 applications for support had been received by SEAI. This is more than double the number received during the same period last year. This demand is translating into delivery, with 13,400 home energy upgrades already completed with support from across the range of schemes. This is an increase of 70% when compared to the same period last year. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smith, will give further detail on these positive developments in his closing statement.

These initiatives are being funded by the unprecedented national development plan financial allocation for residential retrofit of €8 billion to 2030. A total of €5 billion of this funding will be sourced from carbon tax revenue. A total of €244 million has been allocated for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes and the solar PV scheme this year. This is the highest ever allocation for the schemes and includes an allocation of €118 million for SEAI energy poverty schemes. In addition, €85 million funding has been provided by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for the local authority energy efficiency retrofit programme. This means that of the total Government retrofit budget allocation of €329 million, approximately 60%, or €203 million, has been allocated to dedicated energy poverty schemes and local authority retrofits. This is progressive. We are deliberately targeting and making sure that the money goes where it is most needed. This does not mean we do not provide, help and assist other parts of Irish society. We are doing this in a balanced and deliberately strategic way.

On 3 August, the Department published a review of the strategy to combat energy poverty alongside a public consultation. The review showed strong delivery on the existing strategy

with many of the original actions already exceeded. The public consultation closed on 5 September and the responses received are helping to inform the development of a new action plan to combat energy poverty. Other sectoral engagement across Government will also be considered in developing the new action plan.

The action plan will set out a range of measures to be implemented ahead of the coming winter as well as key longer-term measures to ensure that those least able to afford increased energy costs are supported and protected. The new plan will be published shortly after the budget. A cross-departmental steering group, chaired by the Department, is developing the new action plan. The Department is also engaging with relevant Departments, agencies and NGOs on a bilateral basis. The group will also work with the ESRI as part of a research network to improve the measurement and monitoring of energy poverty in Ireland and provide insights that enhance policy design to protect vulnerable householders.

These retrofit schemes are recognised internationally as some of the best examples and as some of the best funded and most progressive. We will never be satisfied because it will never be enough in these exceptional times. These plans are working. The Irish people are responding. We are starting to put in PV and insulation at levels never seen before and we are only warming up.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The debate is taking place in the midst of a massive rise in the cost of living. I urge people to attend the protest on Saturday, 24 September, at the Garden of Remembrance at 2 p.m. It will be one of the biggest protest marches we have seen in a long time.

The existing national retrofitting plan has two distinct streams. These are the better energy warmer homes scheme, which aims to provide free retrofits to those on certain social welfare payments, and the one-stop-shop service that requires households to have significant savings on hand to invest in retrofitting. For everyone else in between there is little or no support for upgrading the BER standard of their homes. This leaves them living in colder homes with mounting energy bills. We need to change this. Many households do not qualify for free upgrades and many do not have the cash needed to avail of the 50% matched grant support. The Government's plan excludes too many households.

What would Sinn Féin do? We would replace the better energy warmer homes scheme with a new retrofit scheme for low and middle income households including area-based components for deep retrofits. Among other measures, households could be eligible for various levels of funding from between 100% to 65% of the cost of retrofits depending on household income. We would increase funding for local authority retrofits. As always, the most disadvantaged are those who suffer the most and have to await local authorities. It is important that local authorities are given enough funding to ensure all the homes they rent are retrofitted. We would establish a new retrofit scheme for solid fuel homes under which households could be eligible for various levels of funding up to 100%. We would replace the one-stop-shop with tiered support for higher-income households. The scaled-down one-stop-shop scheme would continue but with the State's support tiered based on household income. Under this scheme households may be eligible for 50% to 100% of funding towards the cost of retrofits. Sinn Féin proposes increasing the retrofitting budget to a total of €500 million next year. This would be a 50% increase in funding compared to this year. However, we will not just increase funding. Most importantly, we will target those most in need.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We are in the midst of a cost of living crisis and there is no

doubt about it. I hope to see thousands of people on the streets of Dublin on Saturday. The cost of food has increased, as have the costs of energy, renting and home ownership. With a view to energy saving and reducing our energy consumption, retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient is a positive idea but it must be offered at an affordable rate to all households. We cannot exclude anybody. The better energy warmer homes scheme is not working for many of those who have applied. A total of 9,000 homes await the works, with a wait time of up to 27 months in some cases. It is not working for those on lower incomes who simply cannot apply as they are not on the specific social welfare payment. Those in local authority homes are not benefiting with only 1,584 local authority homes retrofitted in 2021. It will not happen for those waiting for the local authorities to do a retrofit. Those of us who have been members of local authorities know exactly what they will do.

The one-stop-shop scheme is beyond the affordability of many citizens who simply do not have the savings to commit to retrofitting. Expanding this and, importantly, delivering a progressive retrofit plan is a necessity. It will deliver social and economic benefits for citizens while helping us to meet our emissions reduction targets.

The motion sensibly calls for orientation of the retrofit plan towards those who have the greatest need for retrofit. These are those most severely impacted by energy price increases. Our proposal calls for an assessment of household income as a means of deciding what percentage of the retrofit is covered. The area-based approach in our proposed scheme would allow for homes in close proximity to be retrofitted at the same time, delivering savings and lowering costs. It is nonsensical to have some homes in an area covered and others not.

As part of the Limerick regeneration programme a commitment was made to retrofit houses in the four regeneration areas. The 2014 regeneration implementation plan committed €4.7 million to retrofitting homes in these areas. Unfortunately, here we are almost ten years later seeing no rhyme nor reason. Some houses have been done but others on the street have not while others have been skipped or excluded. I do not have faith in it.

A failure to deliver will condemn more of our vulnerable citizens to the unenviable choice of deciding whether to heat their homes or use that income for other vital needs. In his contribution the Minister said the Government is scaling up the capacity and competency of the local authorities to deliver higher targets. I would like to know exactly what money he will give the local authorities. If he does not give them funding they will not do anything.

Deputy Chris Andrews: The Minister, Deputy Ryan, said the Government was only warming up on these schemes. I can tell him the residents in the flat complexes have been forgotten about and they are freezing and terrified. The condition of the vast majority of flats is very bad. Dampness and mould as a result of poor insulation is rife in many flats. The flats in Mercer House, Pearse Street, Whelan House, Rathmines and many council-owned houses are in a disgraceful condition. Glover Court, as the Minister knows, was supposed to be retrofitted many years ago but, like many plans for the flat complexes, it never happened. In 2022 the flat complexes are like wind tunnels given the unacceptable condition of the doors. One could fit one's hand through many of the old wooden doors that are basically unusable and then the windows are rattling and creating a wind tunnel. The flat complexes need to be prioritised for insulation. We need to increase the funding for local authority flats and houses. Sinn Féin's alternative budget would do this.

Equally, we need to see retrofitting prioritised for the flats. There seems to be an attitude

that the flats do not matter - that they will be last and we will get around to them at the end. I can tell the House that if it was not for the ordinary working families living in the flat complexes, there would not be a front line during the pandemic. Households living in the flats such as Macken Villas and Beech Hill Villas kept the front line going during the pandemic.

A wealthy household can get €25,000 of taxpayer-funded grants for a deep retrofit, while households living in the flats cannot access this. To make matters worse, they would be waiting for years for decent insulation from their landlords, that is, Dublin City Council. Residents need a plan that is fair and is rolled out to those who most need it. Sinn Féin's plan will do that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We are putting forward this motion at a time when energy poverty is at its highest-ever recorded rate. We are also in the midst of the biggest energy crisis we have faced in a generation with home energy and fuel costs going through the roof as we head into winter. The Government's totally inadequate retrofitting schemes are compounding the energy crisis. More than 9,000 households are waiting on works under the better energy warmer homes schemes, with a wait of well over two years. Just over 1,500 council houses were retrofitted last year.

The one-stop shop service gives the same grant funding to those who earn the minimum wage as it does to millionaires. It is galling that as low- and middle-income households face into frightening energy bill increases, high earners who can afford to install solar panels and are therefore eligible for grant aid will not be affected. Indeed, they might make some money by selling it back to the grid. As usual, it is the ordinary working people who are completely excluded.

Sinn Féin's plan would introduce a new retrofit scheme for low- and middle-income households. Our system would be tiered to ensure that different levels of household income receive a proportionate grant from 100% down to 65%. We would also increase funding for local authority retrofits by 50%. We would bring in a solid fuel retrofitting scheme for those who rely on burning wood, turf or coal to heat their homes. We would also help these households to insulate their homes and install heat pumps, with the priority being to change the fuel source. Our approach can be compared with the Government's attempts to ban turf and slap carbon taxes on people without giving them any alternative or choice. We would introduce area-based components to our scheme to see houses in close proximity retrofitted at the same time to reduce costs and building time. The way the scheme is managed at present is impractical and does not make the best use of resources. The Government's scheme prioritises those who have the most over those who have the greatest need. It excludes most middle-income households - those who do not qualify for free upgrades but do not have tens of thousands of euros to spare to access the one-stop shop scheme. Our scheme will address these issues. It will help households to become more energy efficient, saving them money in the long term. It will help us to reduce our emission targets and, most importantly, it is fair and equitable.

Deputy Ged Nash: Retrofitting is the low-hanging fruit with regard to reaching the State's emission targets and future-proofing energy security. As the Minister will be aware, in 2017 the built environment alone accounted for 12.7% of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions. To put this into context, the average Irish dwelling emits 104% more than the EU average. This is not a record we can be proud of. This has come about not only as a result of our reliance on more carbon-intensive fuels, but also due to the poor quality of insulation in our homes, which is another legacy of the Celtic tiger, cowboy builder era. It can also be attributed to a failure, in more general terms, to upgrade older housing stock over the years. As it stands, more than 80%

of Irish homes and other buildings have a BER of C or worse. This is an astonishing figure.

It is estimated that 70% of current buildings will still be in use by 2050. Even if every new building and home were to be carbon neutral, this would not be sufficient to meet our targets, such is the number of properties with poor energy ratings. If we are to build a carbon-neutral Ireland, we will need nothing short of a massive State-led retrofitting programme over the next decade. Frankly, there is little sign of this. There is no real sense of a national campaign. There are bits and pieces here and there - a piecemeal approach - but no indication of a national town-by-town and street-by-street effort. The lack of such an effort was baffling a year ago and it is even more puzzling now, given what energy-impooverished households are facing into this winter. We need a national effort and campaign.

Aside from the urgent need to retrofit homes from a climate perspective, there is a double imperative with the current cost-of-living crisis. We know that energy prices are only going one direction, which is up. Reducing our consumption of energy on a household, business and national level will be key to helping to bring bills back down. Home insulation can be a win-win. Deep retrofitting has the dual impact of lowering emissions and reducing energy bills for households. It also creates good sustainable green jobs in our communities. It is a no-brainer of a policy which one would think the Government would be absolutely eager to adopt and embrace, as it would be the kind of real national campaign that the challenge we are facing demands.

One would think that the kitchen sink would be thrown at this but experience tells us that has not been the case to date. The energy-efficiency retrofit budget for local authority housing was a mere €85 million in 2022. This clearly is not the overwhelming national priority that it ought to be. Based on an average cost of €36,000 per unit, an extra €100 million would be required to ensure 5,000 homes are progressed next year. When some construction inflation is factored in, the package would probably need to be brought up to close to double that, or approximately €185 million. This should be the absolute bare minimum that we need to hear from the Government on budget day. Even that would not go anywhere near the scale of the ambition required, and nor would it go far enough fast enough. In contrast, my party has proposed how 100,000 homes could and should be retrofitted on a street-by-street basis each year. That is at least the level of ambition we need.

We know that cost is a major barrier to undertaking retrofitting work, as others have articulated during the course of this debate. While the national energy upgrade scheme now offers grants of up to 50% to 80%, this is no good to most working families who just simply cannot afford the initial upfront payment and all that involves. As it stands, they are struggling to make ends meet, with soaring prices and stagnant wages. They simply do not have €10,000 or €25,000 in savings to carry out a deep retrofit under some of the current schemes. Put simply, they are stuck between a rock and a hard place. They earn too much for the warmer homes scheme but not enough to afford major upgrades. They do not have the means to fork out the high cost that grants such as the one-stop shop schemes require. In the meantime, their gas and electricity bills continue to rise out of control. Too many households like this across the country are experiencing energy poverty but are excluded from free energy upgrades. It creates a lose-lose situation out of what really should be a win-win situation.

In contrast, the Labour Party is calling for a retrofitting programme targeted at those households earning under €50,000 and with a BER of B2 or below. We are also calling for a form of carbon credit, through the tax system, to help working families that do not qualify for most supports such as fuel allowance and the household benefits package. We also need to be conscious

of other groups in the design of retrofitting and energy-saving schemes. This winter, energy prices for homes which are old and protected will be hit with extortionate energy bills. Homes such as these are excluded from retrofitting incentives and adequate fuel supports should be targeted at them. Likewise, there will be many people living in rented homes where the landlord is unwilling to apply to the one-stop shop for the various schemes. It is unfair that such people should have to face an effective rent increase due to the rising cost of paying for their fuel and energy bills. Those living in older apartment developments with managing companies that are uninterested in retrofitting require imaginative support too. The chronic apartment defects issues highlighted over recent years require support. People who are experiencing those problems require additional support and we are looking forward, in the context of the budget, to see what the Government has in mind for that cohort of people. The mistakes of the past should not be repeated and a more proactive approach by the State will be needed in such cases.

We also need to see a faster, simpler and more streamlined application process for the various Government supports and grants. The current application process is too slow, too complex and too costly. That has been my experience when advocating for people in Louth and east Meath. The so-called one stop shop often consists in reality of visiting many other shops along the way until you conclude the process. As the Climate Change Advisory Council has noted, this red tape must be simplified urgently to assist consumers through the renewable energy process.

Finally, the elephant in the room is the lack of the apprentices and skilled workers needed to deliver the kind of change the climate challenge requires us to see. They are often forgotten from the conversation but without them none of these targets will be achieved; not today, not next year - never. One recent report has stated more than 50,000 construction workers are urgently needed to fill a black hole in the workforce if the State is to meet its housing and retrofitting targets. The Government has set its own target of just 27,500 additional construction sector workers over five years. That breaks down at 7,500 each year. In this context, last month's Core Research report for the construction industry is deeply worrying. It showed 63% of construction companies were struggling to find workers with 46% of industry professionals noting plasterers are rare and very difficult to find, as are carpenters. This is contributing to significant inflation in the cost of construction work and major delays for all kinds of construction projects, be they national, local, regional or simply domestic. Part of the reason for this is the precarious conditions in the construction sector. With the starting rate of pay for apprentices often being half the minimum wage, who could blame our young people for opting out? Let us not pretend we can have a functioning, fit-for-purpose, skilled construction sector while it continues to be so dependent on labour that is to a very large extent dominated by the phenomenon of bogus self-employment. If retrofitting at scale is to become a reality, which is a reality I think all in the House want to see, we will need to see an urgent increase in pay for apprentices to at least parity with the minimum wage in the first year and a sea change in the approach to security of employment in the sector if we are to have the skilled workers to service the ambitions of the retrofitting and housebuilding programme across the country over the next few years.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this important issue. It emphasises very clearly how inaccessible retrofitting is for many households around the country and certainly for those who need it most.

Gas and electricity bills are already crippling and as temperatures start to drop as we get closer to winter, more and more families will be forced to choose between keeping the house warm or putting food on the table. That is a dehumanising decision nobody should have to

make but is one thousands across Ireland will have to because of the Government's failure to provide adequate supports for low and middle-income households throughout the country. Retrofitting homes is no longer a matter of urgency but a matter of basic necessity for many. For many people, the State has left it too late and they will have to endure a winter of record energy prices and if they cannot afford them they will have to choose between living in a cold, dark room or sacrificing other necessities. That is not hyperbole on my part, as those figures are captured by a multitude of different organisations, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It was also captured by Social Justice Ireland. It demonstrated earlier this year that 581,334 people are living in poverty in this country. They were already people who were choosing to go without food so their children did not have to, which is a choice nobody should have to make. These are families who did not have access to two warm coats and who did not have money left over at the end to have a basic thing like a night out with a friend. These are the families who are going to need it most. These are the vulnerable people who feel these shortcomings most. The shortcomings will be felt by families already experiencing poverty, including one-parent households, migrant families and all those already living on the margins. Estimates show that almost half of households could now be in energy poverty. That is only set to get worse with more price hikes coming into effect in the next few weeks. For people to pay any more than they already are is simply unimaginable.

The Government's inaction may have failed many this winter but we cannot sit idly by and find ourselves in the same circumstances for the next one. Earlier this year the engineer in charge of Dublin City Council's retrofit programme said it would take 12 years to complete the retrofitting of the city's social homes at current funding levels. That is completely unacceptable. Where else did we hear about 12 years? How many of us, the Green Party included, went out three years ago and campaigned to an electorate based on it being 12 years until a point of no return for climate change and biodiversity loss? We said we would demonstrate urgency yet a Dublin City Council official is telling us it will be 12 years before we can enact a retrofitting programme. That is not acceptable by any measure. This needs to be addressed by doubling the retrofitting grant in the budget next week. Bringing up a home's energy rating is a huge financial undertaking, even with the help of the SEAI's current grants and so we must see adequate investment in next week's budget. However, grants alone are not enough to ensure energy security for all those who are struggling. Low-interest loans should be made available for households that still require them to complete their retrofit as too many households have been priced out of the scheme. As well as providing adequate grants and affordable loans for all those who need them, we need to see an investment in training and retraining programmes to build a workforce large enough to retrofit homes as soon as possible. All the funding in the world means nothing if there are no workers to complete the upgrades and that this has not been factored in is a sad indictment of this Government.

Just as we do not want to find ourselves in a situation next winter where households are still facing a crisis, it is crucial we do not fall short of our climate action targets in 2030. We cannot put off reducing our carbon emissions. This leaves us with not one but two vital reasons to retrofit properties around the country as quickly as possible. We simply cannot separate the cost-of-living crisis from the climate crisis. The Government has set a target of retrofitting 5,000 homes by 2030 but as my colleague Deputy Whitmore said, and I agree, there is little clarity on how this can be achieved and we need to see genuine commitment and a realistic plan to achieve these goals in writing in next week's budget. As energy companies rake in profits from this broken market while families find themselves in crisis, we must also see a substantial windfall tax to reroute those profits to speed up retrofits for the households that directly need it.

People woke up last week and saw the ESB had made €1.5 billion more than it did this time last year. Imagine seeing that while wondering how many pairs of jumpers you will have to wear not to be freezing in the cold winter months ahead. We are in a crisis and need a response that is in keeping with that.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I thank Sinn Féin for this motion, which we fully support.

Retrofitting is a key solution to two crises, namely, the climate crisis and the energy crisis but for us the latter is the immediate one. I will deal with the climate crisis in a minute but first I want to give an account of two homes I visited recently. They were two council-owned homes that were retrofitted to a high BER. One family is very poor with two special needs kids. You walk in the door and the house is warm even though they have not turned on the heating in months. They used to live off a pay-as-you-go card and were spending €60 a week on trying to just keep the heat in the house for the kids. Now they probably spend about €20 in the winter months, so it is a no-brainer. They are not lighting fires, the kids are warm and cosy and the bills are brought right down, particularly in this energy crisis. Another family got a proper retrofit with wraparound insulation, having the walls lined, having the attic properly lagged and getting new windows and doors. They are amazed at how warm the house is, as was I, and they never have to turn on the heating.

