



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions . . . . .	1022
Coláistí Samhraidh . . . . .	1022
Sport and Recreational Development. . . . .	1024
Departmental Funding. . . . .	1026
Tourism Industry. . . . .	1028
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions . . . . .	1032
Irish Language. . . . .	1032
Irish Language. . . . .	1034
Caiteachas Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. . . . .	1036
Sport and Recreational Development. . . . .	1038
Tourism Industry. . . . .	1040
Departmental Schemes . . . . .	1043
Culture Policy . . . . .	1045
Arts Council. . . . .	1047
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions. . . . .	1049
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation . . . . .	1057
Financial Resolutions 2022 . . . . .	1066
Financial Resolution No. 6: General (Resumed). . . . .	1066
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters . . . . .	1085
Financial Resolutions 2022 . . . . .	1086
Financial Resolution No. 6: General (Resumed). . . . .	1086
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate . . . . .	1113
Health Services . . . . .	1113
Community Welfare Services . . . . .	1116
School Facilities . . . . .	1118

## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoín, 29 Meán Fómhair 2022*

*Thursday, 29 September 2022*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath) i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

***Paidir.***

***Prayer.***

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

#### **Coláistí Samhraidh**

1. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an léir di na fadhbanna bunúsacha, atá soiléir ón Taighde ar Dhúshláin na gColáistí i gCorca Duibhne a rinneadh le déanaí, atá ag Coláistí Samhradh maidir le lóistín a sholáthar amach anseo do na mic léinn a fhreastalaíonn orthu agus cé na céimeanna atá á nglacadh aici chun feabhas a chur ar an scéal sula ndúnfar coláiste nó coláistí samhraidh. [47273/22]

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. Tá an chéad cheist seo dírithe ar na dúshláin atá ag coláistí samhraidh agus go háirithe ar an tuarascáil Taighde ar Dhúshláin na gColáistí Samhraidh i gCorca Dhuibhne. Ar léigh an tAire Stáit an taighde seo agus cad iad na gníomhartha a dhéanfaidh sé chun a dhéanamh cinnte de go mbeidh lóistín ar fáil dóibh siúd atá ina mic léinn sna coláistí samhraidh amach anseo?

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo. I dtús báire, níor mhiste dom a rá go bhfuair mo Roinn cóip den tuarascáil atá mar ábhar na ceiste seo dar teideal Taighde ar Dhúshláin na gColáistí Samhraidh i gCorca Dhuibhne agus go bhfuiltear á breithniú faoi láthair.

Agus an tuarascáil seo á breithniú, ní gá a rá go mbíonn an Roinn ar an airdeall i rith an ama faoin tábhacht a bhaineann le polasaithe agus beartais chuig a aimsiú agus a fheidhmiú a chuirfidh le hinmharthanacht fhoriomlán na Gaeilge ar bhealach a luíonn isteach leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga.

Ar bhonn ginearálta, aithníonn mo Roinn, ar ndóigh, ón bplé leanúnach a dhéanaimid le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta atá cláraithe faoi scéim na Roinne, le lucht stiúrtha na gcoláistí Gaeilge

agus lena scáthghrúpa Comhchoiste Náisiúnta na gColáistí Samhraidh, CONCOS, go bhfuil dúshlán faoi leith le sárú de thoradh teaghlaigh de chuid na scéime ag éirí as a bheith ag coinneáil scoláirí ar iostas ó 2019.

Níor mhiste dom a rá go bhfuil sonraí beachta faoin staid reatha ina leith seo uile á gcur i dtoll a chéile ag mo Roinn faoi láthair, anois go bhfuil tréimhse na gcúrsaí samhraidh thart. Déanfar an scéal trí chéile a bhreithniú go cúramach nuair atá na sonraí sin faoi lámh.

Níor mhiste a nótáil ar bhonn níos ginearálta gur ghlac an Roinn le roinnt bearta faoi leith i mbliana chun tacú tuilleadh le hearnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh. Níos luaithe i mbliana, cheadaigh mé ardú 10% sa deontas laethúil a íoctar le teaghlaigh scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge ar chostas tuairim is €400,000. Cabhróidh sé seo, gan amhras, le hiarrachtaí na gcoláistí teaghlaigh a choinneáil agus a mhealladh.

Anuas air sin, cheadaigh mé ciste faoi leith ar fiú €400,000 eile chun go mbeidh an deis ag breis agus 400 scoláire ó iar-bhunscoileanna DEIS na tíre freastal ar chúrsa Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht. Lena chois sin uile, ceadaiódh gearrchúrsaí Gaeilge nach giorra ná trí oíche faoin scéim mar bheart eisceachtúil don bhliain seo amháin. Is fiú tuairim is €800,000 na beartais seo agus is ionann le maoiniú os cionn €5 milliún ar fad ar leas na hearnála i mbliana é.

Maidir le ceantar Chorca Dhuibhne go sonrach, níor mhiste dom a lua gur cuireadh ciste faoi leith ar fáil d'Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne Teo. mar chuid den chiste foriomlán bliantúil, ar fiú breis is €237,000 sa bhliain é, chun tacú go sonrach leis an eagraíocht. Críochnóidh mé an chuid eile den fhreagra níos déanaí.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Tá tuarascáil cuibheasach cuimsitheach curtha le chéile ag an Ollamh Pádraig Ó Duibhir ó DCU. Bhí moltaí sách dearfach aige, deich gcinn san iomlán, agus tá roinnt eile fite fuaite leis má léitear an tuarascáil ina iomlán. Bhí ceann de na príomhchinn faoi mhaoiniú. Luaigh an tAire Stáit ansin gur ardaigh sé an maoiniú i mbliana. Is ardú ó €10 go dtí €11 an dalta atá i gceist. Bhíodh an maoiniú ag €10.50 roimh 2010 nuair a rinneadh gearradh siar air. Nílimid ag dul suas ach 50 cent mar sin. Luaigh an tOllamh Ó Duibhir, agus luaigh na coláistí samhraidh nuair a bhí siad os comhair Chomhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge é seo freisin, gur chóir go mbeadh sé €12.50 ar a laghad, is é sin ag cur an ráta boilscithe idir 2010 agus an-uraidh san áireamh, mar níl an ráta boilscithe sin curtha san áireamh. Ba chóir go mbeadh an maoiniú mar sin ag €12.50. Cad iad na céimeanna atá i gceist ag an Aire Stáit a ghlacadh le go mbeidh an maoiniú sin á thabhairt suas go dtí an ráta sin?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Ní raibh deis agam an freagra iomlán a chríochnú cúpla nóiméad ó shin. Maidir le Corca Dhuibhne, mar chuid den chiste foriomlán bliantúil, is fiú breis is €237,000 sa bhliain é chun tacú go sonrach leis an eagraíocht chun teaghlaigh an cheantair a chumasú agus a mhealladh i dtreo lóistín a chur ar fáil do lucht freastail na gcoláistí. Tuigtear dom, go deimhin, go bhfuil roinnt tithe nua sa cheantar tar éis clárú le scéim na Roinne le gairid. Ar ndóigh, tá seo uile á dhéanamh mar bheart faoi leith chun tacú le feidhmiú foriomlán an phróisis pleanála teanga atá á mhaoiniú ar bhonn leanúnach ag mo Roinn sa cheantar, ar nós gach ceantar Gaeltachta eile.

Mar atá luaite agam cheana agus mar a gealladh roimhe seo, tá mo Roinn i mbun na socruithe a dhéanamh faoi láthair chun cruinniú a eagrú gan mhoill leis an scáthghrúpa CONCOS chun go mbeidh deis ag an Roinn breathnú chun cinn ar na bealaí breise a mbeifear in ann tacú

tuilleadh le hearnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge ar mhaithe le tuilleadh teaghlaigh Gaeltachta a mhealladh chuig an earnáil.

Ní gá dom a dhearbhuí go bhfuilim féin agus mo Roinn tiomanta leanúint ar aghaidh ag tacú le hearnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge faoi réir na mbearta ábhartha atá leagtha amach i bPlean Gnómhachta an Rialtais don Ghaeilge.

Ba chabhair mhór an t-allúntas chun cuidiú a thabhairt do mhná tí agus do na teaghlaigh Gaeltachta arís an bhliain seo chugainn agus beidh an t-allúntas seo ag dul suas an bhliain seo chugainn. Beidh mé in ann é sin a fhoilsiú sna seachtainí amach romhainn.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Tá sé go maith go bhfuil céim glactha agus go bhfuil an tAire Stáit ag rá go mbeidh céimeanna eile ann. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann plean cúig bliaina nó fiú amháin deich mbliana a chur ar siúl le go dtuigeann iad siúd atá ina mná tí faoi láthair, agus na brúnna san áireamh, cad atá in ann dóibh, agus dóibh siúd freisin atá ag teacht isteach san earnáil. Is earnáil rí-thábhachtach é seo ó thaobh gheilleagar na nGaeltachtaí, go háirithe. Is gá dúinn níos mó a dhéanamh, ní hamháin chun cuidiú leo le linn na tréimhse samhraidh, ach ina dhiaidh sin freisin chun daoine eile a mhealladh.

Chomh maith leis sin, tá athchóiriú agus a leithéid de dhíth agus caighdeán nua toisc Covid-19 ag teastáil. Beidh ar mhná tí, ar bhrúnna agus a leithéid, infheistiú a dhéanamh chun athdheisiú nó deisiúcháin a dhéanamh ar fhoirgnimh. An bhfuil aon chiste ar leith ar fáil dóibh sin?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Táimid i dteagmháil le CONCOS agus le Teaghlaigh na Gaeltachta anois agus an samhradh thart anois agus táimid ag déanamh athbhreithniú ar gach rud. Tá allúntas breise ar feadh na bliana seo chugainn agus beimid ag féachaint ar an allúntas seo idir an bhliain seo agus an bhliain seo chugainn. Beimid in ann níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt le linn scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge an bhliain seo chugainn freisin. Nuair a bheidh an t-athbhreithniú seo críochnaithe, beimid in ann é a fhoilsiú.

## **Sport and Recreational Development**

2. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has considered the introduction of a leisure card for children and young people that would allow for State funding to be given directly to families for the purposes of paying for sport and or cultural activities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47809/22]

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** Has the Minister of State given any consideration to the introduction of a leisure card for children and young people which would allow for State funding to be given directly to families for the purpose of paying for sport and-or for cultural activities and will he make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo. Although a developed and costed proposal has not been presented by the sector to my Department, the cost of introducing a leisure card as outlined by the Deputy could potentially involve a very significant level of Exchequer support. On the basis of a national scheme with coverage extending to all children and young adults in Ireland under the age of 25, currently totalling some 1,500,000 people, with a weekly subvention of just €10 per week or over €500 per annum, the total cost

would be in the region of €750 million.

As the Deputy is aware, under the National Sports Policy 2018–2027 introduced in 2018 there is a target to double the level of State investment in sport from €111 million in 2017 to €220 million by the end of this policy. As a result of the Government's strong commitment to the development of sport in recent years, we are well on track to achieve our investment targets. In budget 2023, a total allocation of €174.8 million has been made for sport, which will allow for increased availability of sporting opportunities next year for all ages, young and old alike. Additional resources have been allocated to Sport Ireland, the agency responsible for the development of sport in Ireland, which will permit improved budgetary resourcing of the governing bodies and local sports partnerships that deliver so much to families and children across the country.

In the area of the cultural activities provided by the State, visits to the national cultural institutions are free of charge to all, including children and young people. The institutions also continue to develop and expand on their learning and engagement activities for children and young people. Under the all-of-government Creative Ireland programme led by my Department, access is provided to children and young people to engage in free creative activities through its Creative Youth and Creative Communities pillars. For example, the flagship Cruinniú na nÓg provides free creative activities for children and young people nationwide in June every year.

Although the introduction of a national leisure card is not currently considered a feasible or realistic proposition in the circumstances outlined, either from the Exchequer perspective or due to the considerable complexities that would inevitably arise from the administration standpoint, it would be inappropriate to completely rule out its introduction in all circumstances. Future circumstances may allow for the adoption of such an approach, perhaps modified for particular sports, age ranges or population cohorts, and I would be open to considering specific proposals in that regard.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** According to research published by the Federation of Irish Sport, for every €100 invested in sport by the Government, the Exchequer receives up to €195 back through taxes on sports-supported expenditure and incomes. We also know that half of the money invested by the State in the arts later comes back to the Exchequer. This proposal is based on the Icelandic experience of a leisure card. We propose a three-year pilot scheme where every child in junior and senior infants would get €130 worth of credit to use on extra-curricular sporting and-or cultural activities as they choose. We then expand the scheme over the remaining primary school classes on a phased basis and, over a five-year period, the scheme would be rolled out to all children in primary and secondary school.

As I said, a similar scheme was introduced in Iceland in 2007 as a response to the crisis among its youth around alcohol, tobacco, drug use, mental health issues and social isolation. The changes in the experiences of children have been transformative. As a long-term measure, the benefits far outweigh the initial costs and, as I said, the research shows that those costs can be recouped by the State.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I agree that investment in sport, physical activity and cultural opportunities yields huge benefits for young people. That is why we put significant investment into all aspects of this Department for 2023, in particular given that one of the major challenges facing sports clubs and grassroots organisations is around energy costs in the coming months, so they can maintain their level of activity to promote participation. That is why we have se-

cured an overall €60 million fund for community, arts, Gaeltacht and sporting organisations, with €35 million directly for sport so we can mitigate some of the cost increases and support the membership and continued volunteerism that is central.

As I said, the cost of this proposal would be around €750 million across all age cohorts. It is not something we are immediately able to do but it is not something we would rule out into the future. Any initiative to promote sport, physical activity and cultural opportunity is something we can have a discussion on.

**Deputy Imelda Munster:** This leisure card could be used for sport, dance, music, art or some other enriching pursuit. The voucher would be used via a designated website that lists providers who are trained and approved for youth development. That would ensure not only quality control and mentoring through what is being offered, but also that the money circulates in the local community, boosting the after-school sector. It has been transformative in Iceland and, as I said, the research shows that the money invested would come back. As we know, given the current cost of living crisis, there are many families and working parents who, with childcare costs, mortgages and so on, cannot afford to pay for extracurricular classes. There are also many families who just cannot afford it full stop. In the long term, the benefits far outweigh the costs involved. If every child had access to that voucher, they would be engaging in extracurricular activities and would find their forte. The benefits of that speak for themselves.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** It appears to be working well in Iceland, where there is a subsidy system for leisure activities from age six to 18. There is a similar model in France, which has a culture pass that gives all under 18-year-olds €300 to spend on art, music, theatre and other cultural activities. I believe Australia has an active kids programme which provides \$100 vouchers towards sport and active recreation costs each year.

We need to look at all policy initiatives or ideas around how we promote participation opportunities and activity in the culture and sports area. As I said, we have seen a step-change in investment in sport this year, with cost of living being a big dimension of it. Similarly, the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, has secured ongoing funding for the arts and the cultural area. The cost of this in any one year would be €750 million, so it is important in the budgetary process to consider that and weigh up the choices around continued investment in existing schemes and initiatives and policy ideas like this.

### **Departmental Funding**

3. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the assistance that is available to community festivals and shows to help with their running costs, including insurance. [47526/22]

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I want to ask about the assistance that is available to communities that run festivals, fairs, shows and so on to help with their running costs. In particular, I want to focus on insurance costs and the fact that many local communities right now, in the Minister of State's constituency the same as in mine, and across the country, are facing the awful fact that they cannot even get insurance, they cannot even get a quote, to run events that they have successfully run for many years.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** My Department runs a small-scale local festivals and summer



schools scheme. The scheme is designed to support local cultural festivals and summer schools which are not in receipt of other central Government moneys and which may not be eligible under funding criteria for larger scale events supported by Fáilte Ireland, the Arts Council and similar bodies. The maximum funding available under this scheme is capped at €5,000.

My Department provides funding to support Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which is the largest group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music, both at community and national level. The Fleadh Cheoil is organised by Comhaltas at community level by the local branches in partnership with the local authority, media and other partners and sponsors.

Under the Creative Communities initiative within the Creative Ireland programme, my Department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provide funding to each of the 31 local authorities to enable them to implement their individual culture and creativity strategies 2018-2022. Within this context, many festivals and events have received support from their local authorities. Further information is available on the Creative Ireland website.

The Arts Council offers a range of financial supports for festivals. The council provides financial support to a number of single art form festivals, for example, theatre, dance and film, and such festivals are supported within the policy context of those art forms. The council also supports many multidisciplinary arts festivals across different art forms, including literature, music, street arts, theatre, visual arts and different areas of arts practice. Its festivals investment scheme, for example, is specifically designed to support local and voluntary organisations to develop arts festivals. Further details can be accessed on the Arts Council's website.

Through collaboration with the local authorities, Fáilte Ireland's regional festival scheme is available to local community festivals. The scheme seeks to influence culture and arts sector investment in outdoor activation to enhance visitor experience in local communities aligned to tourism objectives. Tourism Ireland is working closely with many festivals to provide exposure for them in key markets overseas.

I might get more time to come back to the issue of insurance, which the Deputy specifically referenced.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I take the Minister of State's point that the Government supports many local festivals, fairs and so on. However, the issue for many of them is that they cannot get an insurance quote. Some of the money the Department is making available will never get to local communities.

The Mohill horse fair in County Leitrim has run for hundreds of years and was reinvigorated 25 or 30 years ago. It has been a huge success and is the town's biggest day. It essentially keeps local businesses going until Christmas and creates a great sense of excitement and community. Despite that, the fair cannot get a quote. It is not about money. Last night, the International Wild Rose festival told a public meeting in Manorhamilton in north County Leitrim that it still could not get a quote to cover the series of events that it ran in 2019.

The Minister of State referred to funding for local authorities. Could that funding be used to help these groups to get insurance?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I take the Deputy's point about the festivals in Mohill, Manorhamilton and many other areas. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has responsibility for insurance reform. He has advanced legislation on insurance. There is also a

Cabinet sub-committee that specifically addresses insurance issues. In the sports sector, we are engaging on the challenges that certain sporting organisations and community groups are facing. Every Deputy or Senator is well aware of the challenges that certain groups or activities face in terms of insurance.

I will bring to the Minister of State the Deputy's feedback on festivals' insurance costs or their inability to get a quote. I appreciate the Deputy's point that issues are arising prior to the drawing down or application of specific funding. It is important that festivals and historical activities continue in towns and villages across the country. There is an action plan to try to deal with insurance reform.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I know about the work that is under way on insurance reform. It will be useful, but what will happen before those recommendations are made and put in place? The Minister of State spoke about the funding that the Government had given local authorities. In the interim, could work be done to ensure that at least some of that funding is made available to local communities so that they might get some level of insurance? It could be an umbrella scheme or whatever. Many groups that are sitting down to plan for the end of this year and next year will not be able to proceed because they cannot get quotes and cannot take on personal liability. This is an urgent matter. Once some of these festivals stop, how we will be able to get their committees back up and running again? Can anything be done in the short term before the insurance reform committee reports?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** There is an action plan on insurance reform. It is not a case of the sub-committee reporting. Rather, there is ongoing implementation of recommendations, legislation is being advanced and there is regular engagement with the sector around the challenges that community organisations and festivals are facing. Significant progress has been made. It is a key Cabinet sub-committee with a cross-departmental focus, including from the perspectives of the Departments of Finance and Justice.

I will bring to the Minister of State the Deputy's suggestions on engaging with the insurance sector and local authorities. It is important to ensure that local festivals can continue and that insurance is not an impediment to important and historical local activities continuing. I will ask the Minister of State to engage with the Deputy directly on the issue.

## **Tourism Industry**

4. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps she will take to protect the tourism industry, which employs 10% of all employees in the country (details supplied) and if there are plans to protect this industry against energy price rises. [47830/22]

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** What is the Government proposing to do to protect the tourism industry, which employs 10% of all workers? The 9% VAT rate was a godsend for many hotels. How will the Government protect them against gouging by electricity and gas suppliers, who are making it impossible for hotels to continue operating?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Businesses are facing cost inflation and other economic stresses, including rising costs in food and energy, increased wages in a competitive recruitment market and the cost of insurance. The aim in budget 2023 is to support the tourism industry to recover



29 September 2022

and grow in a sustainable way. A total of €214.762 million is being provided for tourism. We have secured €15 million in continued additional funding for overseas marketing of Ireland as a leading holiday destination. This includes €5 million to develop further a new tourism initiative aimed at stimulating international demand, namely, the Year of the Invitation. The budget contains an additional €15 million for a range of industry initiatives, including a €3 million fund for the continuation of investment in skills development and retention and a €2 million increase in funding for domestic marketing. We have also secured additional funding of €3 million for the hosting of American college football. Additional funding of €3 million was secured to allow Fáilte Ireland to continue its work in the area of sustainability. Other allocations include €36.5 million in capital funding for tourism product development in terms of the continued delivery of enhanced visitor experiences in line with the objectives of the National Development Plan 2021-2030.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Minister for Finance announced in Tuesday's budget a package to help businesses with escalating energy costs and to plan for the future. This included a temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS, providing qualifying businesses with up to 40% of the increase in electricity or gas bills up to €10,000 per month. It will be administered by the Revenue Commissioners.

I am conscious that the reduced VAT rate has been an important element of the business supports secured for the tourism and hospitality sector. Taxation is a matter for the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and he has extended the reduction to February 2023. All measures and supports will be kept under review in the months ahead, given the current uncertainties in the market.

The hospitality and tourism forum, which is co-chaired by the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, is the appropriate arena in which to discuss issues with the industry and other key questions arising as the sector rebuilds.

*Additional information not given on the floor of the House*

The most recent meeting was held on 12 September 2022.

I am acutely aware of the importance of the tourism sector throughout the country. It is woven into the fabric of Irish cultural and social life and is critical to the regions. I will continue to work and argue for this important industry.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The labour-intensive tourism and hospitality sector provides employment to more than 270,000 people, whose livelihoods depend on tourism. Some 70,000 of those people are directly employed in hotels. That figure had grown to 90,000 in 2018 and 2019 and the hotel industry was hopeful that it would return to pre-pandemic levels, when it generated €12 billion in revenue for the economy.

Consider the obstacles that the hotel industry overcame this year. There was a major surge in demand, amounting to 140% of pre-pandemic levels. The industry stepped up to the mark during the war in Ukraine when it provided 15% of its capacity under Government contracts. I believe that the figure has far exceeded 15%. What will happen next year when we have visitors from other countries? Will Ireland be full?

There is concern about the energy crisis. Since mid-summer, the hospitality sector has constantly requested a central point of information from the Sustainable Energy Authority of

Ireland, SEAI, so that the sector might minimise its costs and update its information appropriately, but this has not happened. The SEAI has not done its job and provided a central point of contact for the hotel industry.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We are conscious of the increased costs for businesses as well as the tourism and hospitality sector's importance for employment. That is why a specific scheme has been developed and announced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, namely, the TBESS, which will provide businesses with up to 40% of the increase in electricity or gas bills up to €10,000 per month. It in this context that we want to support businesses with their increased energy costs.

The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, has secured specific funding to continue supporting the development of the tourism sector in 2023. Approximately €214 million is being provided to underpin and support the sector in terms of marketing and promoting and to fund the capital development schemes that Fáilte Ireland and many other agencies will progress across the regions, in which regard there will be continued progress next year.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The hotel industry was accused of gouging. However, the Smith Travel Research, STR, report, which provides benchmarking and marketplace insight in a global hospitality industry monitor, stated that the average price of a Dublin hotel room during the high season was €187 and much lower throughout the country. It was definitely much lower in Limerick.

*11 o'clock*

For a Fianna Fáil Minister to say publicly that the hospitality industry was guilty of gouging hurt the entire sector. I am glad to say the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, corrected the record yesterday while speaking on the radio and said this was not a true reflection of what was happening around the country. It was definitely not happening in Limerick. For a Fianna Fáil Minister of State from Limerick to say the hotel industry was gouging meant he had not done his homework and he had just singled out the entire hotel industry.

One question the Minister of State might answer concerns the fact that more than 15% of our hotels, or well over that, have now gone in the context of the war in Ukraine. What are we going to do with visitors who will be coming in next year? What is going to happen to the businesses depending on these hotels having visitors coming in? Nearly 30% of our hotels are now full with people, and the Government wishes to take in more. The Government is going to destroy our industry and destroy Ireland.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** It was important for us to have provided a humanitarian response for those who arrived from Ukraine. Thankfully, we have been able to provide accommodation and support for people when they arrive. It has been very important. I hope Deputy O'Donoghue is not suggesting-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am not suggesting it in the first place. I am asking where we are going to put our visitors-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I do not think that we should-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I was not suggesting it in the first place. I am asking the

Minister of State where-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We must be very careful not to-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The Minister of State is correct, and he would want to be very careful in how he is suggesting-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Deputy O'Donoghue must be very careful to not suggest that those who are arriving from Ukraine-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** We signed up for women, children and the over 60s.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I think-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Males between 20 and 50 are arriving.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Deputy should be very careful. We are providing a strong humanitarian response for those who arrived from Ukraine. We have an obligation to provide-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Yes, we are. We welcome them.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----accommodation and welfare to those who have arrived.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** We welcome them.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** To apportion blame to them, however, around the-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am not. I am saying 20-to-50-year-olds are coming in. We signed up for women and children.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I respectfully ask the Deputy-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Please, Deputy, allow the Minister of State to speak.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Deputy should be respectful-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I know, and women and children-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We should be very respectful-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The Minister of State should behave.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----and considerate-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Women and children.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----of those who have arrived-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Women and children.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----and not to-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Women and children.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Address the Chair please.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** To start pitching those who have come from war-torn circumstances is-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** The Minister of State has gone off the topic because he cannot answer the question.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** -----a very unfair departure-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I ask the Minister of State to answer the question.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** We will move on to Question No. 6 as the next Deputy is as láthair. I call Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, or rather Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

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

*Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Irish Language**

6. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her strategy to support and encourage greater use of the Irish language; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47368/22]

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** People always confuse the two of us, so I am glad to see the continuation of that. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire Stáit mar gheall ar an straitéis chun tacú le cothú an teanga go náisiúnta.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Tá an cheist seo i mBéarla mar sin tá an freagra i mBéarla. The 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010—2030 represents the State's policy in relation to the language. The strategy has cross-departmental ownership and, accordingly, responsibility for its implementation rests with several Departments, in addition to Irish-language and Gaeltacht institutions and organisations. My Department is responsible for co-ordinating the implementation of the strategy.