Retrofitting is therefore a no-brainer but there are huge problems with the current experience. People who were refused the fuel allowance are unable to access the SEAI schemes in most cases. However, if you are better off – it is important to emphasise this – and you have, for example, €50,000 to put upfront, you can access a very nice retrofitting scheme for your home, whereas the bulk of the other grants are small and piecemeal.

The big question for the Minister of State as a member of the Green Party is what do the current schemes to reduce emissions. We have some worrying complaints from people about the nature of the work being done and its effectiveness. There is little point in doing small, energy-efficiency work if it still leaves a home reliant on fossil fuel and does not actually reduce the CO₂ emissions.

The Government's inaction may have failed many this winter but we cannot sit idly by and find ourselves in the same circumstances for the next one. Earlier this year, Dublin City Council's engineer in charge of its retrofit programme said it would take 12 years to complete the retrofitting of the city's social homes at current funding levels, which is completely unacceptable. Where else did we hear about 12 years? How many of us, including the Green Party, went out three years ago and campaigned to an election based on 'What we truly need is a national retrofit body, a company that is fully owned and run by the State, that does what has been described previously, namely trains loads of apprentices, and does not leave the provision of the work to a private company or run the risk that we will not lift people out of energy poverty or reduce emissions. A national retrofit body to directly employ workers and direct the scale and pace of the retrofitting by Government is needed.

The Government constantly talks about the €8 billion it is putting into retrofitting along with targets of 500,000 homes to be deep retrofitted and 400,000 heat pumps. This target was presented as a great achievement of the Green Party but it is precisely what was in the 2019 climate plan. There are several problems with this €8 billion figure. It is clear from the answers I received to earlier questions that this sum is heavily back-loaded to the latter years of 2028, 2029 and 2030. Just like our emissions targets, a lot is based on a *mañana, mañana* approach.

It is planned we will spend €1.2 billion in 2028, €1.7 billion in 2029 and €2 billion in 2030. The problem is, of course, that according to the current trends, we will not reach those targets. Like emissions reductions, the Government's ambitions to achieve these targets may mean it and the current Minister of State will be out of office. We know that just ten homes had a deep retrofit last year and up to May this year it seemed that none had been fully completed. This comes on top of ongoing delays and problems facing people getting access to work on their homes that was previously done. I was told months ago that the no second visit rule was gone from the SEAI rules. It is not really gone. People must apply for a scheme that is organised by the one-stop shop or the better energy warmer homes scheme and, therefore, they have to fulfil the criteria of one of them to be in a position to apply for a deep retrofit. The vast majority will not fit into these categories. Other supports for individual upgrades like the attic, wall insulation, heat pumps and so on will not be supported by the SEAI if any work was previously done on the home in question. It may even have been done by a previous owner many years before and anyone seeking support now will be refused. That is just one example of where we are failing in this area.

Another example is people on the median wage who are not on social protection and are not well off. A single parent with two children who came to me during the week is being asked for €15,000 upfront to have the wraparound done on her home. That is not right and that is totally unfair. She can barely even raise the money to get the kids back to school even though she works full time. There is a clear class bias in the distribution of the supports. It is striking and I know there was great work done under the better energy warmer homes scheme but the reality is that the vast majority are not included and will not get access to this. The vast majority of homes that desperately need the retrofitting are, therefore, not benefiting from it.

"Glacial pace" may be the wrong term to use since the glaciers are melting at a rate of knots, but the slow pace of the social housing stock retrofitting is painful. It seems we are less ambitious now and are achieving less than we did in previous years. For example, the State spent €30 million on local authority retrofits in 2014 and retrofitted 18,000 homes. Last year, it spent €21 million and retrofitted just 1,500 homes. I see the targets but we do not see the real delivery or the ambition given the scale of the twin crises of energy and climate. We need to cut our energy demand and our CO₂ emissions. I do not accept the argument that it takes time to ramp up delivery. The logic here is that we must send signals to the market and hope that the market will deliver the numbers needed in retrofitted homes, workers and the resources to be allocated. If we have learned any lesson from the current crisis, it must be that leaving something as vital and important as energy and heating homes to the market is a recipe for disaster. This points to the vital need for a public body to take responsibility for retrofitting and for achieving the scale and pace of the work needed, and ensuring that we can recruit and train the workers needed. This cannot be left to the market and private companies.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the retrofitting scheme and how it can help with the spiralling cost of living, which is the biggest concern of my constituents at present. People are being crucified by inflation and electricity prices 89% above the EU average. This is completely unsustainable. If the Government refuses to cap electricity prices and get on top of the situation now, thousands of households will be facing into an extremely worrying and uncertain winter. Time is of the essence if the most vulnerable people across Ireland are to receive timely assistance. The ESRI estimates that more than 40% of people will be in energy poverty this winter.

With regard to prices, vulnerable constituents and housing poverty, my constituency office

is acutely aware that the people of County Louth and east Meath simply cannot afford to retrofit their energy-inefficient homes. We well know that poorly insulated homes require more energy to heat which will result in increasing carbon emissions and even higher energy bills for households. I would not say that the Government has done nothing but it needs to do more. Currently more than 9,000 homes await work under the better energy warmer homes scheme, with a waiting time of 27 months, which is shocking. Recently I had a woman in my constituency office who applied under the retrofitting scheme for a heat pump to replace her energy-inefficient oil boiler. She met all means requirements. Due to the backlog of applications she went ahead and paid someone to install a heat pump. Subsequently one year later, when an assessor called to view the property, she was denied a grant as work had been done. This needs to be changed.

I, therefore, ask the Government to consider the immediate approval of allocations received under the national retrofitting scheme. We need to help the people now by providing a greater investment in retrofitting households as a matter of urgency. Not a day passes when there is not a queue in my office of people looking for help to fill in applications forms to see what is available. However, many low- and middle-income households in my constituency of Louth and east Meath are excluded from retrofitting under the Government scheme as they do not qualify for the better energy warmer homes scheme and do not have the disposable income required to afford a deep retrofit under the one-stop shop service. This needs to change. State funding should be proportionally allocated on the basis of need and specifically targeted at those who rely on burning solid fuel for heat.

It should be acknowledged that the amount the Department has allocated to this grant scheme has increased each year since 2014, which is welcome. However, we face significant challenges in meeting the targets in Housing for All and the retrofitting targets given inefficiently lengthy mean-tested grant applications and the limited throughput of apprentices in the construction sector, which is already understaffed. The biggest problem we have in Louth and east Meath is the increase in construction costs and material and the shortage of skills and labour. This is putting the cost of these upgrades and essential works beyond the reach of most recipients of grant approval. It is very hard at the moment to get value for money. In the incoming budget the Government should ensure that the grant scheme can meet the demands and reflect the increase in construction costs to meet targets for emissions reductions. The upper limit grants should reflect the increase in the cost of construction. If we are to tackle this issue we need to take a much more direct route.

I would also like to raise the concern that current and new housing developments in my constituency of Louth and east Meath are still installing gas lines instead of heat pumps. These developments are going to cost us in the coming years and they will have to be replaced. The Government must look at long-term costs and implement regulations now. Additionally, we cannot have a situation whereby people are in energy poverty which will have subsequent effect of increasing hospital admissions, causing further stress on health service. These least can afford this energy. There should be a reform of the current national retrofit plan whereby the focus of funding and resources is redirected towards those in greater need of retrofitting. We need to improve delivery times and cost efficiencies while increasing the number of retrofits, especially for those in need. In the upcoming budget the Government must keep its promises and we must follow up the allocation of the €165 million towards housing, climate change and balanced regional development. Families need a warm home and stability. Ireland needs a progressive and effective retrofit plan that will help our emissions reduction targets while delivering wider social and economic benefits for workers and families. Morale in the country is very

low. Families are suffering. The people need help now. It has been said that either people are going to eat or heat. The Minister of State has an opportunity to heat the people's homes and, next Tuesday, the Government has the opportunity to let people eat. Many people are coming into my constituency office who want to avail of these schemes. As the previous speaker said, if they had work done ten or 15 years ago, that is affecting their applications as well. I ask the Minister of State to please have a look.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ten years ago, in 2012, I had the opportunity to formulate a detailed and costed plan to deep retrofit 1.4 million houses in this State that were still, at the time, in need of deep insulation, in addition to the 130,000 non-residential buildings that were in the same state. I presented the plan to the Dáil. At the time, the costings that we worked out meant that it would cost approximately €14 billion to bring all of the residential housing stock up to an average BER of C1. At the time, according to the Institute of International and European Affairs, IIEA, €10,000 per home would have saved the average household approximately €1,496 per year, and it would have helped Ireland reach its 20% energy-efficient target by 2020. It was an incredible plan that was very detailed. We presented it to the Fine Gael Government at the time, which said, "Absolutely not."

This Government launched a plan a few months ago. If one extrapolates the figures from the Government's plan to do the same number of houses, it would cost approximately €24 billion. That is unlikely because of the massive spike in inflation that is happening at the moment. However, even on the Government's figures, it would cost €10 billion more than had the plan that I produced in 2012 been put into place.

One of the reasons I came up with the retrofitting plan was that there was a massive flow of construction workers emigrating from the State. Many of them just could not find work here. I believed that if we involved them in a significant retrofit scheme, we would be able to achieve energy efficiency, save money for families and keep workers in Ireland. Unfortunately, again, Fine Gael, not caring much about our workers, sent tens of thousands of those construction workers away to other countries to start new lives. As a result, many of the construction workers we need now to deal with the housing crisis are simply not there. It was a massive mistake and a lack of foresight on the Government's behalf in three separate, objective areas.

Common sense dictates that the barrel of oil that is cheapest at the moment is the barrel of oil that you do not burn. Most families understand that saving energy is probably the most important objective we have. It is a higher priority even than the generation of sustainable electricity and, therefore, it is frustrating to see how little progress has been achieved so far. I am not laying all the blame on the Green Party, because the Green Party is two years in this particular Government and I understand it takes time. However, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have dressed themselves up in greenwashing over the past ten years but delivered absolutely zero in terms of retrofitting. The figures are incredibly low. Over the past two years, the figures have decreased in certain areas. Indeed, the figures for 2020 were 25% below target and last year's were also extremely low. Projects literally stopping and stalling is frustrating to see.

The *Irish Examiner* did a wonderful report a couple of weeks ago. The Minister of State must have looked at it and perhaps blushed when he read it. It showed that thousands of public buildings are scoring as low as F and G for energy efficiency. They say charity starts at home, but certainly policy should start with the Government first and foremost. Yet, the Government is not doing its job in terms of retrofitting its own buildings. It is an absolute bloody disgrace that there are thousands of State buildings in this country that have F and G ratings, which are

nearly impossible to heat and cost massive money to run. It is not by accident as well. We have senior public servants in this country who are happy to spend money without accountability. Why? Because it is not their money. The best type of money is other people's money, in fairness, if one is going to spend money. That is one of the problems. This type of inefficiency would not be acceptable in people's homes or businesses as well.

I will give another example. There are public buildings in my constituency, for example, a Department of Justice building, that is lit up every night like Las Vegas. It is incredible. It is lit up massively for no practical purpose – just for aesthetics. It is still happening. When one sees that level of inefficiency in State buildings and Ministers calling for lights to be turned off at night-time and for staff to be concentrated on one floor, jaws drop across the country. Most people cannot believe it has not happened already. Most people cannot believe we have attacked the earnings and incomes of farmers before we have even decided to turn off the lights in public buildings at night-time.

I urge the Government to get real on retrofitting and saving energy and make sure that we make buildings warmer and cost less to heat.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I support the motion tabled by Sinn Féin. It is if the Government is saying, “Do as I say and not as I do.”. “Lead by example” is an old adage that stood well in this country. However, Deputy Tóibín gave the appalling example of State buildings to show that the Government and public bodies do not give a whim about saving energy and retrofitting, for that matter. There is no such thing as retrofitting. The schemes are too onerous. There is a massive waiting list, not enough money and people have to invest a lot to get a report done beforehand. As far as I can see, the schemes are tailor-made for the leafy suburbs of Dublin. I mean the leafy suburbs and not the ordinary lads out in Jobstown, Tallaght or any place else. It is the people in the leafy suburbs of south Dublin. That is where the schemes are suited because they have the money to put up. They are the ones with the electric cars too. They are the ones who are dictating Government policy.

I said to the Ceann Comhairle before that Irish people were living in eco-friendly houses long before the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was – I will not repeat it – ever born. They were thatched cottages that were cold in the summer and warm in the winter with fuinneoga beaga - small windows. It is time the Government parties got some measure or modicum of reality, as well as a bit of humility, and brought the people with them. They should lead by example and bring the people with them. There is not near enough funding for this. The Government penalises farmers' groups and the working man. The Government has a punitive carbon tax, which is totally discriminatory against rural dwellers. There are public transport reliefs for where the public transit is, which again, is mainly in Dublin and some other cities.

We had an excellent Tipperary Energy Agency based in Cathair Dún Iascaigh in Cahir. I think it was there 20 years. Now it is gone; it was scrapped. Some of the Government bodies sucked the staff away and it is gone. It is not there any more to advise people how to save energy when we need it most. The decisions that the Government is making are absurd. The demands the Government is making on people are abominable. It will not work. The Government is too much stick and not enough carrot. Is mór an trua é sin.

Deputy Michael Collins: This simply is not working. The Minister of State will probably say that he was going to stand up and say that anyway. However, I know that it is not working on the ground. The people of my constituency are telling me that retrofitting and the warmer

homes scheme are not working. The funny thing is, if we go back 15, 16 or 17 years to when the Government rolled out the scheme initially and it was done through community alert schemes, it delivered. I was on the community alert scheme at the time; I was not a politician. It delivered door to door and it got attics insulated. Unfortunately, funds are not there to do a proper insulation package for houses today. The people who got that little bit of insulation that time are punished today because the current scheme makes sure that they cannot now get their homes insulated because they got a little bit of insulation perhaps 15 or 20 years ago. This scheme is completely outdated and does not work. People who want to get their homes retrofitted are waiting two years, which is far too long. The Government stated it could bring that down to a year. I am waiting for that.

People on fuel allowance are able to qualify. I accept that and that is great. However, there are people who are just €1, €5 or €10 above the fuel allowance threshold and are falling between the stools. They cannot afford their fuel but they cannot qualify for a fuel allowance because they have a pension or whatever. However, they might have a lot of payments coming out of that pension. That has to be looked at if the Government wants to do something.

The Green Party is trying to make people suffer. Certainly, I can feel that. Having been at the ploughing championship today, I would say to Members from that party that they would want to stay away from it, to be quite honest. There is strong ill feeling towards the Green Party out there at the moment because it is not delivering.

I met representatives of the hotel sector last week. They told me they want to put in solar panels. Centra, Musgrave and other shops want to that as well. However, they will not even apply for the grant because it a complete failure. The Government is failing to do the very thing it should be doing. It needs to look at delivering a proper retrofitting and warmer homes scheme that suits and fits everybody.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The SEAI is the State agency designated as the national retrofit delivery body. It has received well in excess of €1 billion in funding over the past decade, yet it continues to operate a system characterised by significant delays between application, approval and the works being carried out.

7 o'clock

The funding it will receive between now and 2030 will be in the region of €8 billion and half of that money is to be used for the energy-poor sector. What I fear, however, is that the scale of ambition and the work being placed on the SEAI will not be reached in any meaningful way. I am aware of pensioners in my constituency who are waiting long periods for essential works to be carried out. I am calling for more urgency to be given to this whole issue because it is one thing talking about retrofitting but if the action is not there, it is not good enough. I ask the Minister to take immediate action on that because I know of pensioners who are waiting very long periods.

I wish to raise the issue of the proposed ban on oil and gas heaters in homes. This was flagged recently and it struck me as the final nail in the coffin in terms of the Green Party's relationship with reality. We in the Rural Independent Group know from our briefings with the Alliance for Zero Carbon Heating that such a policy would place a massive financial burden on families across Ireland if their existing boiler were to fail unexpectedly and they were forced to switch to a heat pump. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has informed the Oireachtas that the

average cost of the deep retrofit that is necessary to make a home heat pump ready is €56,000, while the average grant for these projects is less than €20,000. It is just not going to work. We need more input from the Government. It is as if the Government is making life very difficult for people. The key message people are receiving from the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties, which are very cosy with the Green Party and have endorsed its policies, is that the green medicine will be forced down their necks whether they like it or not.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this important matter. It has been the Government's mantra that the carbon tax it is collecting is going into deep retrofitting. As the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, who is present, has been told here all evening, there is a wait of up to two years. What is happening to the money the Government is collecting from hard-beaten motorists, whether they are lorry drivers or tractor drivers or whoever? They are playing carbon tax at an exorbitant rate and the Government is going to charge them more in the budget. Where is the money going?

Up to 300 people were on the waiting list in County Kerry at the end of February. That number has doubled since then. As for Kerry County Council, we do not know why the voids are not being brought back into use. We are kind of being told that it is because the voids must all be deep retrofitted, at a cost of up to €60,000 or €70,000, but the Government is not providing the money to the local authority to bring back the voids. There are 150 of them at present. I am asking the Minister to direct the money the local authority needs to retrofit the houses. There are 30 such houses vacant in Killarney while people all around are crying to get housed. The Government is talking about putting heat pumps into old houses. Some of the houses are not fit for that.

In the case of grant aid for the elderly, in Kerry a person will only get €3,200 to repair a roof. That includes the VAT, so it is only about €2,192 that the person gets. I am asking the Minister to increase that money. If there is rain pouring down, what good is heating the house? We have to start with the roof and keep the water out.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The national retrofit plan is not working. The SEAI has confirmed that it is now taking up to 28 months for applications to the warmer homes scheme to be dealt with. I am a contractor. I flagged this issue 12 months ago when the Minister, Deputy Ryan, was looking at bringing out this retrofit system. I also said that it would not provide value for money at a time of an energy crisis and prices going through the roof. Some people who are looking at the grant system will not take it up because, given the current high energy costs, they are afraid they will not be able to meet their bills alongside the cost of retrofitting the house. They cannot afford to come up with the 50% that would be needed. I can tell the Minister the scheme does not offer value for money. I just got off the phone to a woman who has been waiting eight months for us to turn up to find out if we would do a job on her house. There are people who cannot get a contractor to carry out the works. There is no incentive for people to do it because they do not have the means or the money.

I saw today that the Government's intake on electricity alone is up 30% even though it reduced the VAT rate to 9%. It is getting €4.64 billion extra in VAT even though it reduced the VAT bill, but now it is talking about putting it up to 13.5%. That would put more hardship on every business and person in the country while the Government is talking about retrofit grants and making it affordable. People will be lucky to have food on the table this year with the way the Government is going.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am supporting the motion. The latest figures for fuel poverty seem to be from 2017. At the time, it was estimated that 475,000 households were affected by fuel poverty or, in other words, had to spend 10% of their income on heating their home. There is no up-to-date strategy to deal with fuel poverty.