To accelerate implementation, my Department published a five-year action plan for the language in June 2018 following a public consultation process and extensive engagement with key stakeholders. It contains more than 180 actions to be implemented over a five-year period by around 60 stakeholders across each of the nine areas of action set out in the strategy. The plan provides for a more efficient framework that supports the ongoing implementation of the strategy and is focused on specific, measurable and time-bound activities. The plan also serves to stimulate more efficient and effective participation with the overall objectives of the Government in relation to the Irish language in the context of the 20-year strategy.

In line with a commitment made when the plan was first published, the Government publishes annually an implementation report covering all of the aforementioned actions contained in the action plan. Further details of significant advances being made across Government in support of the Irish language can be found on my Department's websites. Key actions include: the ongoing implementation of the language planning process under the Gaeltacht Act 2012; the ongoing implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 being spearheaded by the Department of Education; the implementation of a range of programmes by Údarás na Gaeltachta and Foras na Gaeilge aimed at strengthening the use of the language within the Gaeltacht and on an all-island basis; and the initial steps now in hand to develop a national plan for the provision of Irish-medium public services following the signing into law of the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021.

I am confident that, with the additional financial allocations being provided for the language of €8.5 million, my Department and other stakeholders will be enabled to take further significant strides in advancing implementation of the plan to the overall benefit of the Irish language and Gaeltacht regions.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I welcome the €8.5 million the Minister of State mentioned for the Irish language and Gaeltacht. I will pick up on two points mentioned in an straitéis 20 bliain. The first, which I again welcome, is the establishment of Cúla4, the TG4 channel for kids. This meets objective No. 9 in an straitéis, which is to ensure we will support "High quality broadcast services through the medium of Irish...". It is good to see this specific objective is being met. I turn to objective No. 7 as well, however, and this is something we need to work on. Perhaps the Minister of State could work on it in conjunction with the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman. I was out in my front garden at the weekend with my child who attends a naíonra. He picked up what turned out to be a dead leaf, but in his imagination it was a féileacán. For a three-year-old to come in and to use that kind of terminology and those words, which he has obviously picked up at the naíonra, shows the good work those schools do. Will the Minister of State comment on whether any additional funding will be available to naíonraí, above that which normal, English-language schools receive? My understanding is that there is not, and I think this is something worth considering.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thank the Deputy. The development and support of naíonraí is a key part of the 20-year strategy. The ongoing development of those schools will be extremely important in the context of funding increases and the development of the language. We have a plan with Údarás na Gaeltachta, in partnership with community organisations, to continue the development of naíonraí across the country. I will revert to the Deputy on the specific question regarding the announcement made by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and provide further detail.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I would appreciate that. As I said, the naíonraí do brilliant work, like most of our childcare providers. Given they have extra requirements, however, including ensuring their staff are qualified and competent in teaching Irish and instructing in Irish, might an extra increment be applied to their capitation or can anything else be done in this regard? This is something we must examine to ensure we can manage to nurture and foster this positive outlook among people seeking to acquire Irish at a young age. I questioned that childcare provider and, to my knowledge, no funding is being received specifically to allow staff to go and improve their own language skills. They are dealing with children. Therefore, I encourage the Minister of State to talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, to determine if this is something that can be explored.



**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I will engage with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and with the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley. Especially with the new Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, and in the context of trying to strengthen the language across the public services, the State’s investment in childcare demonstrates it is playing a much larger role in the pre-school sector than it may have in the past. From pre-school and all the way through to primary and second levels, we must ensure language development from a continuous professional development, CPD, perspective is strengthened. My Department will engage with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, on continuing to strengthen the quality of language upskilling and training to ensure there are more opportunities from a professional perspective for teachers and those wishing to upskill in the language. This is important from a pre-school perspective as well.

### **Irish Language**

7. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the funding, if any, that is available to voluntary groups to partake in Irish-language activities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47369/22]

**Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan:** Tá brón orm arís a Aire Stáit gur chuir mé an cheist seo isteach i mBéarla. What funding is available to voluntary groups to partake in Irish language activities?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Foras na Gaeilge provides many funding opportunities for voluntary and other groups to access funding to partake in Irish language activities and promote the Irish language generally. These include opportunities in the areas of youth activities, summer camps, the arts, festivals and literature, Irish-language networks and community development. Supports are also available for local businesses who might wish to create an Irish-language friendly environment in their workplace by using bilingual signage, for example. The Foras na Gaeilge website, [www.forasnagaeilge.ie](http://www.forasnagaeilge.ie), contains a section on funding schemes which lists the opportunities currently open to applications and also those where the application deadline has passed. This is particularly useful to help local voluntary groups plan well ahead for next year for seasonal opportunities, such as summer camps, for example.

To give some idea of the scope of the work, some 68 summer camps throughout the island of Ireland received funding to support their work in 2021. Forty-seven festivals and seven major arts events received funding and 36 communities received a commitment to funding over a three-year period.

My Department also provides funding to an ciste spreagtha, which is administered by Conradh na Gaeilge. A sum of €150,000 was made available for this initiative during 2022. After the few difficult years that community groups experienced during the pandemic, this funding was made available to organise community events through Irish, helping to re-energise the use of Irish at face-to-face events. This fund attracted a high level of interest from community groups; 171 applications were received by Conradh na Gaeilge under this scheme and funding was offered to 160 of the applicants. A wide range of events were organised with something suitable for all ages and all levels of Irish.

The Irish language supports schemes section in my Department directly funds a number of initiatives and projects with a voluntary element. Many of the initiatives funded under



this scheme are managed by organisations with voluntary committees or in which voluntary work is a major component of the overall effort. These include Raidió Rí-Rá, Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe, Gaillimh le Gaeilge, Gnó Mhaigh Eo, Cill Dara le Gaeilge and the Na Gaeil Óga GAA club. The Irish language supports schemes funding provision in 2022 is €6.45 million for current spending and €3.5 million for capital spending. I am pleased to confirm that this week's budget announcement has brought the current allocation under the Irish language supports schemes to €8.2 million for 2023.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Fáiltím roimh an €8 milliún sin arís.

I will follow up in relation to some of the items the Minister of State listed. I am aware that organisations in Cork, such as Gael-Taca Corcaigh, receive funding through the Irish language support scheme. It is great to see that this will continue into the future. I welcome all the other items that the Minister of State listed, from summer camps right down to funding local businesses which conduct their business through the medium of Irish or at least offer that facility. If I could follow up specifically in relation to capital funding, be it for cultural centres for any other Irish language activity, is there a specific funding stream for capital funds that groups can avail of?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** As I referenced, there is €3.5 million for capital spending. While the predominant allocation is for current expenditure on festival events and activities, there is a capital dimension to some of the funding around the language support scheme. We welcome engagement from groups around a variety of initiatives from a current spending perspective. Obviously, the predominant allocation of capital is specifically within Gaeltacht areas but we fund certain projects outside of the Gaeltacht from a language perspective. As I said, my officials are always there to engage on any ideas or proposals that people might have.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Chun críochnú, I would welcome any engagement that the Minister of State could afford me and a group in Glanmire which we are hoping to get off the ground. There was an organisation in Dublin that did something similar in Clondalkin in terms of applying for capital funding in a breac-Ghaeltacht or a non-Gaeltacht area. It is good to see that this fund would be available to them. I would invite the Minister of State, on the next occasion when he is in Cork, to meet with that group. At that stage, we might have something more advanced. We have our naíonra, our bunscoil and our scoil dara leibhéal in Coláiste an Phiarsaigh. Glanmire is a vibrant Irish-language community and it is worthy of investment. I would welcome the Minister of State's support for that in the near future.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I would be happy to engage. We welcome all community groups and the effort and energy they put in from a volunteer perspective in promoting the language and developing it within their local communities. We see phenomenal effort and a huge impetus to really drive the language over the coming years. We are seeing many more opportunities now in the language with the new Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021, which will see public services - the 20% target - but which will be complemented by a huge amount of community and voluntary effort where we can really strengthen the language in communities.

As the Deputy has referenced, there is a strong Irish-language community in Glanmire. I am happy to meet and engage with them on my next visit to Cork. I look forward to that.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** The Minister of State might call in to Naíonra Chaisleáin Nua when he is on the road. Bheadh fíor-fháilte roimhe.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Is it not just off the motorway?

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Just down theas, yes.

### **Caiteachas Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta**

8. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cén fáth nár tógadh maoiniú do Chlár na Leabhar Gaeilge ar ais chuig na leibhéil a bhí ann roimh 2010; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [47289/22]

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Áras Chrónáin a bhí an Teachta O'Sullivan ag caint faoi. Tá sé ag ceiliúradh 40 bliain an deireadh seachtaine seo.

An cheist atá mise ag cur ná cén fáth nár tugadh maoiniú do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge ar ais go dtí an leibhéal ag a raibh sé. In 2010 bhí €1.8 milliún ann agus toisc ciorruithe, gearradh siar go dtí €1 milliún é. Tá sé tar éis fanacht ansin ó shin.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Aistríodh feidhmeanna Bhord na Leabhar Gaeilge chuig Foras na Gaeilge ar an 1 Eanáir 2008. Clár na leabhar Gaeilge a tugadh feasta ar an scéim a riartar faoi scáth Fhoras na Gaeilge, scéim a chuireann tacaíocht ar fáil do scríbhneoirí, d'fhoilsitheoirí agus do phobal léitheoireachta na Gaeilge i gcoitinne. Cuireann mo Roinn maoiniú imfhálaithe ar fáil do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge gach bliain, faoina bhfeidhmítear na scéimeanna agus tion-scadail seo a leanas: scéim na foilsitheoireachta; scéim na dtionscadal litríochta; scéim na gcoimisiún; an scéim meantóireachta; agus scríobh leabhar, scéim chun deiseanna scríbhneoireachta agus léitheoireachta trí Ghaeilge a chothú do pháistí scoile.

Aithnítear go bhfuil dúshlán roimh fhoilsitheoirí na Gaeilge faoi láthair. Mar aitheantas ar na dúshlán sin, chuir mé maoiniú breise aon-uaire de €300,000 ar fáil do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge ag deireadh 2021 le dáileadh ar scéim na foilsitheoireachta agus an scéim meantóireachta de chuid chlár na leabhar Gaeilge. D'fhág sé sin go raibh buiséad iomlán €1.36 milliún ar fáil don chlár i mbliana, thart ar an leibhéal ag a raibh sé in 2011. Idir an dá linn, tá tuilleadh plé déanta ag feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne agus feidhmeannaigh Fhoras na Gaeilge ar an ábhar agus ar na roghanna chun tacú tuilleadh le foilsitheoirí na Gaeilge.

Mar thoradh ar an bplé sin, d'éirigh liom an chéad ardú le seacht mbliana anuas a chur ar bhuiséad bhonnlíne chlár na leabhar Gaeilge mar chuid de cháinaisnéis 2023, a fógraíodh Dé Máirt. Cé go bhfuil na mionsonraí le hoibriú amach go fóill, ciallaíonn sé seo go mbeidh thart ar €300,000 breise ar fáil i mbuiséad bhonnlíne chlár na leabhar Gaeilge an bhliain seo chugainn. Leanfaidh feidhmeannaigh mo Roinne na cainteanna le Foras na Gaeilge sna míonna amach romhainn agus féachfar ar an bhfhéidearthacht le maoiniú breise aon-uaire a chur ar fáil i dtreo infheistíochta san earnáil, go háirithe mar a bhaineann leis na córais díolacháin agus dáileacháin.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit agus fáiltím roimh aon ardú in aon chur i gclár na leabhar Gaeilge. Tá obair mhór á déanamh ag Comhchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge mar gheall ar cheist na foilsitheoireachta, ceist na scríbhneoireachta agus dáileachán na leabhar. Beidh tuarascáil mhór ag teacht os a chomhair - agus os comhair na Dála tá súil againn – roimh dheireadh na bliana. Tá deich seisiún tar éis a bheith againn ag déileáil leis na húdair, leis na scríbhneoirí agus le Foras na Gaeilge chun díriú

isteach ar cad iad na féidearthachtaí agus cad é an gá le hinfheistiú ceart a dhéanamh isteach i scríbhneoireacht, i léitheoireacht agus i litríocht na Gaeilge.

Tá mise fós den tuairim nach bhfuilimid, má thógtar boillsciú san áireamh, tar éis an leibhéal a bhí ann in 2010 a shroicheadh arís agus caithfear é sin a shroicheadh sula dhéanfaimid breis infheistiú chun déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an tairg atá ann, agus tairg an-mhaith é, á dhíol chomh forleathan agus is féidir.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Mar a dúirt mé, tá áthas orm gur éirigh liom maoiniú breise a fháil do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge don bhliain seo chugainn mar chuid de cháinainéis 2023, a fógraíodh Dé Máirt. Is é seo an chéad ardú ar bhuiséad an chlár le seacht mbliana anuas. Is aitheantas é sin ar na dúshláin atá roimh fhoilsitheoireacht na Gaeilge.

Chuir mo Roinn maoiniú imfhálaithe ar fáil gach bliain do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge, faoina bhfeidhmítear na scéimeanna agus tionscadail seo a leanas: scéim na foilsitheoireachta, chun saothair d'ardchaighdeán a chur ar fáil don phobal agus do léitheoirí Gaeilge; scéim na dtionscadal litríochta, chun deiseanna léitheoireachta trí Ghaeilge a chothú agus a eascairt don phobal; scéim na gcoimisiún, le ciste chuimsitheach ar mhaithe le soláthar sásúil sna réimsí éagsúla léitheoireachta a chinntiú; an scéim meantóireachta, chun spreagadh agus deiseanna tacaíochta a thabhairt do scríbhneoirí i dtús a ré scríbhneoireachta; agus scríobh leabhar, scéim chun deiseanna scríbhneoireachta agus léitheoireachta trí Ghaeilge a chothú do pháistí scoile.

Is fiú a nótáil gur chuir mé maoiniú aon-uaire de luach €300,000 i dtreo chlár na leabhar Gaeilge don bhliain reatha 2022 ar mhaithe le maoiniú breise a sholáthar do scéim na foilsitheoireachta agus don scéim meantóireachta.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Bhí deis áirithe i mbliana toisc nach raibh maoiniú Foras na Gaeilge chun ardú. Bhí deis ag an Rialtas níos mó airgid a chur i leataobh do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge agus ba chóir i bhfad Éireann níos mó a bheith infheistithe ann. Fiú an figiúr atá luaite ag an Aire Stáit, d'fhéadfaí é sin a chaitheamh go han-tapa. Thug an tAire Stáit liosta de na hábhair atá sé caite orthu ach fiú tá clár ríomhaireachta de dhíth ó thaobh díolacháin de, ó thaobh ÁIS de agus ó thaobh foirne a bheadh ag taisteal timpeall na tíre ag ÁIS. Caithfear ÁIS a thógáil suas go dtí an leibhéal ag a raibh sé nó go dtí leibhéal amach anseo atá ann cheana féin sa Bhreatain Bheag.

Tá beocht agus spiorad i measc údar agus foilsitheoirí ach tá géarghá i bhfad Éireann níos mó a infheistiú anseo ionas gur féidir leo an tairg seo a chur os comhair leanaí agus daoine aosta atá ag iarraidh an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim nó atá ag iarraidh í a léamh. Caithimid i bhfad Éireann níos mó a dhéanamh chun déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an deis acu é sin a dhéanamh i gceart.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Mar aitheantas ar na dúshláin sin, d'fhógair mé ardú ar bhuiséad bhonnline clár na leabhar Gaeilge don bhliain 2023, mar a dúirt mé. Is é seo an chéad ardú ar an mbuiséad le seacht mbliana anuas agus nuair a chuirtear é sin in éineacht leis an maoiniú aon-uaire de €300,000 a cheadaigh muid i mbliana, fágann sé go bhfuil os cionn €500,000 breise curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinn do chlár na leabhar Gaeilge. Tá mé dóchasach go mbeidh tuilleadh airgid aon-uaire ar fáil roimh dheireadh na bliana seo chun infheistíocht shuntasach a dhéanamh san earnáil. Leanfaimid ár gcainteanna le hoifigigh Fhoras na Gaeilge maidir leis an maoiniú breise aon-uaire, go háirithe i dtreo feabhais a chur ar an gcóras díolacháin agus dáileacháin le linn na bliana seo chugainn.

## **Sport and Recreational Development**

9. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps she is taking to promote female involvement in sports from a young age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47505/22]

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Question No. 9 is being taken by Deputy Alan Farrell.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Richmond. It relates to the promotion of participation in sport among women and girls and what the Government is doing to encourage that uptake of sport.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** A fundamental aim of the national sports policy is to increase the level of participation across the population, with a specific focus on less represented groups, including women and girls.

In May 2022, my Department held a youth stakeholder forum on sport at which we gathered young people together to identify the barriers keeping them from sport and to gain insight into how those barriers could be addressed. A report on that forum has been drafted and will help inform and direct the measures my Department takes to address youth participation in sport.

In May 2021 Sport Ireland published its Participation Plan 2021-2024. Sport Ireland is now undertaking several initiatives under that plan for children and young people, which will be delivered through local sports partnerships, national governing bodies and other partners.

In 2021 Sport Ireland launched the research report, Adolescent Girls Get Active. Following on from the report, Sport Ireland created a new funding strand through dormant accounts funding to support local sports partnerships in the creation of physical activity programmes targeting teenage girls.

Sport Ireland is working to establish a brand identity for teenage girls' programmes rolled out by local sports partnerships and governing bodies. Sport Ireland is also tendering for the roll-out of a communication and activation campaign targeting inactive teenage girls. This will be the first time a dedicated national physical activity campaign has ever been created for this target group and highlights the commitment of Sport Ireland and the Government to trying to motivate teenage girls to be more active.

We know from the research that a participation gap arises at this time in women's and girls' lives and that this has an impact on participation for many years, so we are trying to focus initiatives on that. We are committed to our capital programmes supporting clubs that embrace female participation in sport and we are trying to build on that in the years to come.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. It is really important that the Government not just be seen to promote participation in sport at a young age but also do so. That is critical. As the slogan goes, if they cannot see it, they cannot be it. The platforming of young women and girls in sport is really important because, as the Minister of State rightly pointed out, those participation rates have fallen away. I was Chair of the Committee on Children and Youth Affairs during the term of the previous Dáil. The committee did a comprehensive overview of childhood obesity and found that the drop-off rates in women's participation in sport at a young age is quite alarming. As a mentor in a GAA club, I know how

crucial interventions can be to keeping people, young boys and young girls, involved in their local sporting code, whatever it might be, so the dedicated campaign the Minister of State talked about to get girls active is very welcome.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** In addition to that, we are developing a new national physical activity plan with the Department of Health, and I chaired a recent meeting of the sports leadership group. I have got a lot of input from the Federation of Irish Sport and some of the governing bodies, so we have a new and evidence-based physical activity plan. I think that will complement the promotional campaigns Sport Ireland is running not only to try to activate that cohort of our population that is more likely to stop activity in sport but also to develop specific initiatives. The key role of the local sports partnerships and the women in sport initiative is to drive that level of participation and to try to address the participation gap. We are also clear that at a leadership level within sport there has to be increased activity in respect of our target of 40% of board members of our sporting organisations being women by the end of next year. There has been progress in the past three or four years on that such that, not only at a participation level but also at a leadership level, we see better female representation across the board.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** There is a cross-departmental aspect to all this, notwithstanding the extraordinarily generous grants administered by the Minister of State's Department in the form of the sports capital programme and the impact that that can have on communities up and down the country. We know, and the Minister of State, being from a very fast-growing young community just like mine, will know too, that the facilities that are provided to young people, particularly young girls, for participation in sport are incredibly important. There is a role for the Department of Education to play in rolling out further improvements to the physical activity, PE, facilities in schools up and down the country. There was a report a couple of years ago. I cannot remember the precise figure but it was stark as to the number of schools that did not have PE halls and those sorts of activation measures, if we want to call them that. That is what they are because if the facilities are there, they will be used, and that will encourage more people to participate.

I welcome what the Minister of State has told us this morning and look forward to the dedicated campaign he mentioned.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Deputy is correct, in that some schools have embraced this and are open until 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock at night. There is a huge amount of PE and other activity during the day in those schools, and they open their doors for sporting organisations to use their facilities in the evening. Other schools do not have the facilities and are closed when the school day finishes. The Department of Education is on our sports leadership group. We are trying to encourage that Department to communicate to schools that we really need to embrace that community partnership. There is an opportunity, through the sports capital programme, for schools to apply with a sporting organisation or club such that if there is an all-weather pitch, they can build a pitch in partnership with a club for use by children during the day and the club has the benefit of the pitch after school. That maximises the overall benefit of the capital investment the State makes where education and sport are combined, but we have more to do on that. I think the Deputy will see some references to that in the youth leadership report, which we will publish shortly, on what young people have said about facilities and what is available to-----

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Go raibh maith agat, a Aire Stáit.



*Dáil Éireann*  
**Tourism Industry**

10. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps she is taking to address rising costs of operation for the hospitality sector, specifically with regard to their impact on tourism. [47326/22]

11. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will outline her engagements with representatives of the hospitality sector, with specific regard to tourism, since 1 January 2022. [47327/22]

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The Minister of State will be aware of the massive increases in operational costs faced by the hospitality sector this year. Electricity prices are skyrocketing and food prices are up significantly, while insurance and other expenses are putting businesses at risk. While I of course welcome the measures for small and medium-sized enterprises announced yesterday, the budget also quietly included a rise in the VAT rate for the hospitality sector in March from 9% to 13.5%. Any supports allocated to the sector will obviously be gobbled up by that increase. What is the Department doing to support this struggling sector?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 11 together.

The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, co-chair the hospitality and tourism forum. In the context of their respective roles, the focus of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is on the development of tourist traffic within or to the State and the development and marketing of tourist facilities and services in the State. The wider hospitality sector is a key enterprise sector as well, providing employment to people all over the country. Specific policy areas within the Tánaiste's Department, such as the operation of the work permits system, are vital factors in how that sector operates.

The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, regularly meets and remains open to engaging with a wide variety of tourism stakeholders and representative bodies. Department officials have also engaged with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland and tourism representative bodies in order to understand further underlying issues surrounding the recovery of the tourism sector and to emphasise the importance of maintaining a strong value proposition at the core of tourism. The recovery oversight group recently submitted its fourth report to the Minister. The report notes that while much headway has been made in implementing the recovery plan presented in September 2020, a range of current tourism challenges, as set out in the report, means that significant headwinds remain.

Regarding addressing the rising costs of operation, the aim of budget 2023 is to support the tourism industry to recover and grow in a sustainable way. A total of €214.762 million has been allocated to the tourism sector. A total of €15 million in additional funding has been secured for overseas marketing of Ireland. This includes €5 million to develop further a new tourism initiative aimed at stimulating international demand. An additional €15 million is being provided for a range of industry initiatives including skills development and retention, domestic marketing, the hosting of American college football and sustainability. Other allocations include €36.5 million in capital funding for tourism product development for the continued delivery of enhanced visitor experiences.



Budget 2023 includes wider measures that tourism businesses can avail of to assist with escalating energy costs and to plan for the future. This includes a €1.25 billion temporary business energy support scheme providing qualifying businesses with up to 40% of the increase in electricity or gas bills up to €10,000 per month. Departmental officials have sought clarification on a number of points of particular relevance to tourism to ensure the scheme offers the best possible support to the tourism sector.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I raised similar points with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, last week but I am not convinced that the Government appreciates how many family-run businesses and SMEs are close to closing. It is likely that many will at least shut temporarily during the winter and some may not reopen without proper support. The VAT rate for the sector is increasing in March. The exorbitant prices people have to pay for some Dublin hotels was cited as a rationale for the change to VAT but the whole sector will have to pay for that. Rural businesses are suffering because of the prices charged in Dublin hotels. Cafés, restaurants, pubs and hotels in rural areas like west Cork need targeted interventions now because their closure will have a disproportionate effect not only in terms of people losing jobs, but a reduction in footfall will have a knock-on impact for suppliers and producers.

Another operating cost of which the Minister of State will be aware is the insurance and financial fees that SMEs are being hit with. I know this is not his Department's direct responsibility but it seriously impacts the viability of small businesses. West Café and Wine Bar in Bantry, a family-owned business, posted on social media that it had to pay over €800 in fees for card payments for just two months which is ridiculous. During Covid going cashless was encouraged and now it is practically the norm but businesses are paying severely for that. I ask the Minister of State to raise this issue with the Minister for Finance. It is yet another operating cost for hard-pressed SMEs in the hospitality sector. On top of those massive operational cost increases, businesses in Bantry have been forced to close today for a whole business day as the town is without power. The ESB has cited essential maintenance but surely that kind of maintenance and disruption should be planned for overnight, for a Sunday or for any time that would avoid further massive disruption to already-struggling businesses. We need joined-up thinking in this regard because there is only so much businesses can take.

We need the Government to support and invest in family businesses and SMEs now because that will pay dividends down the road and save many towns and villages. We know how crucial the hospitality sector was in our recovery from the last recession.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I share the Deputy's frustration with regard to the ESB and agree there should be better co-ordination to support businesses in towns and villages when particular maintenance has to be done. It is unfortunate that a day's business has been lost. There should be better engagement on such matters.

On the Deputy's wider points, I will raise the issue of the cost of card payments with the Minister for Finance. On the reduced VAT rate, as the Deputy knows, in line with the recommendation in the tourism recovery plan a reduced VAT rate of 9% for the sector was introduced from 1 November 2020. It was originally designed to apply until the end of 2021 but this was extended to 31 August 2022 and later to February 2023. Thousands of tourism and hospitality businesses across the country did not have to apply different VAT rates during the year which further enabled them to stabilise their businesses. The reduced VAT rate promoted business survival, supported employment and helped somewhat to stabilise prices in the sector during

what was a very difficult time because of Covid. The reduced VAT rate has been a very important element of the business supports secured for the sector in the last two years as it is being rebuilt. The Minister for Finance has referenced the reduced VAT rate as one of a number of supports the Government provided for tourism and hospitality businesses over the course of the pandemic but it was designed as a temporary measure, with a sunset clause included in the enacting legislation. The rate will be kept under review, as the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht and Sport, Deputy Catherine Martin, has stated previously.