The retrofitting of homes has to be a key element of combating fuel poverty by making homes easier to heat and cutting energy bills. It is also a key factor in meeting the State's climate change targets. It has been estimated that retrofitting all homes would decrease carbon emissions by 22%. However, the current retrofitting schemes are simply not up to the job. The cost of a deep retrofit for an average three-bedroom house is between €60,000 and €70,000, or more. A deep retrofit involves insulating attics and cavity walls and installing heat pumps to bring a house up to a B2 rating. The grant amount of €25,000 means that a householder would have to borrow between €35,000 and €45,000, which is beyond the means of most individuals. In effect, the better energy warmer homes scheme means those who cannot afford it are subsidising those who can. That is why I am opposed to the carbon tax. It is inequitable from the point of view of those who need it most.

Most Deputies received an email from a man in County Cork who had listened to Dr. Ciaran Byrne, the director of national retrofit for the SEAI, being interviewed on a radio programme and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, being interviewed on the same programme shortly afterwards. The man states that he lives in a three-bedroom detached bungalow in west Cork. The house was built in 1980 and has a BER of D1. He wishes to deeply retrofit his home and, having done lots of research, hired an independent energy assessor from a company that does whole-house retrofit plans. The estimated cost for the deep retrofit drawn up by the energy assessor was €59,300. After the national housing retrofit scheme, NHRS, grant, the final cost to him would be €30,600, which he can just about afford. After the independent assessment, he contacted every one-stop shop listed on the SEAI website. He got a shock when the estimated quotes for the work started to come through. He attached to the email a selection of the quotes he received. One is for €92,400. After the grant, that would leave him with €60,000 to pay. Another came in at €108,700. His heart sank as quotes started to come in and he realised there was no way he could possibly afford this. When he heard Mr. Byrne expressing surprise at quotes as big as those and then later, in a separate interview, the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, stating that no one in her constituency had complained to her about the cost of deep retrofits, he was really frustrated and left with the feeling that he cannot afford the retrofit.

That is the reality of what is going on in a lot of instances in the context of the schemes. The scheme needs to be reformed and reorientated towards those most in need. There needs to be funding for the retrofitting of local authority houses and the homes of those on social welfare, for example. Dublin City Council has retrofitted fewer than 900 homes in almost four years, with the average BER improved only from an F rating to a C1 rating. Those homes will probably need to be redone in future to bring them up to a B2 rating. Dublin City Council's target is to retrofit just 225 homes a year. On that basis, it will take 14 years to do the 2,800 homes remaining and 1,700 units will be left with below standard upgrades. There needs to be an increase in funding for local authorities to dramatically increase their targets and there needs to be oversight to ensure that proper standards are met. There should be increased funding to older people and those on welfare, while a new scheme to make retrofitting accessible to those on lower wages or incomes is also needed. There should be increased grant funding for solar PV, as well as a national body to run retrofitting by the State.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion and the Minister

of State for being here. We want to bring people on board. In fact, people are ahead of us in respect of climate action and climate change. We are not showing the vision or the practical steps that are necessary. We have succeeded in dividing and conquering. We have encouraged climate deniers, which I will have no part of.

This is a positive motion. It sets out facts and calls on the Government to do various things. The targets that have been set bear no resemblance to the delivery of those targets.

Galway city and county councils distinguished themselves before Covid-19, in 2018 and 2019, when no units were retrofitted in the city or county. Any Government that was serious about this would have the managers in to explain what is happening. Retrofitting houses is just one tiny aspect of dealing with climate change. It requires obtaining proper data then getting the managers or CEOs to account for the fact that no houses were retrofitted during those two years. There might be some excuse during Covid-19.

The Government failed to update the energy poverty action plan despite the data being presented to us by various groups such as the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, MABS. The UCC policy briefing document 2021 found that 90% of households with low disposable income considered the cost of energy efficiency measures to be the biggest barrier in making their decision. The ESRI paper of June 2022 on energy poverty and deprivation estimated that recent energy inflation had increased expenditure-based measures of energy poverty to almost 30%. It considered a household to be energy poor if it spent 10%. The figure has become worse since June when the figure was 29.4%.

I have difficulty with the target of having 500,000 houses retrofitted. The various answers to me and other Deputies who have tabled questions indicate that the target is not to upgrade half a million houses up to BER B2 standard at all. It is a kind of trading system whereby all the emissions are taken together. It is extremely difficult to work with the Government and local authorities that are not giving basic data. When basic data are provided, for example, showing that zero houses were retrofitted in 2018 and 2019, nothing is done by the Government. No action is taken.

Galway City Council did great work on decarbonisation zones and identified west side as the decarbonisation zone. We are into our second year now. It was identified in February or March and submitted as soon as the Department asked for it. Nothing has happened. Would the Minister of State not think that two years after the decarbonisation zone was identified questions would be asked about what the Department is doing? I am critical of Galway County Council but in this case it has done its job and the Department has utterly failed to issue guidelines on operating the decarbonisation zone.

Climate change is a huge issue. The word “huge” does not capture it; it is the most important issue we have to face. We have to start using language in a meaningful way.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I support the motion. Some types of retrofit work, such as heat pumps and insulation in roofs, but doing insulation inside or outside older houses is an expensive job. Doing a deep retrofit costs about €90,000. Unless there are interest-free loans, it is not going to work. People do not have the money because they have their tongues out trying to keep themselves warm, never mind retrofitting a house. That is problematic.

On top of that, and this is calling it very clearly, a certain number of people are qualified to do retrofitting but builders may do the work for a person and forget about the grant that could

make the job cheaper. I have seen cases of that. Under the Government's warmer homes scheme, most people do not get a deep retrofit but get only an oil or gas boiler. Condensing boilers are more efficient but they are not ideal because they will rely on oil or gas into the future, although they reduce bills somewhat. There are other options the Government has not looked at. If reducing emissions is the goal, why has it not considered hydrogen fuel, which is coming into the country at the moment? It reduces emissions by 90%. We have not gone down that road, which would help people and also help meet the targets.

Having ideals is grand and so is believing that next summer we might be in a better place. This winter is about keeping the lights on, keeping people warm in their homes and keeping food on the table. People are under pressure. I ask the Government to ensure in the budget that all the vulnerable sectors and middle Ireland are looked after. If it fails to do that, we will be in trouble.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. I am delighted there is so much interest in retrofit. There was not always such interest. In the past, when retrofit schemes were proposed there were cynical responses about how many years it took for the payback. Those calculations about how long it took for payback were based on assumptions about the future price of electricity and gas. We have since found out that those assumptions were wrong.

In February last, the Government introduced a dramatic new retrofit scheme which allowed for grants of up to 80% for those measures which were the most effective, in other words, attic and wall insulation. The response to that change has been huge. There is no need to sell retrofit to the public. Everybody knows what it is now and everybody wants it. That scheme was introduced in February before the war started. The element of the war that Ireland is involved in is the response to the sanctions against Russia. Putin's response has been to attempt to divide Europe, make us fight against each other and crush our solidarity and resolve. I am glad to see we are all on the same page as regards the need to reduce our emissions and consumption, which is even more important than adding more energy to the grid.

I will quickly update Members on the retrofit scheme. At the end of August, more than 30,000 applications had been received by the SEAI, which is a 140% increase on the level that was seen in the same period last year. Applications for the new enhanced attic and cavity wall insulation grants tripled compared with the same period last year. These are highly cost-effective upgrade measures and they will help homeowners to save energy this winter. We are talking about an expenditure of between €300 and €400 for a home. Applications for heat pumps and external wall insulation are up 80% and 40%, respectively. In addition, demand for solar photovoltaic schemes has been extremely positive this year.

While driving demand is important, delivering the retrofits is even more crucial. In regard to what has been delivered so far, the SEAI target for this year is 27,000 home energy upgrades. The latest projections from the SEAI indicate that this challenging target will be met. This means 27,000 families will be made cosy in their homes. Figures for the end of August show that 13,400 homes had been upgraded across the SEAI schemes. This compares with a total of 7,900 for the same period in 2021. More than 4,200 of these homes are upgraded to BER B2 or better and this compares with a total of just under 1,800 for the same period in 2021, not ten as one Deputy stated earlier. Under the solar PV scheme output for this year, we will exceed the target for PV to deliver 6,600 solar roofs. Demand and delivery under the new national

home energy upgrade scheme have also been robust, with a pipeline of work for the remainder of the year and into 2023. There are currently 11 one-stop shops registered. A 12th is expected to be announced shortly and another 14 organisations are at various stages of the registration process. We expect to have about 20 one-stop shops registered by the end of the year, which was the target.

The Government recognises that even with the enhanced grant rates, many homeowners will need to access finance to fund their upgrade. For that reason, my Department is engaging with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, and the European Investment Bank, EIB, on the development of a residential retrofit loan guarantee scheme. This scheme will enable credit institutions to offer loans with reduced interest rates to private homeowners and non-corporate landlords and will make comprehensive home energy efficiency upgrades more affordable to the public. It is intended that the loans under the guarantee will be available in the coming months.

More than 2,400 homes have already been completed under the warmer homes scheme this year. That is nearly three times the number of homes completed in the same period in 2021. The retrofit works delivered under the scheme are extensive. SEAI data show an average investment of €18,750 per home retrofitted under the scheme in the first half of the year. Month-by-month delivery of free energy upgrades under the scheme has doubled since last year and has reached the target of 400 completions per month. To sustain and build on this progress, the following actions have been taken. First, the SEAI has been allocated additional staff to administer the scheme. Second, additional funding has been sought from the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF. Finally, the SEAI has completed a 4% increase in costs for all contractors from June in order to address the ongoing supply chain challenges.

In line with the national retrofit plan's principles of fairness and universality, there is a need to ensure that all housing types and consumer cohorts can participate. For this reason, specific measures to stimulate retrofit activity among approved housing bodies and in the private rental sector were also included in the package of measures which the Government announced in February.

The residential rental sector poses a particular challenge and in this sector the incentives to invest in energy upgrades are misaligned between landlords and tenants. This impacts negatively on the energy performance of the sector. This complex problem is seen in many countries and is referred to as the "split incentive". To address this issue, non-corporate landlords are eligible for the new grant supports available under the national home energy upgrade scheme, the better energy homes scheme and the community energy grants scheme. It is also intended that non-corporate landlords will be able to avail of the planned low-cost loan scheme for retrofit when it is launched in the coming months.

A further key step associated with addressing this issue for tenants will be the introduction of a minimum BER rating required for rental properties for all landlords. The Housing for All strategy, which is being led by my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, includes a commitment to introduce this requirement from 2025. Collectively, these measures will mean that the national housing stock is upgraded and tenants get lower energy bills and a more comfortable place to live.

There are approximately 36,500 local authority homes which will be retrofitted in the coming decade under the local authority retrofit scheme. This programme of work will not only

benefit local authorities in assisting them in the upgrade and maintenance of their housing stock but will also directly benefit householders with an enhanced level of comfort and lower fuel costs. This year, the energy efficiency retrofitting programme will see approximately 2,400 local authority homes nationally being upgraded to a B2 or equivalent standard, with a significant increase in funding support to local authorities to €85 million. That compares with just two years ago when funding of €25 million was provided for local authority retrofits. When moving from funding of €25 million to funding of €85 million, staff must be provided. Staff were provided in every local authority in the country to carry out that work. These are trained retrofit engineers. It is right that this funding of €85 million is targeted towards local authority tenants who are at risk of energy poverty.

While it is important, retrofitting on its own will not address the cost-of-living challenges faced by homeowners across the State. The Government now intends to build on the €2.4 billion package of measures already in place to support people to meet the cost of energy in the forthcoming budget. A new action plan to combat energy poverty will set out a range of measures to be implemented ahead of the coming winter, as well as key longer term measures to ensure that those least able to afford increased energy costs are supported and protected.

I emphasise again the critical importance of the role of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, which oversees non-price aspects of competition and continues to take steps to increase transparency, customer protection and consumer engagement in retail markets. In August, under response No. 6 of the national energy security framework and following engagement with customer representative groups, energy suppliers and network operators, the CRU announced enhanced consumer protection measures. These include, an extension to moratoriums on disconnections, a reduced debt burden on pay-as-you-go meters, better value for those on financial hardship meters and the promotion of the vulnerable customer register. These are important additional protections for consumers during a very challenging time.

As outlined, this Government has set ambitious retrofit targets for Ireland for the end of this decade, including almost halving greenhouse gas emissions from the residential sector by 2030; upgrading almost a third of the country's housing stock to a building energy rating of B2 or carbon equivalent; and installing 400,000 heat pumps in existing homes to replace older less efficient heating systems. This represents one of the most ambitious retrofit programmes in the world. However, under the national retrofit plan, we are making tangible progress. My officials will continue to work with the SEAI to build on the work to date. The operation of the schemes will be kept under review taking account of the overarching need to build a much bigger home upgrade sector, the evolving science, innovation and technology, and other relevant factors. We want to ensure that grant levels continue to be appropriately matched to the costs that people pay.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am glad to speak on this Private Members' motion because there is so much worry and uncertainty about energy and keeping warm this winter. The issue is coming up at all the doors when I meet constituents in Prosperous, Naas and Kilcock. They are so worried about their energy bills and so scared they will not be able to turn on the heating for their children when they come home from school, they cannot even consider the Government's retrofitting plan. People are particularly concerned about older parents who worry so much about paying bills and taking out loans. These are people who work hard and live week to week and month to month. They cannot even consider the Government's retrofitting scheme which prioritises those who have the most over those who need the most. The Government's stance on retrofitting projects, prioritising those who can pay the most over those who need the most,

is the same as the unfair, unjust and unkind stance evident across its energy policy where the chosen ones, the haves, can depend upon warmth and fibre optics, while the have-nots can be consigned to the cold and candlelight. As my colleague, Deputy O'Rourke, said, its approach fails the equity test.

A constituent who contacted me the other day received an electricity bill of more than €400. He lives alone on a disability pension and has not turned on his heating. He has also decided not to turn on his lights and television and is only using the radio. He is trying to do everything by candlelight now, which is a worry as it is a fire hazard. He said the electricity supplier might as well cut him off immediately. Does anyone think this man is considering retrofitting his home? He and so many like him need what Sinn Féin is proposing in this motion for people on low and middle incomes. For example, we propose a €15 million retrofitting scheme for homes relying solely on solid fuel. This would be of particular benefit in rural areas and would also improve our poor air quality, which we suffer so much from, while tackling poverty at the same time.

We further propose a local energy action fund providing €8 million for sustainable energy communities to fund local community-led retrofits. We propose a 75% increase in funding for the solar PV budget, bringing that budget up to €24.5 million for 2023. These are no-brainers. Supporting the motion is also a no-brainer as it would make such a difference to my constituents in Kildare North and others across the State. We should use this energy crisis as an opportunity to lower our carbon emissions. The motion we have put before the House would do just that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, an Teachta O'Rourke, for bringing forward this motion and providing us with an opportunity to have this very important debate.

The Minister of State referred to all of us being on the same page. We are not really all on the same page, though, are we? Some of us are not even in the same book if truth be told. On the Minister of State's page, there are 9,000 people waiting up to 27 months to avail of the better energy warmer homes scheme. On his page, a wealthy household can access up to €25,000 worth of taxpayer-funded grants, while those on low or ordinary incomes are locked out. So, no, we are not all on the same page and, as I have said, we are not even in the same book sometimes. I genuinely wonder if Ministers hold constituency clinics and, if they do, whether they see how people are suffering. Have their constituents brought them their electricity and gas bills and explained what they are doing? Are they aware of the indignity people are living with during this energy crisis? They are standing in a shop for longer than they need just to stay warm. If they are retired, they are getting money off their kids just to pay their heating bills or they are planning to go to bed at 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock in the evening just to stay warm. We need to be ambitious. The Minister talks a lot about the need to be ambitious but we also need to look at where people are. They are not on the same page as the Minister. He needs to recognise that. They need urgent interventions, they need support now and they need to know they will get through the winter. They cannot fuel their houses with ambitions. They cannot pay their bills with the Minister's ambitions. They need direct action.

That was the purpose of this motion. We need to ensure that people can be warm in their homes. The Minister referenced people being warm and cosy in their homes but that is just a pipe dream for many people as we head into winter. This is not in any way personal but I am genuinely worried for where people are at, for the impact this will have on their mental health and for the impact this will have on their families. I encourage the Minister, the Minister of State and their colleagues in government to act. It is instructive to note that the Minister's Government partners have not sufficient interest to come in and speak on this motion this evening. I

would encourage them all to talk to people in their communities and to use the information they obtain, plus the motion we have brought this evening, to put in place measures that will make a real and meaningful difference to people who are now dreading this winter.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank those who have contributed to this debate. It is notable that neither Fianna Fáil nor Fine Gael could present a speaker. Maybe they do not see the same problems that we do. Maybe they do not represent the same constituents that we do, namely, those who are struggling to access these schemes and to heat their homes this winter.

I have to say in response to the Government contribution that we are setting out a clear challenge to the Government. We have identified weaknesses in the schemes, as the Minister heard from a number on the Opposition benches. We need the Government to increase funding. We need to reorient the schemes to ensure they are targeted to those in need, those on low and middle incomes and those in local authority houses. The schemes need to be targeted based on need. There are far too many excluded from the schemes based on waiting lists, on strict eligibility criteria or on the inability to pay, given that they do not have the upfront funding to access the necessary grants. I have not heard enough in response from the Government to be confident it is hearing exactly what has been said here, or that it is going to respond to address the barriers and the lack of flexibility. There is a need to address the roll-out and the speed of lower-cost or shallower retrofits.

I am very concerned by what I hear. The Minister of State gave a lot of information and figures benchmarked against last year, which was in the middle of Covid. It is no great achievement to do better than last year and to have that as a starting point. My understanding is that the overall target is 27,900. The Minister of State indicated that this is now at 13,400, but that just 4,200 of those are to B2 or B2 equivalent. That is a very low number and is of real concern. In that regard, I wonder is that the same as last year. Are many of those B2 or B2 equivalents the result of a move from C1 by just putting solar panels on the roof, and that is another one off the list? That is not the type of progress we need to see.

We need targeted investment towards people who are going to struggle to heat their homes, who are living in cold homes, who are poor. They need to be prioritised, not Deputies, Senators, wealthy people or people who have a spare €25,000. We will get to them but they are not literally at the coal face this winter. The schemes need to be reoriented and they need to be prioritised. Workers are busy retrofitting the homes of wealthy people. We need to take that resource, because we do not have enough of those workers and contractors, and we need to put them where they are needed and, in the first instance, to address the long waiting lists and to expand those schemes. Our approach is one that is efficient and effective. It is about identifying the needs with the SEAI and local authorities and then working through blocks of houses in groups.

The Government is not opposing the motion. I would rather that it took our motion and ran with it, reformed the schemes and delivered for people in need.

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: On a point of order, there were a number of references in the previous debate to the absence of political parties. I would like the House to note that there is no speaking time for parties during Private Members' business. If Sinn Féin wishes to make time available for backbenchers to speak, we are very happy to do that, but it is hypocritical to sug-

gest that no one is present when they do not provide any speaking time.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There is 20 minutes of Government time and the Deputy knows it.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh and Patrick Costello - to discuss the need for a co-ordinated Garda response to stolen cars rallying and ramming a Garda car in Cherry Orchard; (2) Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív - to discuss treating offshore islands as one area with a local action group under the LEADER programme; (3) Deputy Louise O'Reilly - to discuss the pay and conditions of workers in the security sector; (4) Deputies Niamh Smyth and Réada Cronin - to discuss the need to address school transport issues for families; (5) Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss the differential treatment of employees and volunteers by the Citizens Information Board; (6) Deputy Joan Collins - to discuss the holding of a referendum on public ownership of water; (7) Deputy Catherine Connolly - to discuss the ongoing "do not consume" water notice issued by Uisce Éireann-Irish Water for An Spidéal, Inishbofin and Inis Oírr, County Galway; (8) Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss progress in reform of the coroner service; (9) Deputy Eoin Ó Broin - to discuss the findings of the report by the working group on defective buildings; (10) Deputy John Lahart - to discuss the failure of bus service providers to meet their timetable-schedules obligations; (11) Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the Rosscarbery and Owenahinchá wastewater treatment infrastructure; (12) Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - to discuss the increase in income thresholds for social housing eligibility in some counties; (13) Deputy Pauline Tully - to discuss issues of concern with the home care grant scheme; (14) Deputy Jackie Cahill - to discuss specialised long-term dementia care in the Tipperary area; (15) Deputy Cathal Crowe - to discuss a response to the Clare Public Participation Network's Towards an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Clare; (16) Deputy Gino Kenny - to discuss the 35 children who have not been provided with access by the HSE to the groundbreaking Kaftrio drug, a drug that is already available to all other eligible adults and children in Ireland; (17) Deputy Pat Buckley - to discuss the process for replacing lost or stolen driving licences and the additional extra cost associated with the process; (18) Deputy Kieran O'Donnell - to ask the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the delivery of affordable housing under the Part V requirement; and (19) Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the provision of a new school building for Gaeilscoil Pheig Sayers in Cork.

The matters raised by Deputies Niamh Smyth and Cronin, O'Donnell, Murnane O'Connor, and Ó Snodaigh and Costello have been selected for discussion.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Dáil Éireann
Energy Prices

54. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to reduce the price of electricity and energy for households and businesses over the coming months; if he has examined introducing a price cap on electricity in Ireland or introducing other market reforms or interventions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45782/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister his plans to reduce the price of electricity and energy for households and businesses over the coming months, if he has examined introducing a price cap on electricity in Ireland or introducing other market reforms or interventions, given the market is broken, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The unprecedented increase and volatility in international wholesale gas market prices has continued as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This, in turn, has led to increases in energy bills, given the link between the wholesale price of gas and electricity prices. The Government has already put a €24 billion package of measures in place and further measures are being considered for budget 2023. Under the electricity costs emergency benefit scheme, we made a payment of €176.22 to almost 2.2 million domestic electricity accounts. The scheme was part of a package of measures which included further increases in the fuel allowance, seeing it increase from €735 in 2020 to €1,139, and a reduction in VAT on electricity bills from 13.5% to 9%. Under responses 6 and 7 of the national energy security framework, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, announced enhanced consumer protection measures to be implemented by electricity and gas providers ahead of the coming winter.

Earlier this year, the Government increased the grant rates significantly to make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake home energy upgrades. In particular, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, is being supported to focus on free energy upgrades for those at greatest risk of energy poverty. As we debated earlier, these schemes are seeing significant demand increases. Business supports are also available to support businesses to improve energy efficiency.

Responsibility for the regulation of the retail electricity and gas markets is statutorily a matter for CRU. It ceased price setting for electricity and gas in 2011 and 2014, respectively. The setting of prices is a commercial, competitive matter for individual supply companies. Any major interference or change in the market must be carefully considered and that is what is being done now by the EU. We are very supportive of that and we are working with the EU on it. We are also very supportive of the emergency measures considered at the European Energy Council on 9 September, including a change in the market in order that we get a return from the inframarginal pricing and a solidarity levy from fossil fuel producers. Those measures are the most important and immediate ways in which we can protect the Irish people.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is quite incredible that we have a situation whereby the Minister acknowledges the measures to which he referred are needed at this point in time but, in effect, he and the Government have been a barrier to those types of progressive reforms at a European level. Whatever the situation was in October 2021, I think it was clear at that stage, given the European toolbox had been published a number of weeks earlier, that reforms were needed. As recently as June this year, the Minister confirmed to my colleague, Deputy Conway-Walsh, that he did not support market reforms. The Iberian countries of Portugal and

Spain moved for the decoupling and a form of windfall tax on non-gas forms of electricity. Why has the Government resisted those changes for so long and does the Minister acknowledge it was a mistake to do so?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No, I do not. The reason we are following the measures we are is that I think the alternative presented by Sinn Féin would be less progressive. Its proposal for a cap on electricity prices seems to be very similar to what the Tory Party in the UK is proposing. It would give a direct benefit to the energy companies, which I do not think is what we need to do at this time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What has the Minister been doing for the past year?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I understand the proposal by the Deputy's party, it would benefit the wealthiest households that use the most energy. Putting a cap in would enable those households to keep consuming energy in a way that would benefit them more than it would poorer households. I do not believe the alternative proposals being presented would give a better outcome. They are full of potential for eventual, knock-on consequences that would be deeply damaging to the State. We can agree or disagree on that but it is my assessment of the alternative proposals by the Deputy's party. I prefer the measures proposed by the European Commission, which we can more immediately apply, and the ones proposed by the Government.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister is right. If I were him, I would not answer the question I was asked. I would not talk about how I and my Government stood in the way of progressive measures and proposals at a European level to address the fact gas is driving prices and this is, in essence, playing into the hands of Putin. Gas is driving the price of electricity. The Government and the Minister have resisted these progressive moves for close on a year at this stage. Consumers in Spain have benefited to the tune of €1.4 billion in a couple of months because their Government took progressive and aggressive action to deal with that. Now, at the eleventh hour, the Minister is eventually making a massive U-turn on behalf of the Government. It is absolutely incredible. Will he answer the question as to why he opposed those progressive measures almost 12 months ago?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is no U-turn. I work very closely with the Spanish Minister and find we agree on a lot. I do not believe the measures introduced in Spain would work well here and that is why I prefer the approach we are taking. There were knock-on consequences in Spain, including a massive transfer of exports of energy to France, from which the latter benefited. There would potentially be the same consequences here. We could see a major transfer of wealth from Ireland to Britain if we adopt the exact same measures. Different markets have different circumstances but that was my assessment of it. If the Deputy's party is proposing we take the approach of a cap-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We are proposing a cap and a windfall tax.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----I again make the point that this would benefit the wealthiest households and the energy industries. I do not think that is what we need to do at this time.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister's proposals will benefit people with holiday homes.

Dáil Éireann
Energy Policy

55. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position on the building of a liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal; if it will be privately built or State-built; the way such a facility can be compatible with the climate objectives of the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45986/22]

Deputy Bríd Smith: Will the Acting Chairman clarify how much time I have?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Deputy has 30 seconds to put the question, the Minister will have two minutes to respond, after which the Deputy will have one minute, the Minister another minute and the Deputy an additional minute.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Okay. We need some clarity on the issue I am raising. There is a jarring discrepancy between the media coverage of the energy review yesterday and the analysis from some NGOs and columnists today. Will the Minister clarify whether there will be an LNG terminal in this country, either privately built or State-owned? The substantial question I ask him to answer is how such a facility will be compatible with the climate objectives of the State.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Deputy put climate at the centre of her question. I asked the consultants, CEPA, to look forward at the security situation of both our electricity grids and gas supplies and to look at options. In my mind, it benefits us to have a storage capability in gas and to look at that specific aspect of it. We wanted to rule out options that would not help us to meet our climate targets. That is why certain options are now proposed to go to public consultation, which we are doing. Following that, they will be implemented as part of the energy security strategy we are following. I believe that leads us towards not having a commercial LNG facility. It still opens the possibility of a storage facility, whether floating or onshore, but it will be a strategic storage, operated to give us security in times when the gas might not be available. That is a very unlikely scenario but we have to cover every eventuality. As we have discussed in regard to the previous question, one of the concerns I have about some of the alternative approaches is that they would see a significant increase in emissions.

Yes, climate change is at the centre of our approach as well as energy security policy needs in terms of the options that were considered in the consultant's report. We are now putting the report out to open public consultation in order to hear every view, including that of the Deputy's party. We will then act on the consultation by implementing the measures that we see as best fitting Irish needs. We must have something that is fit for an energy future in which we are likely to convert our renewable offshore wind power into hydrogen that can be stored and transmitted. Any new storage facility must be designed and built in a way that meets this need. It also goes back to the debate we have had in this House for many years. We do not want to be seen as a country or be part of a world in which there is a continued expansion of fracked gas in a way that is both bad for the countries in which it is initially produced and that risks the future health and security of everyone on this planet. The report was well received yesterday and I look forward to the public consultation on it.

Deputy Bríd Smith: Friends of the Earth has said the expert review "signals the death knell of Shannon LNG". Is the Minister confirming or denying that? There is a jarring discrepancy on this point and, apart from that, there is a discrepancy of views within the Government. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, recently said: "The time for discussion is over. We need to build an LNG as soon as possible." Either he has not read the review or the Minister and I

are misinterpreting it. Like other Deputies, the Minister of State wants an end to what he calls the philosophical discussion around what he probably sees as silly things like the climate crisis. We do not have clarity on this. There has been and continues to be a significant campaign across this House by Deputies, including Independents, members of Fine Gael, etc., and even Ministers to push for a New Fortress Energy LNG terminal, get it over the line and to forget about climate chaos or the Paris treaty. It is part of a wider campaign launched by the fossil fuel industry to lock the planet into a fossil fuelled future. Will the Minister try again to clarify this matter?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The report is very clear that such a commercial LNG facility was not considered as an option to go to public consultation and be progressed. Friends of the Earth is correct in its reading - it is a very simple reading, in my mind - of the report. There is a range of strategic reasons behind that. From my perspective, first, there is real risk in following such an approach. It would be very good for the developer but it would not be good for our carbon budget. On that criterion alone, it should not be pursued. Second, what we were looking for in this report was to make sure we have a system that gives us energy security, which a commercial facility would not necessarily do. We would have to contract it separately. Third, we have shared the perspective that we could not guarantee the energy produced by such a facility would come from a non-fracked gas source. For a variety of strategic reasons, therefore, including climate, energy security and the environment, it was not included as one of the options to be pursued.

Deputy Bríd Smith: New Fortress Energy has set up the Shannon LNG Limited company and paid Kerry County Council more than €4 million as a development contribution for widening the road to Tarbert, €2 million of which was paid even before the planning permission application was lodged. The question then is whether Kerry County Council now owes this money and whether it is liable to pay it back to New Fortress Energy or whether it has just been gifted to the council and those whom it contracts. I would like to share the optimistic interpretation that the Shannon LNG terminal is dead, but we cannot be sure this is the case and that this report and the Government's interpretation of the public consultation process will not leave the door open. We are also still awaiting the decision of An Bord Pleanála.

On the energy issue and how much we need, the Minister and this Government is allowing more and more data centres to connect to the national grid. We learned from the representatives of the CRU this morning that Ireland is an outlier in respect of the increase in its energy demand across the EU 27. That was conveyed to us in a letter. Our energy demand has jumped 9% in five years while that in the other EU countries has flattened out or decreased. Therefore, there is a problem with the way we approach the use of energy and the alternative of bringing in gas supplies, which would lock us into a fossil fuel future.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: When reading the CEPA report, which is comprehensive, it is important to realise it recognises we need a range of different options for energy security. We need not just gas storage but also other technologies, such as pumped storage and battery storage. The report also recognises that further interconnection, especially in respect of our electricity markets, will give us greater stability and security in this regard. Equally, as Deputy Smith said, it also recognises that we must be clever in how we manage demand. Included in that facet is managing the demand for data centres. We will need new data centres. It makes sense for us to be good as a place where it is possible to store and manage data safely. This is one of the main industries that provides many of the jobs and much of the income and wealth for us. We need that. We must do it, however, in a way that supports the electricity grid and gives us energy security while not resulting in a rise in climate emissions. This is what the Government has

set out. Last September, the CRU and, subsequently, the Government, with EirGrid support, detailed how it is possible to design a system that is more energy secure and low carbon rather than just devising a demand-led solution take would not take those factors into account. This is what we will do when it comes to the management of data centres.

Deputy Bríd Smith: It is unsustainable.

Energy Conservation

56. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of retrofits completed under the warmer homes scheme and, separately, under the one-stop shop service; the measures he will take to increase the roll-out and to better target supports to those most in need; if he agrees a dedicated retrofit scheme aimed at households that rely on solid fuels for heating is needed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45783/22]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What are the number of retrofits completed under the warmer homes scheme and, separately, under the one-stop shop service? What are the measures the Minister will take to increase the roll-out and to better target supports to those most in need? Does he agree a dedicated retrofit scheme aimed at households that rely on solid fuels for heating is needed, and will he will make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The Government allocated €244 million to fund the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, residential, community and solar PV schemes this year. This budget enabled the introduction of a range of new measures to make it easier and more affordable for homeowners to undertake energy upgrades as well as to better target supports for those most in need. Data from the SEAI show that since the launch of the new measures in February, demand across the retrofit schemes has been exceptionally high. As of the end of last month, more than 30,000 applications for support had been received by the SEAI. This is more than double the number received during the same period last year. This demand is translating into delivery, with 3,400 home energy upgrades having been completed with support from across the range of schemes. This is up 70% when compared with the same period last year.

Approximately 2,800 of these completions were free energy upgrades provided to households at risk of energy poverty. This is almost three times the number of free upgrades provided in the same period last year. This activity was funded through an allocation of €118 million for SEAI energy poverty schemes. Under the one-stop shop service, 330 homes had been completed to the end of August. Demand for the national home energy upgrade scheme, which underpins the one-stop shop service, is high. The latest SEAI forecast indicates that approximately 900 homes will be completed under the scheme this year, with a strong pipeline of work in place as we move into 2023. Decisions concerning retrofit supports for next year are being considered as part of the Estimates process.

The Deputy will know, however, that one of the great things about the system we have in this country is that we know that for the next ten years we have €5 billion coming in to help the poorest and to protect the most vulnerable. It will be coming from the carbon tax and will be used to protect those who are vulnerable. That €5 billion is an important and clear signal that this is where we are going for the next decade.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: About €5 billion will come in the years 2028, 2029 and 2030. A significant problem with the funding model is that it is back-loaded to this degree.

On those figures from the Minister, and we had them earlier from the Minister of State as well, how many of these completions have been done to a B2 or B2-equivalent standard? How many of them have been done to that standard simply with the addition of solar PV? Does the Minister have those figures? I ask this because it is important in respect of the difference these retrofits are making. I refer to the start and end points. Will the Minister change the criteria for the individual grants, increase them to 100% and front-load the grant money to ensure it is spent as quickly and as efficiently as possible?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Starting with the warmer homes energy aspect, it is not a case where we are just getting above the present standard and just going from a C rating to a B2. We are specifically targeting those houses that most need improvement, namely, those built before 1993. They must also have a present building energy rating, BER, of E, F or G. Again, regarding how the scheme has changed, we have gone from where it might have typically involved a grant of €1,000 or €2,000 to a situation now where the average spending this year, and I am going on memory, is €18,000. Therefore, it is deep retrofitting. This is important. Also important is the way we have changed the scheme to stipulate that even people who have availed of this scheme before are not precluded from applying again. Equally, we have also changed the criteria for those with disabilities. We broadened and strengthened this scheme in a range of ways.

I did not quite understand the second part of the Deputy's question. Was he suggesting that all the grants for all houses would be set at 100%? That would have real consequences in respect of the social justice aspect of this initiative.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I refer to being in line with the recommendations of the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC. For attic insulation and cavity walls-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): The Minister's time has elapsed, so the Deputy might as well continue with his questions.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The recommendation from the CCAC, and others, including Friends of the Earth, I think, relates to a problem existing with accessing the small and flexible grants for individual works, such as attic and cavity wall insulation. There are financial barriers in this regard. Additionally, these are projects that can be rolled out very quickly, between now and the end of the year, to provide insulation for people's homes. The recommendation is there. For those who want to see these projects run as efficiently as possible, I refer to these grants being set at 100% instead of 80% and, importantly, their being front-loaded. People would get this funding in the same way as they would the housing adaptation grant, after which they would then get the works done, instead of them having to go out and source the money in the first place and then be paid back after the works have been completed. This is about flexibility and speed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I appreciate Deputy O'Rourke's argument, but I must say it runs directly contrary to what Deputy O'Reilly from Sinn Féin said only half an hour or 20 minutes ago.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: No, it does not.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: She accused us of not being on the same page because we were

giving grants to houses that could afford-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: She did not. That is not the case.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: She did.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: No, that is not the case.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): We will take the Minister's-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The record will show that is exactly what she said.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: No.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: She was having a cut at us for providing grants for better-off houses. It cannot be both ways. Do we agree with the position of Deputy O'Reilly or that of Deputy O'Rourke? My own-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Sinn Féin position is in the motion the Minister just agreed to.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Deputy O'Reilly was saying we should not be giving any grants-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I refer to €25,000 for wealthy people-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What the Deputy is saying is we should give 100% grants. I believe this-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: A pensioner couple will get €1,500-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will tell-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: -----to get their attic insulated.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Please let the Minister answer the question.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: He is not answering the question.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What we agree on is this. This 80% grant or the investment in cavity insulation is something 500,000 houses could benefit from and it is the best and most immediate thing any household can do. It will bring a 25% cut in bills and a payback time of less than a year. As I said in my earlier contribution, banks, credit unions and others will lend for this sort of one-year investment.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I thank the Minister. He is out of time on this question.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If I was to go up to a 100% grant, I fear Deputy O'Reilly would come back and say I was helping the wealthy and not doing the right thing-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is for pensioners. That is who I am talking about.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----as she said only half an hour ago.

8 o'clock

Energy Prices

57. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason household electricity bills in Ireland are more expensive than the European average; his plans to address electricity costs and energy supply challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [46059/22]

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: We all know that the Irish people are suffering hard. Not a month passes that the prices are not going up, and they are only going one way. I have been asked by my constituents to ask the Minister a couple of questions. First of all, I want to know what is the reason that the household electricity bills in Ireland are more expensive than the European average and what are the Minister's plans to address the electricity costs and energy supply challenges. This is serious and I ask the Minister to give decent answers, not what is written in front of him but what exactly is happening.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will read out some of the response because it has been thought through.

The first message is that the current high prices are caused by the war in Ukraine. I hope that is agreed by everyone in this House. Failure to understand that is really challenging because I do not see any other explanation.

We face particular challenges because we are a price taker on international markets and Irish electricity and gas prices have historically been affected by long-standing drivers such as geographical isolation, dispersed population, fossil fuel dependency and small market scale.

The Government is acutely aware of the impact on consumers of these high electricity and gas prices and introduced last year, as I stated earlier, a €2.4 billion package. We will go further this year in budget 2023 to protect our people.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, as I said earlier, has also announced enhanced consumer protection measures to be implemented by electricity and gas providers ahead of the coming winter. That will provide additional protections from disconnections and other safeguards for customers.