The Government fully acknowledges the impact of inflation and the economic stresses and difficulties that businesses are facing, including food and energy costs, increased wages in a very competitive labour market, and the cost of insurance. That is why the Government is providing significant support. There is a lot of co-ordination between the tourism and hospitality sector, the Minister and the Tánaiste. The Government will really try to partner and support businesses over the winter period.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** While I acknowledge that there is lots of Government engagement with the sector, ultimately there is a significant discrepancy between what tourism and hospitality businesses in Cork south west are telling me and the messaging from the Minister of State, his Department and others. The Government must be getting similar briefings to the ones I am getting but the urgency and need is not being reflected in Government policy or in the budget. I recognise that this is a cross-departmental matter and appreciate the Minister of State saying that he will talk to various Ministers about the other relevant issues.

The Minister of State's Department is responsible for tourism which is a major employer, especially in rural areas, where communities are solely dependent on tourism and agriculture. I recognise what the Government has said about the VAT rate but the point I am trying to make is that there is such a profound difference between how businesses operate in rural areas and how they operate in Dublin. If it is necessary to increase the hospitality VAT rate, can the Government provide more targeted supports for businesses in rural areas? One cannot compare the kind of price gouging by hotels in the capital city with how hotels operate in more rural areas. Somehow the Government could not figure out how to target particular households in the context of the energy crisis but it did manage to figure out how to do it for businesses. Will the Department look at more targeted supports for businesses in more rural areas that cannot operate in the same way as the urban-based hotels, restaurants and cafés? Such businesses are the single largest employer in many towns and villages.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** We absolutely acknowledge the importance of the tourism and hospitality sector for employment in the regions and that is why in budget 2022 the Government allocated €67 million in additional funding for tourism, which brought the overall budget to €288 million. A total of €50 million was provided for tourism business continuity. Many schemes were operated through Fáilte Ireland, including the €8 million restart grant plus scheme. The tourism recovery plan increased tourism marketing from €46 million to €81 million.

In the last two years the Government has provided unprecedented support for the tourism and hospitality sector in an effort to maintain its viability through the Covid period. The Minister for Finance has established the new temporary business energy support scheme which will mitigate some, though not all, of the costs that businesses face. We want to ensure continued employment and viability in the sector. The Minister, Deputy Martin, and the Tánaiste regularly engage and work with the sector on the challenges it faces and that will continue during the winter period.

Tuesday's budget was about getting significant allocations for the sector and that has happened again and the horizontal supports will help businesses through the coming months. I will relay the Deputy's concerns and feedback to the Minister.

### Departmental Schemes

12. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the implementation of the night-time economy support scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [46892/22]

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** My question relates to the implementation of the night-time economy support scheme, which I know has been pushed through the Minister of State's Department.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The night-time economy task force report was published in September 2021 and contained 36 actions across a broad range of issues associated with the night-time economy, all with the aim of increasing the diversity of events, increasing cultural opportunities for families and other age groups into the evening and look at new ways of encouraging innovation and creativity in the night-time economy. The Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, launched the night-time economy support scheme, NTESS, on 22 June this year, in support of two recommendations in the report of the night-time economy task force, namely, actions 1 and 12. The scheme has an overall allocation of €4 million to provide support for cultural activity in pubs, nightclubs, cafés and other suitable licensed and unlicensed premises during off-peak times. The scheme was developed in consultation with key stakeholders in the night-time economy including the Licensed Vintners Association, LVA, the Vintners Federation of Ireland, VFI, the Restaurants Association of Ireland, RAI, IBEC and Give Us The Night.

The aim of this scheme, which is now closed, is to encourage increased footfall in our cities, towns and villages in off-peak times and to open up existing venues to activity in the night-time economy, as well as providing artists with paying gigs and customers with a more alternative, diverse and inclusive night-time offering. I was really encouraged by the response to the scheme, which saw over 470 applications for funding processed with well in excess of 2,000 events being rolled out in cities, towns and villages right across the country. The events range from live music, DJ nights, comedy nights, dance, theatre, literature and poetry, as well as art and photographic exhibitions. The venues are diverse and as well as events in pubs, nightclubs, cafés and restaurants, we have galleries, retail outlets and rehearsal spaces all turning into lively venues for night-time activity.

As the Deputy will be aware, €6 million has been allocated in next year's budget for the implementation of a range of measures to support the recommendations of the night-time economy task force, and we hope to see more innovative pilot projects developed which will build on the momentum generated by this scheme.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is important that the State and his Department promote alternative activities at night. We have a solid night-time culture in Ireland, but it mostly revolves around alcohol and pubs. There are many other things we are absolutely excellent at and it is very important that funding streams go towards the promotion of music, comedy, literature and, as the Minister of State mentioned, art and photography, among other things. We have an extraordinary story to tell in towns and villages right across Ireland. That is why the funding the Minister of State has announced and the scheme

that has been implemented are so crucial.

I have to compliment the Minister of State, and the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, on measures such as the special exemption order changes. There are also things being implemented under the Sale of Alcohol Bill, which will have an impact on the night-time economy.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I agree that we have to ensure there is a more diverse and inclusive range of events in bars, cafes, nightclubs, art centres and retail outlets across the country. Some examples include the Circus Factory, which pitched events in Cork, the Yamamori Tengu in Dublin, folk concerts in St. James' Church in Kerry and the Birr theatre and arts festival. Windmill Lane Recording Studios had a range of different artists. The National Leprechaun Museum of Ireland hosted a range of events.

I welcome the remarks of the Deputy on his support for the work of the Ministers, Deputies Catherine Martin, McEntee and Donohoe, on special exemption orders, which support the night-time economy. A lot of the recommendations are being implemented and led by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, across a range of areas. For example, action 11 regarding Culture Night resulted in 50 late-night event taking place. There is also progress on licensing legislation.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** This is a cross-government issue because, as the Minister of State will appreciate, it crosses different doors in Government Buildings. The promotion of alternative events and so on comes down to venues. There is a role for local authorities to play in the delivery of such spaces, whether indoors or outdoors. We all know, given our change in approach to expenditure in the Department of Transport, that we are spending at a ratio of 2:1 in the provision of public transport. Within that includes the pedestrianisation of spaces, which leads to public spaces being available that were not heretofore available for these sort of cultural events. Any outside-the-box thinking in the Department of the Minister of State and other Departments to further push the agenda to provide space would be welcome. I am thinking of places in Swords, in my constituency. Malahide village green had a significant sum of money put into it for a public outdoor space which could and does host cultural events.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I agree with the Deputy. Local authorities need to think beyond the traditional things that they fund. The scheme gives them and the local economy a complementary benefit in terms of the ability to develop different spaces and provide capital investment. I share the Deputy's remarks and we need to see that engagement.

In fairness, the night-time economy action plan and task force happening across Government, between justice, arts and culture and finance, is resulting in better co-ordination and we are seeing that impetus and focus of the night-time economy, which has delivered. Some 472 applications were received for the recent fund and over 2,000 events were held. We are seeing that momentum and we need to underpin that. From a Chief Whip's perspective, I am aware that the legislation on licensing is a priority for the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and is key to unlocking one area of the night-time economy. We also need to continue the momentum on a diverse range of events which the Deputy has referenced, as well as getting local authorities to look at this from a capital perspective.

## Culture Policy

13. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media further to Parliamentary Question No. 20 of 21 June 2022, the status of the legacy framework arising from Galway 2020; if she will provide a breakdown of the way that the remaining €1 million from her Department's commitment to Galway 2020 will be spent; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47574/22]

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Baineann mo cheist le Gaillimh 2020, oidhreacht an togra seo agus soiléiriú ar an oidhreacht sin. I followed up Galway 2020, with its myriad of problems and its successes from day one. My specific question relates to what is being left and the legacy framework. Can the Minister of State please give specifics on that?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** My Department is liaising with Galway 2020 on the development and implementation of the proposed legacy framework arising from the designation of Galway as Ireland's 2020 European Capital of Culture. In that regard, Galway 2020 is due to submit its proposals on the proposed legacy programme shortly and I would expect that the €1 million available will be spent. As set out in the reply of 21 June from the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, the overall framework focuses on a number of key strategic areas that are the most important legacies for Galway as a European Capital of Culture including sustaining and strengthening existing partnerships, networks and opportunities in Europe and internationally, as well as forging new opportunities for Galway based artists and cultural organisations; drawing on the successful delivery of projects under the Galway 2020 programme to support new place-based cultural programming, including through the Irish language; and supporting the Galway cultural and creative sector to build capacity through training, advice and networking opportunities.

Until the legacy framework is agreed I am not in a position to advise on the breakdown, but the framework will be published and will contain a breakdown of how the funding will be applied. However, I can advise that the funding will primarily focus on providing direct supports to artists, arts organisations and community arts groups to participate in programmes under each of the strategic areas. For example, it will include co-funding for successful applications to EU and international funding programmes, such as Creative Europe. The funding will also build on the flagship place-based programme under Galway 2020, Small Towns Big Ideas, with new calls for projects as well as initiatives aimed at sustaining and enhancing the capacity of artists and arts organisations to deliver projects of scale. In addition, the board to the company, which retains the chief executives of Galway city and county councils, has made a number of new appointments from senior representatives from local education, business, broadcast, regional and development authorities to drive the delivery of actions under this framework.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I state reluctantly that the reply is very disappointing and the Minister of State will know why, given the history of this project. It started in 2014 and it is now 2022. He provided a repetition of the answer I received in June about a framework. Where is the framework? Why has it not been published? There were serious issues from day one with this project with regard to constant turnover of staff, governance issues and a lack of robust control. The myriad problems were highlighted at the Committee of Public Accounts by the special report from the Comptroller and Auditor General. This should have been an inherent part of the planning of the project, given the €15 million from the Department, with €1 million still outstanding for heritage. Surely, eight years later, there should be a clear outline of what



that €1 million will be used for. Galway is crying out for rehearsal and performance spaces - we heard when we were in touch this week with artists on the ground - among many other things.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The proposed legacy framework for Galway 2020 was received by officials of the Minister, Deputy Martin, in late June. In the intervening period, officials reviewed the framework and engaged with Galway 2020 and Galway city and county councils on the development of legacy actions for implementation. The proposed framework focuses on a number of key areas including building existing EU and international partnerships, supporting place-based cultural programming and supporting the cultural and creative sector.

In order to develop the framework, Galway 2020 undertook an extensive consultation process with stakeholders, including cultural and community organisations and local State and business entities. The €1 million remaining commitment from the overall €15 million from the Department to Galway 2020 will contribute to the implementation of initiatives under the legacy framework with a particular emphasis on directly supporting artists or arts organisations and community arts groups.

The development of the legacy framework will sustain and build on the capacity of networks and opportunities arising from the cultural programme of Galway 2020, which is a key deliverable of the overall European capital of culture action.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I will try to capture something in one minute. In an analysis of the capital of culture, 87% of the funds came from the public purse. The Comptroller and Auditor General said this was contrary to a Government decision that it would only be 50%. There are many other problems besides. Here we have another framework and committee and, in the meantime, the building of a former industrial school, known as Lenaboy has - officially - been sitting vacant since 2011. It is vacant since 2009. The narrative was that it was given as a gift to the city by the Sisters of Mercy. It was not. The building is part of the redress. I am drawing to the Minister of State's attention that it sits there. Does he know what the visionary management has done with the building? It has put out a tender for cameras to monitor and make the place secure, not seeing the irony that this was an industrial school where children were locked up. We are talking about a framework and the management cannot seem to put two things together or even look at the possibility of using that building in an imaginative way that gives suitable thanks to the children who were in there through no cause of their own.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I do not have specific detail or information on that but I acknowledge the Deputy's frustration. I do not know the background of the specific school but if there is a role for the officials of the Minister, Deputy Martin, to engage with that, I will reflect that feedback. I have been told that the delay in the finalisation of the legacy framework was that Galway 2020 engaged in extensive consultation with key stakeholders as part of this legacy development. It also reviewed and took into account key findings and recommendations from the independent evaluation of Galway 2020 by The Audience Agency, including recommendations to sustain and build on established networks at national and European level, as well as further enhancing the capacity of the sector, in particular in light of the impact of the pandemic on delivery.

My Department reviewed the proposed framework and worked with Galway 2020 on areas for clarification and further refinement in respect of departmental funding. As was set out in the response by the Minister, Deputy Martin, we expect in the coming week the final submission for approval with respect to the allocation of the remaining €1 million from the Department's



commitment to Galway 2020.