The CRU, as I stated in an earlier contribution, is responsible for electricity regulation. It ceased price setting for electricity and gas in 2011 and 2014, respectively. Therefore, the setting of prices in that regard is a commercial matter for individual supply companies. It also has statutory responsibility to ensure security of supply and has the duty to monitor electricity supplies and to make sure measures are in place as considered necessary to protect that security of supply. The CRU, assisted by EirGrid and my Department, has a programme of demand and supply-side actions under way to ensure the security of our electricity supply over the coming winters.

Our long-term priority and the best long-term approach for Ireland is to insulate consumers from volatility on international wholesale energy markets by investing in energy efficiency and renewable energy, expanding interconnection with European and neighbouring markets and deepening internal market integration.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The Minister stated that the price is because of the war. How

come all these energy companies are making such high profits? Is that because of the war?

How come it always seems to benefit the companies rather than the consumer? For example, today Deputies were talking about standing charges and the Minister stated that the companies have to justify these standing charges. However, the Minister can stop them putting up these standing charges.

There is an amount of people coming to me in my constituency office about tariffs and how they are being advised every 12 months to change to a different company. Can the Minister not force these energy companies to give their best prices on tariffs from day one?

These are simple issues. My siblings keep telling me to change and I will get the standing charge, this, that and the other.

This is a serious situation and the Minister has the power. This is somewhere we can cut prices. I will not use the word “waffling”, but the Minister has an opportunity to do something here. Will he please do something to reduce the prices to the consumer?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Those high profits and high prices are because the price of gas is ten times its historical average.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: What about the tariffs?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If I can answer the Deputy’s question as to what to do about those profits, certain generators who are not generating with gas will get a supernormal profit because the market price is way above their production price cost. We are working with the European Union, which is the appropriate way to do it. We address this as a wartime measure in response to what the Russian Government is doing by taking some of that excess profit in an intermarginal price system and bringing that back to the public. That is not agreed yet. We have to go to Brussels on 30 September to address that. It is one of the ways, along with the other measures we will introduce in the budget, which will help bring down the prices or help shield consumers from the worst elements of this energy price crisis. There are other measures in social welfare, energy credits and in business supports. They will be set out in the budget.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The Minister has me breathless here. I asked him simple questions. The Minister has an opportunity to reduce the price to the consumer and he has been doing absolutely nothing. I will be honest with the Minister. I would hate to see him as CEO of a company because if he were CEO of a company, he would be sacked straightaway. The Minister will not even have a look at simple wee things I am asking him to do.

The Minister stated the companies have to justify this and justify that. The Minister says we are part of the EU. If we are part of the EU, how come our prices are above the EU average? Another Deputy mentioned Spain and the Minister responded with the EU. The Minister keeps mentioning the EU. If the EU so good to us, why does it not help us?

What can the Minister do about VAT? Will VAT continue the way it is? The Government reduced it from 13.5% to 9% in May and it is up at the end of October.

People want a bit of help here at present. If we are that good with the EU, the Minister should get on to the EU and ask how come we in Ireland are paying above the average prices. It makes no sense whatsoever.

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I come from a business background. God forgive me, when I had my company going I put my best price forward. These companies should deal with the tariff prices instead of messing around. We are in different times. People are really bleeding. People are looking for help. It is important that these companies, the Government and we all work together.

Please God, this will only happen for maybe one or two years, but we need the Minister. The Minister is our CEO and we need him to do this right.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To answer the Deputy's question as to why we are above the other European countries in price levels, it is because we are so dependant on fossil fuels. Other than the Corrib gas field, we do not have any of those fossil fuels. We have to import them all. It is because we have the most dispersed population in Europe and the price of getting electricity and getting gas and getting other energy to a dispersed population is much more expensive than to a concentrated one. That is a reality. Lastly, it is because of the smaller scale and geographic isolation of our markets.

The answer to that is for us to develop our own fuels where we have comparative competitive advantage, particularly in wind. I hope - we will see whether it happens - the first of those offshore wind farms off the coast of Louth will proceed. If we are looking to protect our households, that sort of approach, where we start relying on our own resources not being held to ransom by external governments, is where we can go.

Going back to the debate we had earlier, we help our people by insulating and making sure that our dispersed houses are warm by design and that we do not have to spend so much. That is the answer that we have to follow. That is the path that brings us cheaper energy prices.

EU Regulations

58. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will oppose the proposed European Union regulation on land and peat restoration with reference to the biodiversity strategy and climate strategy as part of the European Union Council of Ministers, given that the consequences for Irish farming will be detrimental if this regulation is left in its present form (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45814/22]

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: This question concerns COM (2022) 304, to ask the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will oppose the proposed European Union regulation on land and peat restoration with reference to the biodiversity strategy and climate strategy as part of the European Union Council of Ministers, given that the consequences for Irish farming will be detrimental if this regulation is left in its present form.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The EU nature restoration law, as proposed, seeks to repair European habitats that are in poor condition and bring back nature to all ecosystems. The aim is for nature restoration measures to apply to a proportion of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030 and to eventually extend these measures to all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. In addition, there are proposals from the EU Commission to reduce the use and risk of chemical pesticides and a new soil health law to significantly improve the state of soils and protect soils on the same legal basis as air and water. In combination, it is envisaged that these flagship legislative proposal will help ensure the sustainability, resilience and security of food supply in the EU.

While the proposed EU nature restoration law is being negotiated there are measures, such as a voluntary eco-scheme, set out in the CAP strategic plan. It is anticipated that it will be a key action in the delivery objectives of the nature restoration law. The proposed EU nature restoration law will have implications for all land users in Ireland. These will be taken into consideration as part of the second phase of the land use review, due for completion in 18 months' time.

The national implementation of the proposed EU nature restoration law will require a whole-of-government approach, and we will continue to work closely with our colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage who are leading on this issue.

To answer, if I can, the question as to whether I will oppose the proposed Union regulation, I met the Commissioner, Mr. Sinkevičius, when I visited Brussels the week before last and we discussed this very issue. I am supportive of what he and the Commission are looking to do. I believe it will be to the benefit of nature restoration in Ireland but also to the development of rural Ireland and to our cities. Part of the plan and the proposals is that we green our cities as well as our country areas. This law and the measures that would help deliver that have a real, long-term benefit for our people. As a result, I said to Commissioner Sinkevičius that I would be supportive of his work.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: If the Minister supports the regulation in its present form, he will be a traitor to the people in rural Ireland. That is the fact. What has been proposed would make Cromwell blush when compared with what he tried to do to Ireland. The Minister used the word "voluntary". This is bringing into law a regulation that will affect people with land containing peaty soils. The Minister should go down to Kerry, where most of the cows for the dairy sector are reared, to the west, to the north west and out to the midlands, where land has been reclaimed for years and where families make a living. Whoever will be in government can listen to these words very carefully. Whether the Government signs off on this, whether it supports it with the EU or whether it wants to be a lackey for the EU, we in rural Ireland will stand against this and fight it. No EU diktat and no Government Minister in Dublin will decide our private property rights, decide how we will farm our land or take us off land that we have drained, looked after and reared families on down through the years.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was down in Kerry last week, as it happens.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Minister could have a look at Listowel. Where are the cows reared around Listowel?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was in west Clare the previous weekend.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes, and where are the cows?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will be heading back out west again this weekend. One thing I believe to be absolutely true is that it is in all our interests to stop the destruction of the natural world which has occurred over the past 50 or 60 years - within our lifetimes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am talking about land that is reclaimed, that cattle are on.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We are not disconnected from the natural systems. If we lose them, we will not be able to restore them easily. We need to protect our water, our soil, our air quality and our land and the ecosystems within them. That is good in the long run for farming, forestry,

tourism and so many other industries that bring wealth and prosperity to our country. We will work collaboratively and collectively on that. Obviously, it will not work if it is someone telling someone else what to do and how.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: And what does the regulation do?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: However, ignoring the biodiversity crisis and ignoring the destruction and loss of the natural world that has occurred in the past 50 years serves no one's interests. We have to look forward, restore nature and ensure that we maintain our prosperity in that manner.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Minister talked about forestry. It is a good job there might be someone in the EU who will stand up for their citizens. Sweden and Finland are to oppose the regulation, just so the Minister knows. He talks about the past 50 years. Over the past 50 years the EU has given grants to these farmers to shore their land and to make a living on marginal farms. Is the Minister the person who is going to support an EU diktat from unelected representatives trying to bring in a regulation? He talked about working with people. A regulation does not work with people. A regulation seeks to bring something into law. This regulation will not be accepted, just so the Minister knows. He is hearing it loud and clear here. From the top of Donegal to the bottom of Kerry and out as far as Cork and the midlands, he will destroy family farms if, by 2050, the plan is that the Government will rewet the ground that these farmers have spent years trying to farm all their life. The regulation will not be accepted, whoever is in government. I am telling the Minister that clearly.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It will be accepted if we provide an income-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It will not be accepted.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): We will hear the Minister's answer.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: If I may make my point, it will be accepted if we can, in restoring nature, provide an income-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Do not talk bullshit.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy, please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----to a new generation of farmers, foresters and people to look after the natural world. That will be a far more secure, a far more profitable and a far more prosperous future.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Stop, will you? For Jesus's sake, will you just leave it?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is absolutely achievable. It will not work-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: So you are going to tell families, "Forget about farming. Leave the area."

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Do you want to have it so that Leinster and Munster will have the farming and the rest will not?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I ask you to hear the Minister's response, Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am sick of listening to him.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have just as much an interest in the prosperity and the future of the Irish family farm-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: You want to rewet all their land.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Thank you, Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is absolutely connected to protection and management of that land.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The sooner we have an election and have the likes of you gone, the better.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We will need people, young and old, who see that the care of their environment and of their local area is central to what they do. That aspiration and that instinct belongs to everyone. It does not belong to any single party one way or the other, but we will not-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We are a sovereign people who have property rights and we will protect them. We have done it before and we will do it again.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): Deputy Fitzmaurice, please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have to work now to find a mechanism whereby we can do this in a way-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: There will be no mechanism of flooding people's land.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----that guarantees the future of the family farm, and that is what we will work towards with the European Union.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The European Union is no friend of ours.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Deputy David Stanton: I am substituting for Deputy Colm Burke.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh): I have checked with the staff and I am afraid I have received no such email about substitutions. I know that this is a matter to be discussed by the Business Committee this week on foot of a letter from Deputy Stanton. If he wishes to take this question, I will allow it.

Deputy David Stanton: I received an email stating that the substitution could happen. I am sorry about the confusion.

EU Meetings

59. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the emergency meeting of the energy ministers of the 27 member states of the European Union on 9 September 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45775/22]

Deputy David Stanton: What was decided at the emergency meeting of energy ministers of the 27 member states held on 9 September? Will the Minister inform the House as to what actions he intends to take as a result of that meeting?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I thank the Chair for facilitating the question and the response.

The extraordinary energy council meeting on 9 September in Brussels was to exchange views on the energy situation in the European Union. The meeting was split into two parts, with the first session covering policy options to alleviate the burden of high energy prices. The second session was on the state of play of the preparedness of member states for the coming winter.

In respect of higher energy prices, the council discussed in private session four main areas on which member states expected the Commission to act. These included capping the revenues of electricity producers that face low production costs, a possible price cap on gas imports, measures for a co-ordinated electricity demand reduction across the EU, and measures that would help to address the issue of decreased liquidity for market participants. The Commission has since published a draft regulation, which is under urgent negotiation by member states in order to have agreement by the end of the month. We are supportive of the overall approach being taken and will co-operate closely with other member states to get the regulation agreed swiftly.

Ministers also discussed the state of play of preparedness for this winter. EU member states have carried out several actions at both national and EU level. In particular, they have adopted a regulation to fill gas storage and to share gas in a spirit of solidarity, diversified supply sources and committed to reducing gas demand by 15% this winter. EU gas reserves have been filled to 82.5% of their capacity, well ahead of the 1 November deadline set in the gas storage regulation.

There was a fifth issue we discussed in the earlier session, looking at what measures we could take on global gas markets, particularly LNG markets, where we could use our purchasing power, perhaps in co-ordination with other countries, in Asia or elsewhere, to try to help reduce market prices that way as well. That did not conclude, or has not concluded yet, with a specific proposal, but we gave a clear mandate for the Commission to investigate what might be possible in that regard.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response. I am aware of the points that were made. With respect to the proposal to reduce gas use by 15%, does the Minister see that happening here and, if so, how soon? How would he encourage that reduction?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: While that was a key matter for discussion, there were different consequences for three members of the European Union: us, Malta and Cyprus. At an earlier meeting of the European Energy Council there had been agreement that we would not have to apply in Ireland the same mandatory reduction. It was also recognising the reality in our case that we are connected to the UK and Norwegian gas markets and are not dependent on Russian gas in the same way. Therefore, any requirement for us to reduce our gas use by 15% would not have

material consequences in terms of the use or otherwise of Russian gas. As a result, I stated that we have committed very much on a voluntary basis to do everything we can to reduce our use. We need to do that for sound economic reasons in any case, but that mandatory 15% reduction in gas does not apply to Ireland in the exact same way as it does to other member states.

Deputy David Stanton: Another proposal was to reduce the revenues of inframarginal electricity producers with low costs of production. Does the Minister plan to take that on board as a proposal and, if so, how does he plan to put it into practice?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Since last year, I have been raising the need to end the crazy situation whereby sky-high gas prices set the price for all electricity, and the need to decouple electricity prices from gas prices. Each time the Minister and the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have dismissed it out of hand. It is unacceptable for the Minister to continually hide behind the EU. Energy policy is a shared competence between the EU and member states. It is simply not good enough for the Minister responsible for energy to take such little responsibility during the cost-of-energy crisis.

I want the Minister, here and now, to clarify his position on the decoupling of gas from the setting of the price of electricity. Has that changed since the Taoiseach said that it was not his analysis and since the Minister dismissed it before when I raised it in the Chamber months ago?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In response to Deputy Stanton, inframarginal pricing is the right measure and one which we are looking to implement. There are complexities involved in it. It will apply to the likes of wind farm or other generators that are generating without the impact of high-input gas price, therefore, it is likely that they are making a significant profit. Inframarginal pricing will not apply where they have a long-term contract or where a cap is in effect. It will not apply to the recently agreed renewables projects because they also have a cap on their system. It is measure we want to introduce, however.

In response to Deputy Conway-Walsh, if anyone thinks that it is easy and that there is a perfect market mechanism-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I never said that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----I would love to hear it, because the complexity and design and development of energy markets is not something that one can be easily categorical about. It is complex. What was also considered by the energy Council, and what we are intricately and centrally involved in the European Council - the Deputy is right; it is a joint competence - is the conducting of a wider review, starting with recognising that it takes time. If anyone thinks that we can change the energy markets this winter at a click of a finger, they would not be doing the people a favour because that is not easily achieved. It is better for us to do the review in conjunction with other countries. There are different views. A categorical answer would not be an honest answer.

Energy Prices

60. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with the Minister for Finance regarding a windfall tax on energy companies' earnings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45676/22]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: This question was submitted prior to the EU meeting referred to by Deputy Stanton. What engagement has the Minister had with the Minister for Finance regarding a windfall tax on energy companies?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As the Deputy will know, I have to be very sensitive because we are in the middle of a budget process. My Department and the Department of Finance have been exploring the potential to collect a portion of these windfall gains with a view to using the proceeds to support energy consumers. Subsequent to this, there have been significant developments at EU level, which we just discussed. At the Council of energy ministers on 9 September, which I attended, the issue of windfall gains was discussed in some detail. Outline proposals were set out and the Council of energy ministers invited the European Commission to make formal proposals. On 14 September, the Commission published a proposed regulation, which included measures aimed at addressing windfall gains in the electricity sector and in fossil fuel production. These proposals are expected to raise additional revenues which will be used to reduce the cost of energy for households and businesses. It is important that this proposal captures the windfall gains and minimises negative effects on consumers. The proposal will be negotiated throughout the remainder of this month with a view of it being approved at a meeting of the Council of energy ministers on 30 September. I fully support the objectives of this proposal and am working to ensure it fully addresses the issue of windfall gains in Ireland.

I wish to make two further points. First, it will be very difficult to get proposals that exactly fit our circumstances, including on the rate that would apply. For example, the Commission proposed a rate of €180 per megawatt hour and that they would be on the supernormal profits above that rate. My personal view is that we should look for a lower rate. Similar technical issues revolve around many aspects of this, which will make it easier or more difficult in different countries depending on the circumstance of each country. Therefore, it is not an easy approach.

Deputy Fitzpatrick and other Deputies asked earlier why I mention the European Union so much. In this instance, we do have to work collectively because this is a temporary measure in response to a wartime event, where energy has been used in this way. We do not want to divide; that is what the Russian Government would like us to do.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I should have said from the outset that we all know the backdrop to the discussion we are having. Some people might paint the windfall tax as a panacea for all our woes, which it certainly will not be. Many commentators have more or less said that in the past few weeks. An article I read said that the best benefit of a windfall tax might be in the name of social cohesion. I am not so sure if that is why we should be making these types of decisions. Many people will argue that the introduction of a windfall tax would be negligible in terms of its benefit for us domestically in terms of reducing prices. That said, the backdrop is still the same. Profit margins are going up for all electric and gas companies. Profit margins have increased by 10% for ESB and by 74% for Centrica. Internationally, Shell and BP posted massive profits of \$11 billion and €14 billion, not to mention SSE, the parent company of SSE Airtricity, which reported £1.5 billion in profit.

Notwithstanding the likelihood of a windfall tax coming in, are other mechanisms being looked at including those that are being considered in the UK, such as the 25% profit levy?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy in that the proposals coming from European Union are just one element. They are among the four pieces in the jigsaw of measures that we will need to implement, as I mentioned earlier. We will not have the full details on them by

budget day. We will have a rough estimate of what implications it might have for Revenue but it is only one element of the response we must take.

What we need to do is to continue with last year's process, which included a combination of social welfare measures targeted at the most poor and those who are most vulnerable to higher energy prices. There must be continued use of energy credits, such as the high cost of energy that is hitting and affecting every house in the country. It is appropriate to have timely, quick, easy to deliver and low-cost solutions such as the energy credits that we presented, as well as supports for businesses that will now be at real risk because of the tenfold increase in prices.

It is an evolving situation. We are right to do through to early spring so that we can reassess the prices then. Even in the past three weeks, the international price of gas has fluctuated massively. These interim measures will give us the chance to get through the winter, with a review in the spring as to where we are then.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It was encouraging to hear other members of Cabinet and Government stating that in the event of the introduction of windfall tax, we would be looking at it over the totality of the year so that it would be retrospective. That is welcome.

I have another point in relation to something the Minister said at the end of August in an RTÉ "News At One" interview regarding such a measure being considered. He said that it would be done during the budget talks, which he has reiterated today. Has the Minister had meetings with the Minister for Finance addressing this in the budget? I know he cannot divulge their content, but will he confirm whether those meetings have taken place?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: On the European solidarity windfall tax, who would be liable within the State in that regard? The Minister has spoken about how difficult it is to reform energy markets but we could all make the argument that perhaps we should have started this conversation earlier. We must do whatever we can at this time, however. The Minister has raised the fact that we are dealing with a wartime situation. It is fair to say that the biggest weapon Vladimir Putin has is the fact that we are all about to face absolute energy and financial carnage if the European Union and the wider western world do not get a handle on this and, at a domestic level, if we do not look after businesses, families and workers. It is absolutely necessary that we do all we possibly can. Otherwise, we will give Putin the win that he does not seem to be able to eke out on the battlefield.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I meet the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, every couple of days and, leading up to the budget, I am sure it will be close to daily, in my capacity as the head of two Departments and as the leader of my party. Last night, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and I met the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform. We have had a series of those meetings where we consider all of these issues.

To respond to Deputy Ó Murchú, we need to get windfall taxes in. They are an important part of the process. It will not be easy and we will have to work with our European colleagues to make sure it happens. They will apply in particular to wind farms and other generators that are not burning gas. With regard to the solidarity contribution, the only large-scale company involved here is with regard to Corrib gas because it is the only one where we have at-scale fossil fuel production. The Deputy is absolutely right that the Russian Government is looking to divide. No market redesign will address this coming winter. I do not believe it is possible. Certainly, no one who has investigated and looked at this in real detail thinks we can do it in the

six months through this winter during which we need protect people. We will have to have a series of measures as we look at market redesign. This is the approach we're taking.

North-South Interconnector

61. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has received a review of the North-South interconnector; when it will be published; and if he will commission a full independent assessment of the potential undergrounding of the project. [45767/22]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister's colleague in government promised a full independent assessment of the potential to underground the North-South interconnector. Rather than deliver this, the Minister commissioned a review of previous reviews, something nobody had asked for. Has the Minister received the findings of the review? Does he plan to publish them? Importantly, will he now ensure we can move towards delivery of the North-South interconnector by delivering what communities have sought, which is a full assessment of the undergrounding of the project?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The new North-South interconnector, which will allow for the flow of 900 MW of electricity between Ireland and Northern Ireland, will be critical for improving the operation of the all-island integrated single electricity market. It will also help to facilitate the achievement of the goal of generating up to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The option of undergrounding the North-South interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, the key findings from the international expert commission's report of October 2018 was that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this critical electricity infrastructure. Notwithstanding this, it was deemed appropriate to carry out a further short review to assess if the overall finding from the 2018 report remained valid. Having requested tenders from a number of grid experts across Europe, two international experts were selected to carry out the study. Work is continuing on the report, which has taken longer than expected, but I understand it is to be finalised shortly. Following receipt of the report, it will be considered, with publication to follow in due course. I expect to receive it within a short few weeks and will then share it with Government colleagues, publish it and have a debate in the House on its contents.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I was at the ploughing championships today and the Minister's name came up quite an amount. I am not one for personalised attacks but he has become the figurehead for the perception that the Government does not listen to communities. The North-South interconnector is a good example of this. Communities have been very clear, as have we in the Opposition, that we understand the rationale for a North-South interconnector and we want to see it delivered. We have also pointed to Minister and his predecessors on several occasions that the principle of public acceptance and public engagement have not been met in respect of this project. We can proceed with this farcical situation whereby the Minister refuses to engage with local community. He has established a review to carry out a review of reviews. The elephant in the room is that undergrounding of this project has been deemed a credible option by the exact report the Minister has cited. What is the resistance to pursuing it in a way that will deliver the project in a more timely and efficient way than the current trajectory?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We listen acutely to communities. That is what all politicians do. We listen. I listen to a country where high energy prices are crippling people, as various Deputies said earlier. One of the benefits of having a North-South interconnector is that it would save Irish households significant amounts of money year in, year out. I hear people ask why we are so dependent on the distant fossil fuels that hold the country to ransom. An interconnector would also help us to develop and deliver our own power. I hear communities, particularly in Border regions, that have not had the same economic advantage and development that has occurred in other parts of their countries. I know an interconnector would also help to facilitate such economic development in the Border area. It is right and proper for us to try to get this economic development to these areas and not only in Dublin or the other cities. I hear communities who want an all-island approach in everything we do and who have a belief in national unity. I see no reason for us to break up our island with disintegration of the electricity market and not integrating our systems. What I hear is that communities in the Border counties want this united Ireland approach, which is what an interconnector will help bring.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sure the Minister's colleague in the North will be delighted to hear an interconnector is some clandestine mechanism to deliver Irish unity. To be quite clear, absolutely Sinn Féin wants to see an all-island integrated electricity network. That is why we want to pursue this infrastructure in a way that will have community support precisely so that we can deliver this interconnector. The Minister has told me he recalls his previous time in government when this issue was first mooted. He should also recognise we are no further on with the delivery of it almost 20 years after it was first mooted. My fear is the Minister's approach is simply to advocate what it is he thinks communities are saying rather than what they are actually saying. They are saying let us build this infrastructure but in a way that is credible, as determined by a previous report, and in a way that will have public acceptance. I do not know why this concept that we can deliver a key piece of vital infrastructure but with the support of local communities is so alien to the Minister and the Government. Without this support we will enter another period of prolonged delays and we will not see the end goal of this infrastructure in place.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I met the Minister the other day and earlier in the summer. It is very difficult because there is no Administration up North. There is keen interest in it even if there are no structures whereby a government up North can make a decision on this. We need a decision. I first started hearing about this 20 years ago when it was described as the most important and urgent project to deliver an effective all-island energy system. In the intervening years, all of the energy experts I have heard have said that we have to have it as part of a synchronised AC system, especially if we want industrial development in the Border counties. We could run a line up the Irish Sea from Belfast to Dublin but what we would then have is an island where economic development is only in Dublin and Belfast.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is what we have under the Government.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is what we need to change. That is what we need to get away from.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is missing the vital component of community acceptance.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We have a responsibility in government to think of the long-term development of the island.

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Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister has never answered my questions on community acceptance. Why is that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is an issue. I fully accept it is an issue.

Deputy Matt Carthy: How will the Minister address it?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I also believe-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time and we are eating into the time for questions.

National Broadband Plan

62. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan; the number of premises that have been passed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45632/22]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan and what is the number of premises that have been passed? Are we are likely to make the target of 102,000 premises, realising we are much behind where we thought we would have been? In further questioning I will speak about acceleration.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): We are ahead of where we expected to be at the start of the year when we were planning in February. Survey and design work for the new high-speed fibre broadband network under the national broadband plan is complete or ongoing by National Broadband Ireland, NBI, in every county in Ireland. I am advised by NBI that, as of 9 September 2022, more than 331,000 premises are design completed and more than 88,000 premises can order or preorder a high-speed broadband connection. NBI has further advised that more than 75,000 premises across 23 counties have been passed with a high-speed fibre broadband service and are available for immediate connection. Construction is under way across 26 counties, demonstrating that the project is reaching scale. The level of connections is increasing daily and is in line with or exceeding projections from earlier this year.

The Department has worked with NBI to agree an updated interim remedial plan, which recalibrated the targets for 2022 to take account of the knock-on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and other delays to the programme. The revised target is 102,000 premises to be passed by the end of January 2023. NBI is implementing a number of measures to help lessen the impact that delays have had on the roll-out. Those measures include increasing the rate of pole replacement and duct remediation per month; bringing in additional NBI resources; earlier procurement of materials used in the build stages and bringing in additional subcontractors. The focus will continue to be on ensuring that the NBI build programme is back on track and is gaining momentum month on month.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all get the importance of remote working, especially in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, where it may be beneficial for people to reduce the amount of commuting they are doing - for multiple reasons at this stage. Those figures are

definitely heading in a better direction than they have been. We just need to ensure that it is acceleration, acceleration, acceleration. I know that NBI has spoken about its need to either increase the amount of Eir make-ready products that they can use or that they would be able to use - what they have called a self-install product - which would enable it to finish more of this infrastructure. I ask for an update on that. We, at one stage, talked about acceleration from the point of view of this seven-year project becoming a five-year project. I think we are now talking about seven years becoming six years. The big question is about where we are on that.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I regularly meet with Eir, NBI, the contractors who do the work and everybody in between to make sure that the project is still running. I have met with the new chief executive of Eir and I am convinced that he will continue to improve the roll-out of this system. Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned Eir make-ready which is the preparatory work that Eir does in the year before it hands over the poles and ducts to NBI for its design work. At this stage, the bottleneck is not with NBI anymore, but with Eir. The availability of new connections is not constrained by NBI's work. It has now reached the speed where it is delivering as much as Eir can give it. I have asked Eir to prepare more of its network at a higher rate.

At the same time, Eir is delivering in the commercial area and has much of its staff deployed to bring fibre broadband to areas outside of the intervention area, along with two other companies, Virgin Media and SIRO. If the Deputy looks at the ComReg statistics, he will see there are 10,000 fibre connections in Ireland per month. Those are not homes being passed. They are connections to people's houses.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the fact that the Minister of State has an interaction with Eir from the point of view of delivering more at its end and the fact that NBI obviously has a serious capacity but, at the end of the day, this is all about ensuring that we accelerate this as much as possible, especially to reach areas that have been and will be waiting for broadband for a considerable length of time. When is Eir to come back to the Minister of State with a plan with regard to producing more of the Eir make-ready product? What is the status on NBI doing some of those works with the self-install product it is talking about? Does the Minister of State have any updates on where the targets for the coming years stand? When will we get that finalised plan for sixth-year accelerated delivery?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What does the Minister of State say to people in Mayo who, when they key in their postcode, find that they will get broadband in 2025 and 2026? What does he say to the people who key in their postcode and are excluded, because they are deemed to have a service, when they cannot do the very basics in downloading and uploading? Is he concerned that we have not future-proofed this plan and that 30 Mbps is not sufficient because of all the transactions and everything else that are necessary now and in the future of our broadband?

Deputy David Stanton: How many connections have been made to date under the national broadband plan? What are the projections under the national broadband plan per month? The Minister of State has given us the connections on the commercial side. Does he agree that there is sometimes confusion when somebody in one house, who is not in the commercial area, can get a connection and the next-door neighbour outside the area cannot? Does he have any way of resolving that?

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I will start with Deputy Ó Murchú. By the end of this year, we will have agreed with NBI what its target is for next year. Some 102,000 is our target for January of next year and we will have agreed a new achievable target by the end of the year. That will

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involve working with Eir on their make-ready plans. The existing contract is for a seven-year roll out which completes by 2026. If we can do it faster, we will. Our focus in the past year has been on getting it back on track. We are now delivering the right number that we expected and are moving at scale. If we can do it faster, we will.

At the same time, I need to look at urban black spots and any areas that are not being met. I know there are 8,750 premises to be passed in Deputy Ó Murchú's county, Louth. Of those, 3,200 have been passed and more than 1,000 of those have connected. They only represent a small proportion because most of the homes in Louth will be connected by commercial operators.

Deputy Conway-Walsh asked about people in Mayo who would not be connected until 2026. When one has a seven-year project, that means some people are in years 6 and 7 and are very disappointed to see that. Unless we accelerate the project, it is very difficult to do better. However, it is better to give people that information in order that they can plan, and be honest with them and not promise them that it will be some time in the future, in order that people do know. There are broadband connection points and people can use hubs in community centres. All of the schools in Ireland will be connected in Ireland by the end of the year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: With regard to the people who have 30 Mbps and are regarded to be good enough, the national target has not been agreed, but it is likely that everybody will have gigabit Internet by the end of 2028.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I know it is impossible to answer all of this in one minute. Additional speakers come in and it still has to be answered in one minute.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: I understand.

Natural Resources

63. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Question No. 86 of 24 May 2022, the role of his Department in the decommissioning of the Kinsale and Seven Heads gas fields; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45773/22]

Deputy David Stanton: What are the Minister's views on the decommissioning of the Kinsale and Seven Heads gas-fields-related infrastructure; the pipeline that is already under the sea and any other infrastructure that would enable gas to come from the now-depleted fields but that might now be used for other reasons?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The geoscience regulation office in my Department is responsible for the regulation of petroleum exploration and development in Ireland. Petroleum authorisations are issued under the Petroleum and other Minerals Development Act 1960 and subsequent Acts and include decommissioning operations of petroleum facilities. Decommissioning of petroleum facilities is subject to regulatory and environmental approval by the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications. Holders of petroleum authorisations are required to submit a detailed decommissioning plan to my Department, detailing how they will safely decommission the facilities with minimal impact on the environment. This plan is assessed

and approved in line with international best practice. As part of the process, my Department engages independent specialist advice and liaises with relevant regulators such as the Commission for Regulation Of Utilities, the Irish Coast Guard and the Health and Safety Authority.

Two applications for decommissioning phases of the Kinsale gas fields were granted by my Department on 26 April 2019 and 26 February 2020 for plugging and abandoning of wells; the removal of the two platform topsides structures; the removal of the Kinsale alpha and Kinsale bravo platform sub-structures and all associated works.

An application for the next phase of decommissioning was received in October 2021. Public consultation on this application was held from 14 October 2021 to 17 November 2021. In July 2022, my Department completed environmental assessment of the application and it returned to the geoscience regulation office to make a recommendation on whether Ministerial approval should be given for the activities under application.

Deputy David Stanton: The Minister has already alluded to our living in very unusual times. I put it to the Minister that we have an infrastructure in place which is an undersea pipeline and associated infrastructure on land which was used to transport the gas from the now-depleted undersea caverns. Has the Minister considered using this infrastructure for floating storage regasification units? These could be used to alleviate our storage issue, which was mentioned earlier as part of the recently published report. Has he engaged with any suggestion with respect to this? Has he been asked to engage by any company with respect to that proposal? Does he agree with me it is worth considering and examining acquiring a floating storage regasification unit attached to the end of the pipeline that could store gas that could be hooked into our system. It would be LNG that did not come from fracking. It would not increase the amount of gas we use but would give us some insurance in the event of the other supplies being reduced.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We consider a whole variety of different options and will still consider various options. Cork Harbour in particular has some real strategic advantages when it comes to a whole variety of different energy infrastructure. One of the storage options has always been looking at the likes of the Kinsale gas field, or the Ballycotton or Seven Heads fields as there is a network of fields there, to see whether they could have gas storage capability. One of the downsides of that is one requires a lot of cushion gas and that might affect the economics. Regarding the use of the pipeline from those fields back to the shore at the Inch terminal, we have to consider the age of the pipeline and the alternatives. A vessel of the sort the Deputy mentioned, if it were to be moored, I would expect to be moored closer and probably somewhere like Aghada, some part of Whitegate or a similar place where the original gas came ashore. One would not necessarily berth a ship that far out and the pipeline for that purpose would not make sense. We can look at all those options when it comes to the consultation on the energy security paper published yesterday but the pipeline now and the terminal at sea have been decommissioned and, therefore, I do not believe they will have a role in this process.

Deputy David Stanton: I thank the Minister for his response. This is quite a serious issue and I thank him for taking it seriously. The pipeline is there and the Inch terminal is there. My information is it can be used for floating storage regasification units. I am not talking about using the caverns under the sea at all. The proposal that has been sent to the Minister's Department involves a floating storage regasification unit moored at the end of the pipeline which could be filled on a regular basis as required. It would act as insurance. The infrastructure is already there so I am asking the Minister to consider it. He should have a look at it and exam-

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ine it, bearing in mind what he said about the age of the pipeline, the material and so forth. It should be seriously examined because we do not need planning permissions, foreshore licences or anything like that as that has already been done. All we need to do is get the work done to moor this gasification unit onsite and allow the gas to flow if required.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said, the decommissioning of this started a number of years ago and it is my understanding the platforms are starting to be decommissioned. They have already been taken out.

Deputy David Stanton: Yes. They are not needed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The pipeline has been displaced to seawater and the Inch terminal has been degassed. As I said, that was a very old pipeline in the first place and I think it was already 40 years on the seabed. Accordingly, I do not think that infrastructure will be used. The decision was made on good energy grounds and there was much detailed consideration. The Department assessed all the potential uses and came back with a recommendation for decommissioning, so that is what we proceeded with. However, as I said, there will be other infrastructure in the Cork Harbour area for offshore wind, the conversion to green hydrogen, the ongoing operations in Whitegate and Aghada and indeed at Marino Point and the Verolme Dockyard. They are the key strategic sites in Cork that have a real future in this new energy future and we must consider what that is. We should not look back to what was there at Kinsale but look forward to what we will build instead.

Deputy David Stanton: I fully agree with what the Minister has said-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think the Deputy was in-----

Deputy David Stanton: -----about green energy, hydrogen and so on. That is absolutely fantastic. However, I understand there has been no engagement with respect to companies that want to talk about regasification.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am bending the rules to a third response. Deputy Stanton has been in twice.

Deputy David Stanton: I am sorry. I thought the Leas-Cheann Comhairle called me. My apologies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise if I did.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Always take the opportunity.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Several Deputies are not here so we move to an Teachta Cairns.

Questions Nos. 64 and 65 taken with Written Answers.

Energy Prices

66. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures he is proposing to support SMEs struggling to meet rising energy bills. [45550/22]

Deputy Holly Cairns: Small and medium enterprise are facing into a bleak winter with rapidly increasing energy and operating costs. Shops, restaurants and many other businesses on main streets across west Cork and all of rural Ireland are looking at closing. We have seen this before and some of them might not reopen. That will have a detrimental impact on our towns and villages. How is the Minister proposing to support SMEs to meet these rising energy bills?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is a wide range of grants, vouchers and training available to help SMEs to reduce their energy costs. Improving energy efficiency and reducing energy consumption helps to reduce emissions and ultimately improves competitiveness and saves on energy costs.

Supported by my Department and administered by the SEAI, current supports to SMEs include the excellence in energy efficiency design scheme. It is for all businesses, including SMEs, and helps in the planning of any major investment in energy efficiency. There is grant support of up to €1 million per project available. There is the support scheme for renewable heat. It supports the adoption of renewable heat by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and public sector organisations. There is the support scheme for energy audits which offers €2,000 towards the cost of a professional, high-quality energy audit. Last of all, the SEAI's energy academy is an online resource that provides business with free access to high-quality energy training.

As part of the targeted milestones under the climate action plan and expedited as part of the national energy security framework, comprehensive reviews of all energy efficiency schemes have been carried out. Work between my Department and the SEAI continues with enhanced measures in streamlining processes and improved customer engagement already in place. The support scheme for energy audits, for example, has seen a significant increase in demand in recent months with €1 million in direct supports being provided to 500 SMEs. Furthermore, as part of the targeted measures in the decarbonisation of commercial building stock, a new, non-domestic solar photovoltaic support programme will be launched by the SEAI this month to add to the current ongoing development of a commercial retrofit support programme due to come on stream in 2023. The nationwide Reduce Your Use public information also gives practical advice on how people and businesses can save money by promoting and encouraging energy efficiency. It will focus on how we can reduce heating and electricity use in homes, workplaces and public sector buildings.

The Government is currently considering what additional supports could be made available to SMEs and other businesses in recognition of the significant increase in their energy costs this year. Decisions on this will be taken as part of budget 2023.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I appreciate all those schemes and am sure businesses will look into them but they are more long-term solutions. Many small businesses cannot go on at the moment. They need more immediate solutions given rising energy bills, operating costs, insurance, rates, food and the list goes on. The Minister knows shops, cafés and many other local enterprises are really fearful of the winter. Just as we are getting over the impact of the pandemic they face inflationary pressures, especially with energy prices.