*Question Nos. 14 and 15 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Arts Council**

**16. Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if additional funding will be provided to an organisation (details supplied) which recently announced that it cannot afford to continue operating due to a lack of Arts Council funding. [47588/22]

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Two weeks ago the Dublin arts festival, Scene + Heard, announced that it will not be returning in 2023 due to a lack of funding. Will the Minister continue to provide some funds in order that this much-needed festival can continue to operate?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Arts Council is the statutory body charged with supporting and developing the arts under the Arts Act 2003. Under section 24(2) of the Act, the Arts Council is independent in its funding decisions and the Minister is statutorily precluded from intervening. The Arts Council offers a wide range of schemes that provide funding to artists and arts organisations. These include the festival investment scheme which is a competitive scheme that offers funding to support the staging of festivals on a non-recurring basis.

The Deputy may wish to note that under budget 2023, the Minister, Deputy Martin, has maintained the Arts Council allocation of €130 million. This allocation will allow the Arts Council to continue to protect jobs and livelihoods of artists and assist arts organisations through the cost-of-living crisis. With such assistance and the support of the public, the core infrastructure of the arts in Ireland has survived. This ongoing public funding in 2023 allows the Arts Council to continue its support for artists and arts organisations. Budget 2023 and the cost-of-living package deliver a range of supports to the tourism, culture, Gaeltacht, sports and media sectors across Ireland.

The measures announced under the budget on Tuesday resulted from ongoing dialogue and engagement between officials in my Department and the sectors and communities which come under our remit. Budget 2023 is unprecedented, compared to recent years, with increasing uncertainty in the face of rising energy costs, inflation and economic uncertainty. Together we have provided supports to help these important sectors survive through the rapidly-increasing energy costs they face. In the case of Arts Council funding, this budget will not doubt assist the council to address significant costs and challenges for artists, arts workers and arts organisations.

It is important that the arm's-length principal of funding of the arts be maintained. We cannot overstate the importance of the Arts Council's status as an independent agency where funding decisions are taken at arm's length from the political system. This ensures that artists continue to have the freedom to create and express their art, including views and even criticism that we, as politicians, might not necessarily embrace.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I will pay testimony to what exactly this arts festival was about. It mentored countless young aspiring performers, writers and directors for six years and provided them with training, encouragement and a space to demonstrate their work. Three thousand

artists benefitted from the Scene + Heard festival over the years and the programme launched many successful careers in the arts but that is set to end.

I appreciate that the decision should be removed from politics, but politics should not separate itself from how we foster a culture of artistic endeavour in this country. Mentorship is essential to that. There is a role for politicians.

In a country where it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living as an artist, this is a massive blow to future generations. I implore the Minister to consider other avenues by which politics and the Government can step in to ensure that artistic mentorship can continue into the future. The Scene + Heard festival was instrumental to that.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I acknowledge the points the Deputy made about the Scene + Heard festival. What Government can do is support funding for the arts. That has happened in an unprecedented way again this year. The Minister, Deputy Martin, has secured €130 million for the Arts Council, €35 million for the basic-income-for-artists pilot scheme which will see 2,000 artists receive a payment of €325 per week for three years; €7 million for capital supports for artists' and climate adaptation, including a new €5 million scheme for local authority and not-for-profit bodies; €15 million to address the energy cost challenges; €6 million for the night-time economy, including €2 million for new capital supports; €2 million extra for Culture Ireland to promote Irish artists overseas and €500,000 to support measures developed in conjunction with the Irish Theatre Institute as part of the speak-up campaign. Specific funding decisions are made with an arm's-length principal. That has been underpinned in the Arts Act 2003 with regard to specific funding decisions.

I acknowledge the importance of the festival the Deputy referenced but it is a decision for the Arts Council.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I accept fully that there has been massive strides made in terms of funding for arts and I also acknowledge that basic funding for arts has gone some way, but none of that will mean anything if we do not have a culture of mentorship. It is extraordinarily difficult for artists to get a start in this country. One of the ways that can be fostered is by artists helping other artists. The Scene + Heard festival did that for six years in Dublin. It will not exist anymore which needs to be lamented in this House. Politicians and Ministers have a role in fostering that culture in this country.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Martin, she has been a very strong advocate of fostering that..

*12 o'clock*

We have an innovative scheme to provide a basic income for artists. We have got a huge step change in funding for the Arts Council since the Government came into office. That has been continued and maintained in budget 2023. We have got supports for the night-time economy and cross-Government co-ordination to build more inclusive and diverse spaces for that economy. There has been an extra €2 million for Culture Ireland as well as Creative Ireland, which has seen continued support.

As stated, I acknowledge the importance of the festival the Deputy referred to in his area, but, under the Arts Act, an arm's length principle is maintained. I hope there can be engagement between the applicant and the Arts Council for further consideration on it but it is not something

29 September 2022

there can be direct intervention on. If there was there would be huge criticism. Arts Council decision-making is a fundamental principle we have had for over 20 years. It is important we maintain that so artists are free to express whatever view they have within the context of Government funding.

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*Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.*

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Agus muid ag labhairt anseo inniu, tá os cionn 17,000 páiste ag fanacht ar teagmháil tosaigh ó fhoireann mhíchumas leanaí. Tá an Rialtas ag fágáil na páistí seo ar leataobh de bharr córas nach bhfuil ábalta freastal ar a gcuid riachtanas. As we speak, there are 17,000 children waiting for initial contact with children's disability teams. There are 2,500 children who are waiting for and overdue an assessment of needs. As the Tánaiste knows, these are crucial assessments the families and the children involved are entitled to, but they are being failed by a system that is totally unable to meet their needs. The situation is dire. It is continuing to get worse year after year under the Government. The number of these assessments carried out by the HSE has plummeted. Thousands of children are being failed by the State and left in limbo while they wait for care they are entitled to.

I will tell the Tánaiste about one of those children. Uisneach turned 13 last month. He received his official diagnosis of autism in an assessment report this week. Uisneach is a lovely little boy who has a rare syndrome involving physical and intellectual disability. His mother first asked for an autism assessment when he was six years old and beginning primary school. He got that assessment this summer as he became a teenager, following seven long years of uncertainty and barely in time to make applications for secondary school. Due to this shocking delay, Uisneach did not receive the supports of home tuition or July provision he was entitled to. He had autism his entire life and should have been entitled to both these supports but because he did not have the formal assessment and diagnosis, he was excluded from these supports. It was only after this official assessment was completed - seven years after it was requested - that his parents were directed for the very first time to any supports tailored for neurodiverse children. Because everything is put on hold for the assessment to be completed, delayed assessments mean delayed access to supports. Uisneach will not get that time back and he will not get back all the missed supports he was entitled to for many long years. Neither will the 2,500 children who are waiting for assessments of needs that are overdue or the 17,000 waiting for initial contact.

These families are left in limbo after reaching out for support. They are being failed by the Government, and this is happening under its watch. Ministers were out this week with announcements in the budget that sound impressive on the glossy surface. When you scratch beneath the budgetary spin, however, it is clear the Government has not responded adequately to the situation. The vast majority of money announced this week is to stand still, not to speed up, the delivery or assessments, or the badly-needed services that should follow these assessments. The Government's disability capacity review made it clear the levels of funding that were required to meet the needs of children and adults across the State. The Government provided a fraction of what was required. In doing so, just like last year and the year before, the Government will fail these children and many others like them.

When will the Government will deliver the investment needed to support these children and their families? When will it provide the investment necessary to ensure that they get the fairness and respect they deserve in a timely manner, and not be obliged, like Uisneach and his family, to wait seven years to be given the supports they are entitled to from day one? Will the Government rethink the budget decision and provide the resources to meet the needs of these children and deliver on the recommendation in its disability capacity review to the effect that substantial additional funding is required?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is one that is of enormous importance to thousands of families across the country. I think all of us will know from our constituency services of cases of people and children who have had to wait a very long time for their assessment of need. I am sorry to hear of the case the Deputy raised and hope Uisneach is getting the support he needs now.

There are lots of delays in getting those assessments of need done for the children who need them. As I mentioned, this is something I am aware of from my constituency service. I met Avista, one of the providers in my constituency, on Friday last to discuss this and related issues. There are additional resources provided for in the budget that will be detailed in the HSE service plan.

It is not just a matter of money. We have seen a huge increase in spending on health and disability in recent years but money alone does not solve problems. You need to recruit and retain staff, which is a challenge here and everywhere around the world at the moment. You also need to be able to ensure your systems work well. Perhaps we need to consider a change of approach here. At the moment, you need to get your assessments of need before you get the therapies you need. However, I know people who work in the sector would state that it does not necessarily have to be that way. You could start providing therapies right away. It can be very clear that some children need therapy. The system we have at the moment where you wait for your assessment of need before you get the interventions is perhaps not the best option. Where it is obvious a child needs a particular intervention or therapy, why do we not provide that straight away? We need to provide additional resources, which is happening, and additional staff, which is a challenge. Perhaps we also need to look at the system and the approach we have taken to date and assess whether these can be improved.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** What these parents want is a plan. Unfortunately, what the Government has is a Minister of State who is not forward-planning. One third of all positions in disability services are vacant yet there is no plan in the budget to deal with this. The Government was brought to court by these families and it was found the law was being broken in relation to assessments of need. That is how dire it has got, and the Tánaiste is now talking about how maybe we need a different approach. Of course we need a different approach. What we really need is a different Government that will put these children first and foremost. This cannot go on year after year. The situation is getting worse. There are 2,500 children whose assessments of need have been delayed. That is up 500. The number of assessments carried out last year compared with this year is a fraction of what the HSE was doing. The situation is getting worse.

The Government does not have a plan. People who are desperate, who do have the support they require and who have children like Uisneach who are going through their entire primary education without assessments of need and the support to which I refer are this week being given a booklet on what autism is. That is a disgrace. It is a disgrace that our Government is failing so many children in this way. These people are really vulnerable. This problem could

be fixed with the right political will.

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

**The Tánaiste:** I absolutely guarantee that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is leading the way on this and is committed to working with the Government as a whole to make improvements in this area. There are a lot of additional financial resources for disability. The total budget for the year coming is going to be €2.4 billion, with €11 million or €12 million being provided specifically to improve waiting times when it comes to an assessment of need. We accept that there is a problem and it is something we are working on. We are providing substantial additional financial resources. However, there are challenges, including those relating to recruiting and retaining staff, which the Deputy mentioned, and which are by no means unique to this country. There are also challenges with getting the systems right and ensuring that we get the therapies children need as soon as possible.

It is disappointing that the Deputy used his time to only come up with one solution to this problem, namely, his party being in government.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** That is the only solution.

**The Tánaiste:** It is disappointing it seems to be the Deputy's approach to anything, rather than coming up with a solution or ideas and detailing them to set out what he would actually do.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** We provided five times the amount of money that the Government did-----

**The Tánaiste:** Instead, the solution is just Sinn Féin.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----in our alternative budget.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Go raibh maith agaibh.

**The Tánaiste:** It is pretty narcissistic.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste has been in government now for a decade-----

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Sinn Féin's alternative budget was €153 million.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----and these children have been left on the sideline.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Sinn Féin's alternative budget was €153 million.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Tá me ag bogadh ar aghaigh.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste has been in Government, he has been a Minister-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----he has been the Minister for Health, he has been Taoiseach and he has been Tánaiste-----

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** Sinn Féin's alternative budget proposal is for €153 million.



**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----and these children wait and wait. That is the reality.

**Deputy Alan Farrell:** This is the usual bluster.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am not going to impose the ultimate sanction. I ask for a little co-operation; just a small bit of respect for the Chair and what it represents, namely, the democratic process, please. Could we do the courtesy of listening and stop interrupting? We are moving on to the Social Democrats.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** I have to ask what part of the term “affordability crisis” the Government does not understand. Earlier this month, we learned that house prices had surpassed their Celtic tiger peak. Never before in the history of the State have they been so high. Workers and families are locked out of homeownership, stuck in a never-ending loop of paying extortionate rents but never being able to buy a home. The housing disaster is causing untold human misery and pain. Nowhere is this clearer than in the record numbers of people who are becoming homeless. Homelessness is up by a massive 30% this year. Child homelessness has skyrocketed by 47%. Thousands of children are losing their childhoods while growing up in emergency accommodation. This is happening on the Government’s watch and it is getting worse. People no longer believe the Government’s promises on housing. Why should they? The reality is that under successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments, levels of homeownership have collapsed. The share of 25- to 34-year-olds who own their own homes more than halved between 2004 and 2019, falling from 60% to just 27%. That is Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil’s record on homeownership - a generation of young people who no longer hold out any hope of one day owning their own homes. None of the Government’s targets on affordable housing has been delivered. Last year it did not manage to build a single affordable home, not even one. This year will not be much better. The Cabinet sub-committee on housing has been told that targets for affordable and social homes have no hope of being met. Those targets were not ambitious enough to start with.

Faced with this disaster and litany of failure, what is the Government’s response to the affordability crisis? It is not to build more affordable homes or to meet its own targets. Instead, it is to make homes even more unaffordable. The Government has decided to introduce a levy on concrete blocks that will add a further €3,000 to €4,000 to the price of a home. On what planet does this make sense? Does the Government really propose to place the cost of shoddy building work and defective materials onto the shoulders of people who are struggling to buy a home? Can the Tánaiste explain? Why has the Government not directly pursued those responsible for construction defects as it promised? Why are quarries that are producing defective materials still being allowed to operate? That is what the Oireachtas housing committee was told by experts a few months ago. Is the Government going to abandon its plans to impose this unfair levy?

**The Tánaiste:** I acknowledge that the housing shortage is an enormous challenge facing our country and people of all age groups, but particularly young people. It is the case that Ireland is a country with high homeownership. Some 60% or 70% of people own their own homes. That is a good thing. However, that is not the reality for people in their late 20s and early 30s, when it used to be. Probably only 30-something per cent of people in that age group own their own home and it would have been much higher 20 years ago. That is a breach of the social contract, in my view. If somebody works hard, plays by the rules and saves some money,



they should be able to buy their home. That has become harder and harder over the past 20 years, and I acknowledge that.

The reasons for this are myriad. We have a booming population and smaller households. We had a collapse in the construction industry 12 years ago that we have still not recovered from. We are essentially running up an escalator that is moving in the other direction. We are making some progress. Approximately 25,000 new homes were built in the past 12 months, the highest figure in ten or 11 years and certainly since the current data were collected. We have had about 15,000 first-time buyers in the past year. That is really encouraging because it is the highest in 15 years. It is not enough, however. I would like to see the number of new homes being built closer to 40,000 or 50,000 and the number of first-time buyers close to double what it is now. That has to be our objective.

In the context of what we are doing about it, the response is to increase supply. We are doing absolutely everything we can to increase supply. Only yesterday, I had some discussions about that with people involved in the business. In the budget we extended the help-to-buy scheme, which helps people to buy their first homes. The Deputy will know from the independent report that it is the authors' view that the scheme has not had an upward pressure effect on house prices. That is not my view, it is the view of the independent analysis. All the more reason, I believe, to extend that, and it has been extended for two years. We are providing people with grants to do up old and derelict properties and turn them into homes. I really hope that turns out to be a big success. That also applies to sites in small rural towns and villages. We have the first home scheme. This is an affordable home scheme in respect of which we are getting really good feedback and strong interest. That scheme is helping to bridge the gap. If somebody can get a mortgage for €250,000 but the house they want or need to buy is €320,000, we can bridge the gap through shared equity. We are seeing a lot of interest in that programme. If it turns out to be oversubscribed, as it may well be, we should expand it if we can.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I asked three specific questions. They were not addressed at all in the Tánaiste's answer. I ask that he address them in his final response. There is no shortage of independent analysis which shows that Government policies in respect of housing are continuing to push up and fuel house price and rent inflation through myriad schemes that provide subsidies for developers. Every week I meet young people who, years after finishing school or college, are still living with their parents. These individuals want to be able to move out, become independent and get on with their lives. More and more people with skills that we desperately need in the country are emigrating in search of somewhere affordable to live. It is grossly unfair that the Government would seek to put the burden of paying for construction defects on people who are struggling to buy homes. The Government promised to go after those who are actually responsible for these costs. Why is this not being done? Why are the quarries that continue to produce defective materials still being allowed to operate? Defective materials are going into homes now. This will result in millions of euro of damage in years to come. Will the Government abandon its plans to introduce this very unfair levy?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I have heard suggestions or allegations that there are still quarries producing defective materials. If that is the case, it needs to be dealt with, but the relevant authorities will need evidence of that. I am not sure if that is being provided to the relevant authorities. As the Deputy knows, any criminal prosecutions are not a matter for Government. We are a democracy. We abide by the rule of law. That would be a matter for the Garda, not for the Government.

The truth is, and I know the Deputy knows this, that it is going to cost hundreds of millions if not billions of euro to repair the homes affected by mica. We need to do that for the 7,000 or 8,000 families affected. We are also going to need to do something to help people who live in apartments that are defective. There is no quarry or two quarries that are going to come up with that kind of money. We need to find a way to recoup some of the cost. It is not fair that the taxpayer should cover all of the cost. We believe that the cost should fall, at least in part, on the industry. I have heard people suggest other methods of doing that and we are open to suggestions if the Deputy has other methods. I have heard the suggestion of putting an additional levy on the profits of the construction industry. That would be passed on, too. They would increase their prices and increase their profits to compensate themselves for the levy. No matter what we do, when we decide to socialise the cost of something, the cost has to be borne in the round by society.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** A moratorium on electricity and gas disconnections is in place for this winter. For most customers, the moratorium will be in place from the beginning of December to the end of February. For vulnerable customers, the moratorium will apply from October to March. While this moratorium is very welcome, does it apply to all electricity and gas customers? Approximately 10% of electricity users now use the pay-as-you-go system. That would approximate to approximately 200,000 homes. For low-income households, the percentage will be higher; I suspect much higher. One constituent I spoke to last night estimated that every second house in her estate uses the pay-as-you-go system. For the purposes of this contribution, I am going to call this constituent Noreen. It is not her real name. Noreen lives on the north side of Cork city with her husband and three kids. She is spending €100 a week on electricity, gas and heating her home. She spends €20 a week on blocks and briquettes for the stove. She uses pay-as-you-go for her electricity, which costs €50 per week to top up. She uses pay-as-you-go for her gas, which costs €30 a week to top up. Noreen goes to Centra once a week to buy those top-ups. When she is down to the last €2 on her credit, a beep goes off in the house. When she is down to zero, the beep goes off again. She is then allowed €10 emergency credit. If this runs out before she tops up, she is disconnected. What will happen this winter if Noreen's emergency credit runs out and she cannot afford to top up? Will the emergency credit be extended and, if so, will it be extended without limits? Will she and others in the same situation be cut off? I would appreciate a reply to that. There are many people asking this question who would like to hear the official position on it.

**The Tánaiste:** As the Deputy mentioned in his contribution, the moratorium on disconnection applies to the end of February for the vast majority of customers and to the end of March for the most vulnerable. Ideally, it should apply to everyone. Thinking through the Deputy's question, it is difficult to know how one would apply that in the case of pay-as-you-go customers just because of the nature of how pay-as-you-go works. The Government can help, however, and it wants to help the kind of people the Deputy mentioned.

How can we help? As the Deputy knows, there will be a fuel allowance cash payment that people in receipt of the fuel allowance will receive in the next couple of weeks. In addition, we are extending eligibility for the fuel allowance to many more people. That will kick in from the new year, subsequent to the social welfare Bill being passed by this House. A double social welfare payment will be paid in the next few weeks. For people not in receipt of social welfare, there will be a double child benefit payment and a double working family payment. That will help people with their essential bills a lot. An energy credit of €200 will be paid before Christmas and a further two credits, each for €200, will be paid after Christmas. These credits will

run through to March. Then there are the emergency needs payments that are available from the community welfare service.

That is the kind of help the Government is offering in the round. I hope that answers the Deputy's question in terms of what we can do to help people who are pay-as-you-go customers. I have outlined many different actions. The Deputy asked whether we can do it without limits. I do not think so. I do think we can say to anyone that we can cover the cost of their electricity or gas without limits. No matter who it is, I do not think that would be reasonable or right.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** I am gobsmacked by the Tánaiste's reply. He said that ideally, it should apply to everybody. However, that implies, and he clearly indicated, that it does not apply to everybody. Who are the people it does not apply to? They are the people who have been disconnected in the past and put onto the meters and are, in many cases, the lower-income people in society. Many of them are vulnerable individuals. The Tánaiste stated that there is the fuel allowance, the community welfare officer and energy credits. That will be fine; it will get many of those people through the winter. However, it will not get all of them through the winter; in fact, there is a significant number of them who it will not get through the winter. The Tánaiste is saying that they face the prospect of their electricity supply being disconnected - not just for themselves and their partners, but for their kids. That is a scandal.

The Tánaiste asked what can be done. During Covid, the emergency credit on gas was extended well beyond the usual amount. That is something that could be done. There could be a commitment given that there will be no disconnections this winter and that this will apply, not for some but for all. That is what I am asking for.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy makes a fair point. It is something that I can undertake to examine in conjunction with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys. We need to find a mechanism to protect pay-as-you-go customers. It is gas bills in particular that will present a difficulty over the next few months. We may see electricity prices falling or at least stabilising. The changes in the European rules around how electricity is calculated will help, as will the energy credit. However, gas bills could be particularly high over the next couple of months.

As we both mentioned, the Government is helping in many ways. It is doing so through the fuel allowance, other social welfare payments, the energy credit and the exceptional needs payments. As the Deputy acknowledged, that will be enough for the vast majority of pay-as-you-go customers throughout the winter. However, if there are particular hardship cases, we need to find a mechanism to help the people involved. I will undertake to speak to the Ministers for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Social Protection about precisely that matter.

**Deputy Mick Barry:** We will return to this.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** For the seventh time in the past year and a half, I am raising the issue of the serious, chronic and worsening situation at Sligo University Hospital, SUH, regarding the numbers on trolleys and waiting for beds. There is no shortage of statistics thanks to Trolley Watch. While numbers fluctuate day on day, if we look at the trends, we will see what is happening. If we look at this year, from January to August, we see that compared with all other hospitals, SUH started off in January as the fifth worst. As the year progressed, it went from fourth to third. When we get to August, because that is the last full month, we see that it was in the fourth-worst position. The figures in September show a distinct disimprovement.

The headline figures for the month of August, which show Sligo with 720 people waiting, do not tell the full story. One needs to look at the capacity of any hospital, such as the number of beds and staff, because that, to a large extent, determines how it can manage those waiting on beds. If we look at August of this year and compare bed capacity in Sligo and Limerick, for example, which is meant to be perhaps one of the worst hospitals from the perspective of those on trolleys and waiting for beds, we see that Sligo is the worst of all the hospitals in the country. That is measure of the real challenge that is facing SUH, not the headline figures that are screaming at us at this stage.

I am sure the Tánaiste is well familiar with this issue, not just from my interventions, but from his party's councillors and Government Deputies, some of whom described the situation recently as truly shocking. They are right; the situation is truly shocking and completely unacceptable. The situation, while it is worsening, has not crept up on us by stealth; rather, it has worsened year on year. If the Tánaiste looks at the figures back from 2006, he will see that those figures are getting worse year on year. All hospitals have experienced increases, but Sligo is the worst.

That is why I am asking the Tánaiste for an immediate, short-term response for the coming winter-spring period. I know there are longer-term plans for a 42-bed unit, and we are waiting on that. However, we need immediate action. The hospital is under severe pressure. Staff are under huge stress and suffering burnout. Covid tested all of us, but it tested healthcare staff more than others. As we face into uncertain winter and spring in the context of Covid and flu, what short-term messages can the Government put in place?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Harkin for raising this important question and raising SUH again in the Dáil. She has raised this matter many times in the House and has spoken to me offline about it as well.

According to the HSE this morning, there are seven patients on trolleys in the emergency department in Sligo, but it has been much higher on other and, indeed, in recent days. I acknowledge the Deputy's point that ten people on trolleys in a small department, such as Naas or Portlincorney, for example, is worse than ten in a very large department, such as, for example, St. James's or St. Vincent's. The Deputy makes a valid point and I acknowledge it.

With regard to short-term actions, the HSE is currently preparing its comprehensive winter plan. That will include bespoke local plans for Sligo University Hospital and the community healthcare area of which it is part. It is being finalised and will be brought to the Government very shortly. In the meantime, funding has been provided for actions to take place this year. These include GP and out-of-hours support, the extension of the local injury unit operating hours, transition-care funding and short-stay respite services. Across the country, the HSE has been instructed to recruit an additional 51 emergency medicine consultants, including on a locum basis, if necessary.

Attendances in Sligo have been very high relative to the predicted range for September. The HSE is acting to alleviate congestion by prioritising diagnostics to get people discharged more quickly and also by using day services. Elective services have been pared back to six beds over recent months, unfortunately, but that was necessary.

In the past two years, additional capacity, including 41 public intermediate care beds, has been provided to Sligo. There has been an extension of the emergency department, which

has provided a new reception area, a Covid assessment area, separate adult and child waiting rooms, a new nurse triage area and an ambulance arrival area, which opened back in January.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I thank the Tánaiste. On 28 September, the INMO branded Sligo University Hospital a safety hazard. That is not politics and it is not me saying it. The INMO does not do this lightly. That is where we are at the moment. The INMO has called for an urgent inspection by HIQA because of the increased overcrowding and safety issues for patients and staff. I hear what the Tánaiste says about diagnostics. That will work in two or three years; it will feed into the system. I also hear what the Tánaiste says about the 51 emergency consultants. How many of them will be coming to Sligo? I understand that there are four ICU beds in Sligo not opened because the HSE is not sanctioning the required staff. Did budget 2023 ensure the deployment of the 30 additional staff needed for Sligo University Hospital? This is what we want to hear. I do not expect the Tánaiste to wave a magic wand today such that the waiting list will disappear tomorrow but I want to see some kind of immediate action so the people attending the hospital and its staff will know some support will be in place for this winter and next spring.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. As I mentioned in my earlier reply, a winter plan is being developed. There will be a bespoke winter plan for Sligo, taking into account not only the hospital but also the community services in the wider area. Diagnostics can help quite soon. I know from bitter experience, both as a doctor and Minister for Health, that patients very often must wait a long time in hospitals, particularly over weekends, to get the scans or tests they need. Then they must wait for a senior decision-maker to decide whether they need to stay or can go home. Just having more diagnostics, particularly in the evenings and at weekends, and having senior decision-makers on site, can speed up services. Just reducing the average length of stay by half a day can be as good as providing dozens or hundreds of additional beds across the health service. You need to do all of these things to reduce the average length of stay, and also provide additional bed and staff capacity.