I have so many examples I can give and think everybody does but I am going to go with examples from Bantry as I am aware it is a town the Minister is familiar with. Staff in Wharton's Fish and Chips were in the local newspaper showing their energy price hikes. The Stuffed Olive was on social media today with its bill and the owners of Organico, the health store and bakery,

said in another newspaper their electricity bills went up 25% to 30% last year and have gone up 100% this year. To really emphasise where people are at, one of the proprietors summed it up by saying:

I don't see how we can trade out of a situation where the cost of everything is increasing but the turnover is not. It's going to close down businesses in the short-term.

What does the Minister say to her? I was speaking to a group who were saying the price of a pound of butter has gone up from €2.70 to €3.90.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I accept those businesses, and so many others across the country, as well as households, are finding the bills that are coming are absolutely critical and critical to their operations. Government will engage in this six-month period ahead to look to providing further supports targeted at small or medium businesses because those businesses may not have the ability to pass on the costs. They are the ones that are richest in employment and we do not want to see them fall to this crisis which is not of their making, or the doing of anyone else in this country, but is a function of energy being used as a weapon of war. We must help protect our businesses in that regard. As I said in reply to various questions earlier, we are working with Government colleagues to consider what sorts of supports might be possible.

9 o'clock

It will not cushion the full blow, there are no two ways about that, but we have to try to help provide as much protection as we can, which is what we will do.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I just want to emphasise again that some of these businesses are literally weeks away from closing their doors without significant intervention from the Minister. Potentially thousands of people could end up on social welfare for the winter, not to mention the closure of businesses and confidence in our towns and villages. Even a temporary closure means less foot traffic, fewer people visiting the area and it has severe knock-on effects. The Minister knows one closed business in a small town or village has a really profound impact on the whole area. We need ambitious preventative measures now. I would be grateful if the Minister could explain in his answer how energy companies can be allowed to have record profits at this time. How is that permitted? Should they not be absorbing costs as small businesses seem to have to? We need an effective windfall tax that we can use to support SMEs.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to make the Minister aware of a problem with the SEAI and businesses applying for grants. Businesses that have applied for grants are not getting a response quickly enough. In some cases they are not getting a response at all. I know one business that has been told it will be informed in November. These businesses have laid out a lot of money, up to €180,000 in some cases. Could the Minister intervene with the SEAI and ask them to speed up and streamline the process so that money gets back into these businesses as quickly as possible? They are depending on it for cash flow.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In response to Deputy Conway-Walsh, I will commit to that. It is important that everyone does treat this situation as what it is, an emergency situation, the SEAI included. It is important for it to accelerate its communications with companies looking for advice or grants to make sure we act quickly. I agree with Deputy Cairns. It is not a functioning market. There are super-normal profits being made. The best way for us to target those is to work in conjunction with European colleagues because the more uniform and united our approach to this is, the more legally robust and effective it is in countering the Russian Govern-

ment and what it is doing. We will do that. It will not be an easy process but we are committed to trying to redirect some of those excess profits to Irish consumers and Irish businesses.

Recycling Policy

67. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his proposals to reduce the amount of polyethylene terephthalate, PET, plastic exported from Ireland considering options are available for the domestic recycling of that waste. [45768/22]

Deputy Ossian Smyth: At present, the quantity of recyclable materials placed on the market by industry in Ireland is in excess of domestic recycling capacity and the waste management industry relies, in part, on the export market to meet its processing needs. As Minister of State, I do not have the power in an open market to direct waste to be kept within Ireland or that it be directed to a specific facility for recycling. That being said, Repak, the national packaging extended producer responsibility scheme is incentivising domestic recycling ahead of recycling abroad. That is because it is not a Government body. Repak's scheme promotes domestic recycling and maximises funding to operators that collect, separate and reprocess PET plastics in Ireland.

For household collections, an additional reprocessing subsidy was introduced in 2020 and is only available to plastic reproducers with operations in Ireland. In 2022 this subsidy increased from €35 per tonne to €50 per tonne. For commercial collections there is a stepped system in place with the highest subsidy payable where material is recycled in Ireland, mid-range funding where material is recycled in the EU or UK, and a reduced subsidy for material sent outside Europe. The forthcoming deposit return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans, when operational, will increase the quantity and quality of materials available for recycling in Ireland.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome the recent visit by the Minister of State to Shabra plastics facility in my own constituency. Regardless of the constituency it is in, I am sure from his engagement as local Oireachtas Members will have heard that he is bound to have been astounded by the facts as they are. A company that is in Ireland has to import PET plastics in order to remain viable, while Irish waste collectors are exporting significant tonnes of that same product even though they are subsidised by the Irish taxpayer through Repak.

There are a couple of things the Government has the power to do. The first is to introduce a levy on the use of virgin plastics, something other EU states have done, but as with previous questions, the answer here is that we have to wait for an EU-wide response. In many cases when things affect ordinary individuals the Government has no problem acting unilaterally and swiftly but it seems that when things impact on big global companies there is a reluctance.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: Indeed, at the invitation of Deputy Niamh Smyth I went up and had a look at Shabra plastics in Monaghan, one of many visits I have made to Monaghan. I could see it is importing plastic from all around the world and meanwhile Irish plastic is being exported all around the world in contravention of the proximity principle. The question is how do we address this. We are not waiting for European agreement on a common virgin plastic tax. There are countries that brought one in. My Department is examining what form that could take and it is part of our circular economy strategy at the moment. I have been in contact with the Department of Finance, which pays out the unrecycled plastic tax as part of its EU membership

following Brexit, whereby that became part of our EU membership costs. There is an incentive in the country to reduce the quantity of unrecycled plastic that exists and to do everything we can to make sure it is reprocessed. Repak does have an objective of processing plastic and recycling it domestically. I will look over the agreement we have with it over the rates they pay for local recycling.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In a previous written response to me back in May, the Minister of State indicated that the data relating to the quantities of PET plastic that are recycled domestically and exported were not collated by his Department. Will he indicate as a first step that this has now changed and that he plans to provide the data? We are having a debate in the abstract if we do not know precisely how big of a problem we are dealing with.

In respect of the levy on virgin plastic, it appears to be a no-brainer in terms of the language the Government uses. Whenever we are talking about ordinary people using coffee cups, plastic bags or whatever, they are all measures that I support. There is never any issue. We never have to carry out years of analysis or wait to see what is happening at a European level. Virgin plastic being imported into Ireland is a source of pollution and therefore it would make eminent sense that there would be a levy on that in order to encourage the use of recycled material.

Deputy Ossian Smyth: The unrecycled plastic tax on packaging waste is calculated by finding the quantity of plastic packaging put on the market and then subtracting out the quantity that was recycled. I will get the Deputy an answer for who the authorities are who calculate those statistics. If it is not my Department it is probably the Environmental Protection Agency, the Central Statistics Office or somebody.

On the question of a virgin plastic tax, we are looking into that. We do not have to wait for EU approval. What is being imported into Ireland includes large quantities of recycled material as well as virgin plastic. We have both coming in which hardly makes any sense. I am glad to see what Shabra is doing. It is an Irish company that is making a profit and one of the only companies that is reprocessing plastic in Ireland. We will do everything to make sure companies like that thrive in the future.

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Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Transport

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister of State for being with us tonight to address the very important issue of school transport. I want to talk specifically about the area of Kilnallick in the heart of County Cavan. This is a beautiful, idyllic village in the heart of the county. There are 25 students currently having to use private transport to get to school in Cavan town. There are three big secondary schools in Cavan town and 25 students currently have to pay for a private bus service.

This is not a new issue. It is an issue that has been ongoing for years. One of the parents

told me that 50 years ago there was a route from Kilnaleck into Cavan town but, for some reason along the way, that was changed. I am hoping that as a result of this debate we will have the opportunity to change and rectify that and make school transport a possibility and a real part of the lives of the parents who have this relentless problem around school transport.

As I said, there are parents whose children have to use private school transport. Of course, I acknowledge the fact it is the second closest school and it is not the nearest. I am asking that under the review around school transport the scope of that would be broadened to facilitate parents and students like those in Kilnaleck and to ensure the second closest school will be an option for them.

I have already explored all options. We have looked at Local Link and so on but none of that is a runner. I have tried to be flexible. Ultimately, there are 25 students and countless families who deserve school transport to Cavan town.

One of the parents has given me a very clear example of where it is costing more than €1,400 per annum to get her child to school. On top of that, she drives 4,000 km each year to get her child to the pick-up point outside Kilnaleck. That is before the child even gets on the bus to go to school.

The Minister of State will have got the gist of my ask. I will allow time for my colleague.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I thank the Minister of State for stepping in to take the matter to-night. I do not know what bus na scoile is like in Waterford but in north Kildare it is absolutely dire. In all the years I was a councillor, and since I have become a Deputy, I have never seen anything like the avalanche of messages, requests and emails I am getting from parents in north Kildare, contacting me about bus na scoile. It has been an absolute fiasco. The Department announced free seats without making sure it had the actual seats in the first place. It has led to chaos among families across north Kildare and across the State as well.

I know from a reply to a parliamentary question that the Department did this after a couple of days liaising with Bus Éireann. Bus Éireann only realised the seats were going to be free half an hour before it was formally announced. There is the phrase, “Build it and they will come”. If you announce free school bus places, do not be surprised that many hands go up. This has left many children without any tickets this year who had gotten concessionary tickets for many years. They are bitterly disappointed.

I am also bitterly disappointed with the replies I am receiving to parliamentary questions. The Minister said at least 124,000 tickets were given out, with an extra 20,000 places this year. The Government keeps insisting on this figure but it is just not true. In another reply to a parliamentary question, I was told 121,400 were carried in the scheme for the 2021-2022 school year. That is only an extra 3,000 places and not the 20,000 the Minister said there were. I ask the Minister of State not say that in her reply because that is back to school stuff whether one has a school bus place or not.

I wish to raise the issue of the number of mothers who are contacting me because, primarily, this is a gender issue. This goes back to women. It is seen as the woman’s job to get the kids to school. In addition, because of the gender pay gap, it is primarily the women. Women are telling me they will have to give up work to bring their kids to school.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Depu-

ties for raising these matters. As discussed with the Deputies, I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Foley, who is unfortunately unavailable this evening due to another commitment.

Deputy Cronin asked about the transport issues in Waterford. I am a mother of three and for the past 17 years, including this year, I have put somebody on the school bus. Living in Portlaw, where there is no secondary school, we have no choice. Only for the school bus system, with five buses leaving Portlaw every morning, thankfully, my youngest is on the bus.

I will provide an outline on the extent of the school transport first. School transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the last school year, more than 121,400 children, including more than 15,500 children with special educational needs, were transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of more than €289 million in 2021.

The purpose of the Department's school transport scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

In July 2022, Government announced funding for the waiving of school transport scheme fees for the 2022-2023 school year as part of a wider package of cost-of-living measures. I know, particularly in the area where I am from, not having to pay that €650, or €220 in the case of primary school, was welcomed by school families.

School transport ticket registration for the 2022-2023 school year closed on 29 July, by which time almost 130,000 applications were received for mainstream school. The figure included 44,299 new applications as well as roll-overs from the previous school year. Already, 124,000 tickets for the mainstream scheme alone have been issued to applicants for the 2022-2023 school year. At the start of the last school year, there were 103,000 children carried on mainstream school transport services, so already in the region of 20,000 additional places have been created. There has been an increase in tickets allocated across all counties, including the areas referred to by both Deputies.

Bus Éireann will continue to process applications and to issue tickets as soon as extra buses and drivers are sourced and become available to provide transport for the higher numbers qualifying for the service. However, regrettably, the unprecedented numbers of applications for the upcoming school year has led to some delays in issuing tickets.

I will respond to Deputy Smyth first. I take on board what she said. I believe she was referring to Kilnaleck.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Yes.

Deputy Mary Butler: Some 25 students are using private transport and the Deputy has exhausted all avenues and spoken to Local Link. I will certainly bring that back to the Minister on her behalf. What I have found in my constituency office is that if there are two or three children in a particular area, it is very difficult. However, when there are 25 students, it is easier to deal with that. It is very hard to provide the bus for one or two children, which is not what parents want to hear. However, in this case, there are numerous students. Deputy Cronin is very challenged in north Kildare as well.

The normal eligibility criteria of the scheme still apply and tickets continue to be allocated in line with the criteria that the Deputies know in relation to those who are eligible and those who are concessionary. In line with normal practice, all eligible children who completed the application and ticket registration process on time will be accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

In addition, pending completion of the outcome of the full review of the school transport system, temporary alleviation measures at post-primary level, which is the second school the Deputy referred to, will be continued for the 2022-2023 school year.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: As I said, I am speaking about a specific issue, which is Kilnaleck. I would like to take this opportunity to thank one parent who has had numerous meetings, sent numerous emails, made numerous phone calls and put hours and hours into this on behalf of the other parents and kids to try to come to a resolution. Using her words, to say this is a stressful situation is an understatement.

On the broader picture, the system has to be flexible, particularly in the current circumstances we find ourselves in. To say, as I read in the reply, that a late applicant will not be accepted is not flexible. I will use the example of a family with a number of children who have been paying Bus Éireann over the past 15 years. Their child cannot get on the bus this year even though that bus is driving by the end of their lane only half full. This is the problem. We cannot have half-full buses going to schools with other kids, who have been loyal Bus Éireann customers, left at the side of the road. I ask that the system be flexible to ensure the capacity is provided for all these concessionary students.

Deputy Réada Cronin: That is a problem I am hearing about as well. Buses are not full and yet kids have been refused places on them. I know of 29 children from the Rathcoffey-Straffan area. There is no public transport from Straffan into Maynooth secondary school. There is a public bus service from Rathcoffey, but there is not one from Straffan and there are 29 children without a seat. This is all in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis where women are thinking about having to give up work so they can bring their kids to school. I know of another child from Coill Dubh going to Prosperous and who is relying on the 120 bus, which is just not reliable. The word “reliable” should not be in the same sentence as the 120 bus. Mothers are having to quit work with no warning in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. It is all just a lack of joined-up thinking. The headlines were great - there was to be a free bus na scoile service and it would be marvellous and important in the middle of a climate crisis, but it is not delivering. One cannot just announce something and make it happen. Bus Éireann did not get the notice it needed. I want to know what the story is. I have heard Ministers saying they are still looking into it and they are still trying to get places, whereas Bus Éireann says it is over and finished. What is the story there?

Deputy Mary Butler: It is important to point out that 124,000 tickets for the mainstream scheme alone have been issued to applicants and 124,000 children are on the bus. As part of the cost-of-living packages introduced by the Government, they are able to travel to school by bus free of charge. Notwithstanding that there are difficulties, that point cannot be lost. All present accept this is very important for many families who might not ordinarily get supports, possibly because they are working, for example. It is important to acknowledge that.

The Department has commenced a review of the school transport scheme. It is being conducted with a view to examining the current scheme. All Deputies are aware there are issues

every September. The Government accepts that.

Deputy Réada Cronin: There has been nothing like this year previously, though.

Deputy Mary Butler: The review will consider how the scheme currently operates, its broader effectiveness and sustainability and that it adequately supports the provision of services to students and their families.

The review encompasses the school transport scheme for children with special educational needs. The review of the primary and post-primary school transport schemes will examine each element of the schemes, including eligibility criteria, trends, costs, cost drivers and overall effectiveness in meeting the objectives of the scheme. The review will also examine the potential for integration of different strands of the scheme and a more co-ordinated approach with other Departments that also use transport services.

Wider considerations relating to operation of the scheme are taking place in the current phase of the review. As part of this, the technical working group has undertaken extensive consultation, including running a public survey for parents and guardians as well as students who use the service. It is to be hoped that, as a result of the review, the situation will be resolved by the end of next year.

I reiterate the point that 124,000 students are receiving school transport at the moment. I will feed the Deputies' comments on the immediate areas to which they referred back to the Minister.

Housing Policy

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I very much believe in Part V delivery. I wish to deal with a particular aspect of it. I like estates to have 10% social and 10% affordable. That is what I want to see on every new estate that is built. Part V provision was in place previously, with both 10% social and 10% affordable, but on many occasions the Part V obligation was bought out and did not happen. That is no longer the case.

However, I draw attention to the fact that under Housing for All and, more particularly, the Affordable Housing Act 2021, in the case of planning permissions granted before 3 September 2021, it is only the 10% social that applies. The 10% affordable does not apply for private estates in that context. For planning permissions granted after 31 July 2026, which is the bones of four and a half years away, the 10% social and 10% affordable - a total of 20% - will apply. For planning permissions granted between 3 September 2021 and 31 July 2026 in respect of land purchased prior to 1 September 2015, the 10% social and 10% affordable apply. However, for any land purchased between 1 September 2015 up to 31 July 2021, which makes up the bulk of the land that will be built on now, only the 10% social applies. Why is that the case? In the case of land purchased after 1 September 2021, the 20% total does apply, but the bulk of the land that will be built on in the coming years will be land that was probably purchased between 1 September 2015 and 31 July 2021. That means that many of the private estates that will be built will not provide 10% affordable housing.

I passionately believe in the Part V model. Why has this situation come about? What can be done about it? I ask the Government to reconsider this and amend it. Whatever the cost that

will have to be paid to the builders of these estates to ensure 10% of the houses are made available under the affordable model should be met. I am talking about ensuring that, on an estate of 100 houses, ten of those houses would be set aside for affordable purchase. That is what the people in Limerick whom I represent are seeking. My worry is that will not be the case under the structure currently in place. That may be based on legal reasons, but I want to know the reason for the decision and I want the Government to consider ensuring the 10% social and 10% affordable provisions apply to any planning permissions that are granted from now on, regardless of when the land was purchased. If that requires additional funding from the Government to the developers of these sites, so be it. I believe it would offer value for money because it provides people with affordable homes on private estates in their own communities.

I believe in the model of estates that have 10% social, 10% affordable and 80% private. It is a mix and it works. There are other models and I very much acknowledge the fact there are 25 new houses going up under the affordable fund at the moment in Castletroy, where I live. That is to be welcomed, but this is a slightly different thing. Anyone who has been involved on the ground will understand what I am talking about.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for his question. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy O'Brien.

Under Housing for All, the Government's strategy to increase housing supply, we have an ambitious target to deliver 300,000 new homes in the next decade. This includes social, affordable purchase, cost rental, private rental, and private ownership housing. It has seen the Government make funding available for 54,000 affordable home interventions, including 36,000 affordable purchase and 18,000 cost rental homes, to be delivered between now and 2030.

Part of this affordable housing delivery will be facilitated under the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 Part V requirement. These provisions were amended via the Affordable Housing Act 2021 and came into operation on 3 September 2021. I know that is the matter to which the Deputy is referring. The amendments increase the required Part V contribution from the current level of "up to 10%" to a flat 20% in housing developments. This applies in situations involving five or more houses and enables the use of Part V for the provision of cost rental as well as social and affordable purchase housing. A minimum threshold is in place and requires at least half of the Part V contribution to be for social housing provision. Planning permissions granted before 1 August 2021 are not affected, as the Deputy noted. The contribution remains at 10% for social housing purposes where planning permission is granted before August 2026 in respect of a site purchased between September 2015 and the end of July 2021, when the requirement was at 10%. This transitional arrangement ensures that near-term delivery will continue, mindful that increasing the percentage could make developments unviable where the original financial appraisal was based on the 10% contribution.

I can confirm that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently preparing updated Part V guidelines for local authorities under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. These guidelines, which are expected to be finalised shortly, will provide detailed information and clarification on the amended Part V requirements, including those aspects relating to affordable housing.

In the interim and in the period to 2026, the Government has committed the funding to deliver cost rental and affordable purchase homes via approved housing bodies, AHBs, local authorities, the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the first home shared equity scheme. Cost

rental homes will be delivered by AHBs, local authorities and the LDA. AHBs are currently supported by the cost rental equity loan funding, while local authorities can access funding for cost rental delivery through the Department's affordable housing fund.

The LDA will also deliver cost rental on its own portfolio of sites and through acquisitions under Project Tosaigh. The target under Project Tosaigh is the delivery of 5,000 new homes by 2026 for cost rental or sale to eligible households under affordable purchase agreements. In regard to affordable purchase, the first home scheme was launched on 7 July last and aims to support in the region of 8,000 primarily first-time buyer households in acquiring new homes in the private market in the years 2022 to 2026 with an overall budget of €400 million. The remaining affordable homes for purchase will be delivered by a combination of local authorities underpinned by the housing delivery action plans and supported by the affordable housing fund and the Land Development Agency, LDA, through Project Tosaigh as it continues work on public and State land.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the fact that there is a great deal happening on affordable housing. As I said, the 25 units in Castletroy that are being built under the affordable housing fund through the local authority and all the other aspects such as the home equity scheme are all very welcome. However this is a very particular point. The Minister of State made reference to the fact that land purchased between 1 September 2015 and 31 July 2021 might be deemed - if Part V for affordable housing was implemented and for planning permissions granted on or after 3 September 2021 - unviable. We are talking about 10% of an estate. It is very simple. This is down to funding. If it is down to funding, then the Government should be funding the developers for any shortfall they have in terms of a development. If we are looking for a model, it must be an integrated model. We cannot have a situation where over the next number of years no private estate built will have affordable housing. This is common sense. I ask that it is taken back to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and that Government will look again at the legal implications of this measure to see if that shortfall, where a builder bought land between 3 September 2015 and 31 July 2021, can be funded, so that the Government funds that 10% for the affordable housing. There are people, young couples and young people, who want to purchase a home in their own communities. They need to be entitled to avail of this and, therefore, I ask Government to revisit this aspect.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will take on board what Deputy O'Donnell said and feed it back to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. What the Minister said, as Deputy O'Donnell said, the transitional arrangement ensures that near-term delivery will continue, mindful that increasing the percentage could make developments unviable where the original financial appraisal had been based on the original 10% contribution which was prior to this new Bill. As sites that fall under the new Part V provisions begin to obtain planning permissions, a supplementary delivery of social and affordable homes will be yielded. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will continue to concentrate on delivering a strong short- and medium-term pipeline of affordable delivery through continued engagement with the local authorities, approved housing bodies, AHBs, and the Land Development Agency. The transitional arrangements included in the amended Part V provisions ensure that the near-term delivery will continue uninterrupted and the Government remains committed to delivering affordable interventions, which I know Deputy O'Donnell welcomes and is supportive of. He mentioned the build in Castletroy. I will take on board what he said and will bring it to the attention of the Minister and his Department.

Dáil Éireann
Coroners Service

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I wish to ask the Minister for Justice about the coronial system particularly as it relates to the justice plan 2022 which commits to bringing forward nationwide coroner review proposals later this year to address identified issues and drive innovative change. My biggest concern right now relates to the absence of a coroner in Carlow district. We currently have 34 coroners in 38 coronial districts. Why is there not a coroner appointed in Carlow? There is temporary cover from Laois that is already three years in place. As the Minister knows, coroners are appointed by the local authority except in the district of Dublin where appointment is by the Minister's office. Where a vacancy arises in a particular coronial district and that district falls within local authority areas where there is more than one coronial district, the Minister's office may, following consultation with the local authority, direct another coroner from the same local authority area to assume the coronial duties of the vacant office. These can then be amalgamated districts. However there is no specific protocol in a case such as in Carlow where the passing of a coroner left a vacancy which has still to be filled and is currently being held by a coroner in a separate district for it to be filled from that district. There is no urgency to fill the vacant role and this concerns me.

Coroner districts within counties have been amalgamated from 48 districts to 38 in 2022. Carlow remains a district, although it is without a coroner. The legal requirements for a person to be appointed as a coroner or a deputy coroner are set out in the legislation. Are there any plans to broaden this?

As the Minister knows, no person shall be appointed to be a coroner or deputy coroner unless he or she is a practising barrister of at least five years' standing, a practicing solicitor of at least five years' standing or a registered medical practitioner who has been registered other than provisionally or temporarily under the Medical Practitioners Acts 1927 to 1961 in the register of medical practitioners for Ireland or who has been entitled to be so registered for at least five years. Yet there is no application process, no job site to which to apply, so what steps are being taken to recruit a Carlow coroner for a vacancy that is some years in existence? To date only two such appointments have been made, one in Kildare and one in Meath. My understanding is that there is a mechanism for the coroners service to recruit extra staff. The Minister might come back to me on that.

The Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 provided for the assignment and appointment of temporary coroners as part of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, Carlow remains without one.

Section 13 of the 1962 Act provides that each coroner shall appoint a deputy coroner, again in the case of Carlow, we do not have one. We have been promised many times comprehensive reform in the system but we cannot seem to get the right staff in place. I have argued for a review of the system, a widening of powers, a better system that empowers families left behind after a death, that provides more transparency and supports for those bereaved through suicide. I support calls for better data collection so that we can learn lessons better and for recommendations made by coroners to have greater weight.

In committee I called for a full-time coroner in each district reporting to the recruitment and resourced from a national coroners service with consistent standards of practice throughout the country and sufficient supports to ensure families left behind are supported in a most difficult time in their lives. I look forward to hearing the Minister's plans for these vital reforms.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank Deputy Murnane O'Connor for raising this important matter and for giving me an opportunity to provide clarity on some of the issues and to outline what has been done to date. We have plans to do further work. As the Deputy outlined, the coroners service is a network of coroners and districts throughout the country. Coroners are independent, quasi-judicial officials whose function is to investigate sudden and unexplained deaths so that a death certificate can issue. This is an important public service in particular to the next-of-kin, to friends and family of the deceased. Coroners not only provide closure for those bereaved but also provide a wider public service by identifying matters of public health and safety concerns. As Deputy Murnane O'Connor rightly outlined, my justice plan 2022 commits to bringing forward this year nationwide review proposals to deliver a service improvement plan to address identified issues, drive innovative change, enhance customer service and improve interaction with pathology services. Until I have that review, going into more detail is not possible at the moment but I am committed to doing it by the end of the year and will engage with the Deputy when I have that report. The Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2013 provided for legal aid and legal advice by certification by the coroner to the Legal Aid Board in respect of inquests. We then had the Coroners (Amendment) Act 2019, which clarified, strengthened and modernised the powers of a coroner in the reporting, investigation and inquest of deaths. The scope of inquires at inquest was expanded beyond being limited to establishing the medical cause of death to seeking to establish, to the extent the coroner considers necessary, the circumstances in which the death occurred. The Act also broadened the coroner's powers relating to mandatory reporting and inquests of maternal deaths, deaths in custody or childcare situations, as well as significant new powers to compel witnesses and evidence at inquest.

More recently, we have the Civil Law and Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020, which provided, among other items, for the assignment and appointment of temporary coroners to act simultaneously with other coroners in exceptional circumstances. This was used in part of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been a great deal of change, amendments and Acts in the past decade or so to improve the overall structure and system but we are reviewing it now again to see what more we can do to ensure that it is the system that works as effectively as it can.

In regard to Carlow, Mr. Eugene O'Connor has been *in situ* as coroner to Laois since 1996. As deputy coroner for Carlow, he assumed the duties of coroner for Carlow upon the unexpected death of the Carlow coroner, Dr. Brendan Doyle, in April 2019.

As the Deputy has rightly said, the appointment of coroners to districts outside of Dublin is a function of the relevant local authorities. The Department and I are not aware of any plans to appoint separate coroners to these counties at this time but obviously, that is a matter for the council to decide and is not something I would prevent or stop it from doing.

It is available to the coroner for Laois and Carlow, Mr. Eugene O'Connor, who has assumed duties, to request that I as Minister for Justice would authorise the deputy coroner, where there is a deputy coroner in Carlow at the moment, to act contemporaneously, that is, in line with or at the same time as the work that he is doing. The option is there for him to request that I would approve such a measure. It is something that I can do and it may, perhaps, be something that the Deputy might want to suggest will happen.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. I welcome this review and will definitely talk to the Minister about this. It is important that the Act also broadens the

coroners' powers. That is very important and I have called for that at our committee. It is a vital role.

As the Minister has said, there is a deputy coroner in Carlow. Carlow needs its own coroner, however, which is something I am very passionate about and I have spoken to many people about it. As the Minister noted, we had the unexpected death of our Carlow coroner, Dr. Brendan Doyle, in April 2019 and Mr. Eugene O'Connor has been *in situ* since.

Overall, we need to ensure that this review gives coroners extra power and it would be important to have it done as soon as possible. We need our own coroner in Carlow. I will happily work with the Minister on this issue and I thank the Minister very much for coming back to me on it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. Once again, I will engage with her on this issue and once we have the report and review, and have a greater idea of where we are going in what changes need to be made, we can continue to engage on that. As Dr. Jonathan Jacob is deputy coroner at present, it might be an idea for that request to come in. It may be the case that the changes are not being made on the basis that this review is happening and waiting to see its outcome. In the interim, it would be an option for me, as Minister for Justice, to authorise the deputy coroner, in this instance Dr. Jonathan Jacob, to act contemporaneously with the coroner who is acting for both Laois and Carlow at the moment, which I appreciate is not what people in Carlow might want. We will engage further on that and hopefully will deal with that.

An Garda Síochána

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: First, I wish to condemn outright those who were involved yesterday evening and every other night and day in rallying robbed cars through the neighbourhood of Cherry Orchard. Thankfully, nobody has been seriously injured in this ongoing spate of criminal behaviour by youths in the area. As anybody who watched the lawlessness of the joyriders as they raced up and down the road in the housing estate yesterday evening, all would have been thinking that it was lucky that there were not multiple victims in hospital, or even in the morgue today.

This has been ongoing for a number of weeks and months. The gardaí in the squad car must have been very shook up because it looked as if the criminals were intent on doing serious damage to the car and injury to those inside.

It is a pity, however, that it took to ramming of a Garda car for the authorities to sit up and take notice. This has been, as I have said, ongoing for a number of months with little visible impact from the minor actions the Garda has taken to date. Only two weeks ago I raised this matter with An Garda directly in a local policing forum and I know that my colleague, Councillor Daithí Doolan, who is chair of the local policing forum and who was injured by one of these gangs when he interceded on behalf of a besieged constituent, has been contacting the Garda morning, noon and night when a robbed car is spotted rallying and endangering children in the area.

More gardaí and more Garda resources are required. One squad car is not enough for the whole of Ballyfermot. Two gardaí in a car going to tackle three racing, robbed cars and being cheered on by 50 or 60 people, is not enough. No visible patrols for most of the year is not good

enough. Accelerated planning and delivery of the Cherry Orchard local area plan needs to happen, including additional resources and extensions for St. Ultan's Primary School. There also is a need for shops. Approximately 40 years after this area was built, there are no shops, barbers, hairdressers, butchers, cafés or anything like that. That shows this area has been neglected and that neglect must end.

Deputy Patrick Costello: As Deputy Ó Snodaigh has said, the scenes played out last night in social media were shocking for many but they are not shocking for the residents of the area who have been putting up with this kind of thing night after night for months.

Some of us local representatives have been working together to raise the issue by working with the community and with community development organisations. Excellent work is being done in the community but the funding is constantly on a knife edge. We need to be looking at how we can work with the community, which wants to see an end to this kind of behaviour. As my colleague has said, we need to see more gardaí on the beat and to see a higher level of community policing. Based on replies to parliamentary questions, only approximately 6% of the local Garda station's complement is dedicated towards community policing. This compares to a national average of 19%, to 13% in other areas, or even 66%, I believe, in Carlow. I appreciate that many of the decisions on community policing are made at a divisional level but they are made in the context of the wider manpower available. We need, therefore, to look at the manpower that is available to the Garda in order that its members can get out on the beat regularly and build up the relationships they need in this community to enforce the law effectively.

Communities like Cherry Orchard feel marginalised, ignored and invisible because this kind of behaviour has been happening. When communities feel so marginalised, this kind of behaviour is inevitable. We need to invest in these communities but we also need to show them that we care about them by putting gardaí on their streets to protect the community.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank both Deputies for raising this issue in the House today. This incident is very much at the forefront of our mind today and the incident referred to by the Deputies is completely unacceptable for those living in the local communities who have to put up with it. I agree with Deputies in condemning this in the strongest terms. What we saw was a blatant disregard for the law, for members of An Garda Síochána, who were going about their business but most importantly, for the people in the area who should not have to put up with this.

We will always support communities affected by antisocial behaviour and criminality. They are as appalled by what has happened as we are. We will also put supports in place to ensure that there are the services and facilities for young people in all of our communities.

Speaking from a justice perspective, however, and I will touch on what has been invested specifically in the Cherry Orchard area in the past year or so, but we have to do this in a comprehensive way in order that it is a Garda response but is also making sure that we have the other resources in place.

I have spoken to the Garda Commissioner and have asked him to look specifically at what more we can do to try to tackle and deal with this type of antisocial behaviour. To be clear, however, anyone who engages in this type of behaviour, in what were criminal acts last night with cars being stolen and with the types of incidents that were happening, must be punished and there must be repercussions at the end of the day. We cannot allow communities to live in

this kind of fear. I also wish to convey my best wishes to the gardaí who were involved in the incident last night. I agree that we are very lucky it did not result in a fatality, either of members of the Garda Síochána or members of the community, or even those who were driving the cars and causing the havoc we saw on social media. I would appeal to anybody in the area, as gardaí have been doing, to try to come forward.

I would like to outline some of the responses that have been happening because I do not think it is fair to say that nothing has happened in the past few months. I have spoken to gardaí following concerns that have been raised by Deputies in this House, including by my colleague, Senator Seery Kearney, and others. We have had Garda Operation Práchán in place since 20 August this year. This is a specific operation focusing on car-related crime and antisocial behaviour. Arising from that specifically, in the last few weeks seven arrests were made and seven individuals were brought before the courts and were placed under bail conditions, including curfews and other types of conditions. In the Cherry Orchard area specifically, responding to the concerns that people have raised and these types of incidents relating to cars, there have been seven arrests.

Separate from that, other issues have been raised in respect of antisocial behaviour. Local Garda management have tried to enhance their high visibility policing presence with the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, public order unit over the weekends, although, as we saw, this incident happened on a Monday afternoon. That has to be kept continually under review with regard to where the resources are, when they are there and making sure they are visible. I have been informed by the Garda that there have been a number of meetings with community representatives to try to explore what more can be done, and also with regard to support from those like the armed response unit, the emergency response unit and the air support unit. However, we do not want it to get to a stage where these units have to come into communities, and it should never get to that stage.

The way to deal with it is the comprehensive response that I have mentioned, with more gardaí and resources. What I can say is that I am absolutely committed to increasing the number of gardaí. Templemore has reopened. While we have had challenges with Covid-19, we are now nearly at the stage where we will have 200 recruits in Templemore every 12 weeks. That will give rise to a significant increase in the numbers right across the country and in each area. The new Garda operating model will mean we have more front-line gardaí on the beat because HR, finance and desk work duties that can be done by civilians will be done in a more condensed way, allowing more front-line gardaí out on the beat.

In terms of dealing with more societal issues and supporting young people in particular, I want to highlight that in the last year €300,000 has been invested specifically in Cherry Orchard. There are two full-time youth justice workers, one part-time project manager, one family support worker and one early intervention worker. The CODY project just last year received funding of €62,000 to work with people involved in the antisocial use of scramblers, quad bikes and related crime.

What happened last night was unacceptable and it should not have happened. People should not have to put up with this. I believe the gardaí are doing what they can. Of course, we need to make sure they have more resources but we also have to look at this in terms of a holistic response and how we can engage with the community more. As the Deputies stated, it is about how we invest in community services and supports, looking at education and all of the various different preventative measures that are required.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I agree with the Minister that there is some good work being done by gardaí based in Ballyfermot. I was aware of a number of arrests, but those seven arrests have not quelled the issue and it seems to be continuing unabated. One resident wrote to me today who has set up a WhatsApp group with her mother. She wrote: “We have this group to notify and warn each other if there is a car out or an unsafe situation happening in the area to ensure we do not cross paths with it and can be safe coming and going from our homes.” That is residents living in siege and it needs to end. We all have a role to play and I accept the role of local representatives, youth services, schools and the like. However, there is an immediate need for a response from the Garda so this can be nipped in the bud, and it is a long bud at this stage. We cannot have what happened yesterday continuing.

Deputy Patrick Costello: We have seen a special policing plan and a special accelerated response for areas like the north inner-city, and I believe this community needs that kind of response. As I said, some of the local representatives are working on plans around community development and around these issues, and when they are unveiled, we need to give them full support.

I would also ask the Minister to come on down and meet the local police and the local community, if she can. The Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, was out recently, as was the Minister of State, Deputy Joe O’Brien, seeing the situation for themselves first hand. In fact, where the crash happened, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, had been standing there less than 48 hours beforehand. The Minister for Justice should come to the area and meet the local gardaí and members of the community. Let her hear first-hand from them and the other local representatives what can be done.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I would be happy to meet with the community and with members of the Garda Síochána. I have spoken directly today to the chief superintendent and I think it would be important to meet with the community. We have also engaged with Dublin City Council. I know a report had been done outlining how there can be greater development, not just in the Cherry Orchard area but in the larger vicinity, so we need to make sure that report and that plan is put into action. It is important that Dublin City Council, the local community, local representatives, the Garda Síochána and my Department come together as soon as possible to make sure we can advance those plans, so it is not just about policing and making sure the resources are on the ground. I know there will be extensive patrols, including the public order vans that will be there this evening, and that increase in resources will continue until this type of behaviour abates and until there is a hold on what has been happening, not just last night but over the last number of weeks. However, it is important that we look beyond the next few weeks and to the longer term. I am committed to working with Deputies and, most importantly, with the community to make sure the plan is not just for policing, Garda visibility and the type of work that is being done in the criminal justice system, but that the resources that are needed, the investment in education and the wider collaborative piece can happen. As I have said, I will be happy to work with colleagues to make sure that is the case.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.58 p.m. go dtí 9.12 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 21 Meán Fómhair 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.58 p.m. until 9.12 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 September 2022.