As the Deputy mentioned, there are plans for a new four-storey block for the hospital. That will include 42 new beds, as well as additional staffing for critical care. That is needed as soon as possible. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is working very hard on this and I know Deputy Harkin is too. We need to get it under way as soon as possible but also to make the short-term changes.

### **Ceisteanna ar Pholasaí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Bank of Ireland has been fined over €100 million for overcharging more than 15,000 customers and 81 breaches of regulations. To date, it has been forced to pay back €186 million it took from affected customers. Bank of Ireland inflicted serious harm on customers and ruined many of their lives. Even during the tracker mortgage examination, it continued that harm, leading to the loss of seven family homes during the period. The cruel irony is that the bank is likely to pass on the fines to its customers. The problem is that not one banker has been held to account in any of the banks for the tracker mortgage scandal, which has ruined so many lives. In January 2017, I passed a motion in this House calling for individual accountability for bankers. The Central Bank called for legislation the following year. It has taken the Government five years even to publish the legislation. Given what has transpired in Bank of Ireland, AIB and other financial institutions, and the fines that have been levied against



them, will the Tánaiste agree with me that now is not the time to remove the bankers' pay cap or allow for bankers' bonuses? Will he rule both of them out during his time in government?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. When I think about this issue, I do not just think about the financial scandal; I also think about the human impact of it, the 16,000 families affected and particularly the 25 families who have lost their homes. What we see today is a €100 million fine, the largest ever imposed on any bank, in addition to €180 million paid in compensation by the bank. To me, that sends a clear message: rip off your customers and you will pay. It is now very clear to the banks that they will pay big fines if this kind of thing happens again.

On the legislation, the Central Bank (Individual Accountability Framework) Bill has been published. We hope to get that through the Houses as soon as possible.

The rules on bonuses and salary caps apply to the banks that were bailed out, not to the other banks. The position on that has not changed.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Tuesday's treadmill budget did not do anything like enough for those who are renting and have no security or affordability with regard to their homes. In my constituency, renters pay an average of €2,000 per month, which amounts to €24,000 per year. For them, the €500 tax credit proposed by the Government, while welcome, is merely a drop in the ocean. Will the Tánaiste agree to bring forward more meaningful and effective measures to help renters, such as a ban on evictions just for this winter alone and a three-year rent freeze? Will he agree to expedite the Labour Party's renters' rights Bill, which would give real and meaningful protection to renters currently facing such insecurity and unaffordability?

On the concrete blocks levy, I am aware that the Tánaiste said he wants to recoup costs from the construction sector. We agree with that. However, let us not do it in such a way that it will pass on costs to those seeking to buy homes.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** One item per question.

**The Tánaiste:** The figures the Deputy gave relate to new tenancies. We will know from the census figures in the next few weeks or months the real average rent paid in all of our constituencies. I look forward to seeing those figures.

The rent credit the Government has agreed in the budget might be misunderstood. It is €500 per renter, not per tenancy. That means €1,000 per couple. If three people are renting an apartment or house in the Deputy's constituency, it will amount to €1,500. The credit is not just for this year; it can be claimed retrospectively for last year also. Therefore, it is €1,000 for a single renter, €2,000 for a renting couple and maybe €3,000 or €4,000 if several people are renting a property. I do believe that will make a meaningful difference. It is not just a week's rent; in many cases, it will be a lot more than that.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Poverty is corrosive to the human condition. At its very essence, it is about the basic provisions a person is asked to go without. Some 62,000 children in this country are living in consistent poverty. They go to bed hungry and there is no capacity to buy extra clothes, such as a warm coat for the winter, and there is absolutely no opportunity for them and their families to have a day out, go to the zoo or go to the cinema. I was struck by that fact today when the members of the National One Parent Family Alliance highlighted that for one-parent families the budget was the most regressive since 2012. It states nothing in it is targeted at one-parent families. It called it a short-sighted budget that will leave the poorest children in

the State even poorer. That is a sad indictment. The €12 increase in core social welfare payments and a payment of an additional €2 for children will do nothing to mitigate poverty. I have a simple question: why was there nothing targeted at one-parent families in the budget? Other vulnerable groups were targeted. Why not one-parent families?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. This was a progressive budget. That is not just my opinion; the independent analysis by the Department of Finance shows that.

The kinds of measures in the budget that I think will be beneficial for one-parent families are the double payment of social welfare, the increase in the working-family payment, the double payment of child benefit, the increase in the dependant child allowance, the free schoolbooks and the reduction in the cost of childcare. All of these will benefit a lot of one-parent families.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The following groups will get no Christmas bonus, no fuel allowance, no €400 payment and no double payment to help them through the cost-of-living crisis and energy price hikes that people are facing this winter: people on jobseeker's benefit, illness benefit, enhanced illness benefit, occupational injuries benefit, maternity benefit and disablement benefit. How is it fair or just that people on those social welfare payments, who are on reduced incomes, will not get the double payment, fuel allowance or the Christmas bonus? Do they not need help in the face of the winter ahead that is going to crucify them?

**The Tánaiste:** The Minister, Deputy Humphreys, will be able to give precise information on this today if she has not released it already. The rules for the Christmas bonus are very clear. A person must be on a long-term social welfare payment for a period of time before qualifying for the Christmas bonus. That is not going to be the case for the one-off double-payment that people will receive in October. The rules for that will be similar to those that applied to the pandemic unemployment payment. Very many people, and I do not have exact details, including some of those mentioned by Deputy Boyd Barrett who have only been on a payment for a shorter period-----

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** That is not what they are being told by the Department of Social Protection at the moment.

**The Tánaiste:** We will clarify that but the rules are not the same as those for the Christmas bonus. There is a different set of rules that are not as strict.

**Deputy Cathal Berry:** Ireland is the only country in the EU without a national security strategy. Development of such a strategy was commenced a number of years ago but there has been radio silence ever since. In light of events in Ukraine and in certain embassies in Dublin and in particular over the past 72 hours in the Baltic Sea will the Tánaiste update the House as to where we are on the development on this strategy? Is it completed? When will it be published?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Berry for raising this issue and security issues in general. He has been a very strong advocate for funding for security and the Defence Forces in particular. I recognise the contribution he makes in that regard and the fact that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, has secured an additional €100 million for the Defence Forces next year. That includes pay, as it should, but it is the biggest increase in defence spending in any budget. I hope it will be seen as a positive. In regard to our national security, the national security analysis centre in the Department of the Taoiseach is drawing up a national security strategy. Work on that is ongoing. It was delayed as the people involved in it had to be diverted to work related to the pandemic. However, planning, consultation and analysis on a draft strategy has continued. I

do not have a date for publication but it has been reprioritised in recent weeks given that those staff have been able to spend more time on that than while diverted due to the pandemic, which was the case for some time.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** There is absolutely near chaos in the education system due to the situation regarding school buses and tickets. What the Government thought was a great idea has really messed up the whole situation for many people including those with special needs. It is so frustrating that people who have tickets are not using them. The bus companies do not know how many passengers they will have. The Government promised this last November but has not done anything. Early in summer the Government promised to raise the age limit so that people over 70 could continue to drive provided they had the medical certificate. Bus companies are scrambling to get drivers. Some of the drivers are coming up to 70 and the situation is going to get worse. This has to be sorted out. The issue of drivers over 70 needs to be resolved as well as the ticket situation. Bus Éireann had no warning. The situation is bad every year but this year it is a complete mess and is causing trauma for families and most of all children and students and indeed the bus companies and drivers. It is not fair to anyone. It is not being resolved.

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I thank Deputy McGrath for raising an important question. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is working extremely hard on this issue. The Deputy mentioned children with additional needs. They are being prioritised in terms of ensuring they have places on school buses. People who have applied in regard to concessionary tickets and also first applications are being looked at as a priority. The Department is working closely with Bus Éireann on this matter.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What about drivers over 70?

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** In regard to the electricity credit scheme which will be a big help to many families, we have a situation in Sligo and I expect elsewhere in that a significant number of Traveller families will not receive the full amount payable of €200 per household, if they happen to share their MPRN connection with other families, as many of them do. If they share with three other families each household only gets €50. Sligo County Council responded to say it is not providing funding for families living in halting sites where there is only one MPRN. It simply does not have the money, that is what it said clearly. I am sure the Tánaiste does not want to see a situation where any family, Travellers or otherwise, do not access this money. I ask him to speak to the relevant Minister, whoever it is, to sort this out because it is discriminatory.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Harkin. I am not aware of the details around that issue but I appreciate her raising it in the Chamber. I will figure out who the right Minister is and have him or her come back to the Deputy directly.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Government has acted decisively by announcing a package of measures worth €4.4 billion from which people will benefit in the coming weeks, if not immediately. Budget 2023 helps hard-pressed individuals and families at a time when they are feeling the strain of rising costs. The introduction of the temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS, a €1.25 billion programme of financial aid for businesses hit with soaring energy costs is without doubt a hugely significant intervention. How quickly will we get the first payment issued to businesses currently struggling? Speed is of the essence for this programme. Will the Department conduct a national communication plan for all businesses impacted? Will the

Tánaiste confirm the eligibility criteria for entry into the scheme?

**The Tánaiste:** My apologies, I missed the start of that. Is the Deputy referring to TBESS?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Yes.

**The Tánaiste:** We have to legislate for it first and get State aid approval. It will be back-dated to September. We anticipate we can legislate, get State aid approval and have the scheme up and running by the end of the November. That is when people will get the payments and we will back-date them to September. It is open to any business that has seen an increase of 50% or more in the unit cost of energy or gas. It is not the total bill, it is the unit cost of energy or gas comparing the billing period this year with that of last year. Almost all businesses will qualify. A very small number are on a very low long-term tariff but that is not the norm. Almost all businesses will qualify and will be able to claim up to 40% of the increase up to a maximum of €10,000 per month per business.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** The family of an eight-year-old girl, Brianna, was left devastated when her surgery for scoliosis was cancelled for the second time. This transcends politics. We need to fix this problem. This is about decency and right and wrong. That young girl left the hospital not with her surgery completed but in a wheelchair. She was in tears. We were left with images of young girl crying her eyes out because this Government has not provided the capacity. This goes back to when Deputy Harris was Minister for Health, and indeed previous Ministers for Health made commitments. We do not have the protective capacity. She left because there was no hospital bed. That is a capacity issue. It is a disgrace and a stain on all of us that this happened. We really need to sort it out.

**The Tánaiste:** I appreciate the sincerity of Deputy Cullinane in raising an individual case here but without having any of the information it is not possible for me to comment on it directly. I can guarantee that the Minister and the HSE are doing all they can to improve services when it comes to scoliosis and paediatric spinal surgery in general. There have been real improvements in waiting times. There are also setbacks from time to time but it is a very high priority for Government and for the Minister, I can guarantee that.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** It was great to have the budget on Tuesday. Many people contacted me to say it was very good and they were happy with much of it. One of the areas I welcome was the €110 million promised to a range of health funded bodies including nursing homes, hospices and section 39 organisations. My understanding is that it is a once-off payment. How much would be ring-fenced for section 39 organisations that deliver great services across the disability services, older person services and mental health services? When I meet with the team in Holy Angels Carlow or BEAM Services in Bagenalstown, Delta in Carlow and the Cairdeas Centre in Tullow the main issue that comes up is the building and funding for staff. What also comes up are the terms and conditions affecting section 39 agencies which are quite different from HSE section 38 agencies. What is the update on that? I am aware the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, is committed to working on this.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I thank the Deputy for raising the question. The first part of the Deputy's question was on the winter fund and the Deputy quite rightly said there is €110 million within that. Of that, the disability sector is receiving the lion's share of €65 million, which is a once-off payment which will be dispensed before the end of the year. Nursing homes will be receiving €35 million and hospices will also

be receiving funding. The Department of Health is working out the arrangements as we speak.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** Page 51 of the programme for Government acknowledges that the impact of Covid-19 has been particularly difficult for older people. When will the Government commence a full public inquiry into the deaths of residents and the quality of care in nursing homes during the pandemic and the systemic failures in the sector?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I am afraid I do not have detailed information on that issue. I know this is an issue that has been raised several times in the House and my colleague, Deputy O'Dowd, is very vocal on it. I might come back to the Deputy with more information when I have it, because I am not sure what the status of those inquiries are at the moment.

**Deputy Brendan Griffin:** I raise with the Tánaiste the issue of the format of letters currently going out to people on rates valuation. First, the format is very misleading. The multiplier is not included on the front page and the valuation is. For example, a man contacted me this morning who thought initially that he had a €1,200 rate to pay. When the 0.227 multiplier for Kerry is applied, however, it was down to approximately €272.

Similarly, yesterday, a very hard-working woman contacted me and thought that she would have to pay up to €30,000. It was, in fact, a figure of approximately €6,500.

Two thirds of people in Kerry are seeing a reduction in their rates, which I welcome. That means, however, that one third are seeing an increase. First, I ask that the format of the letters is changed and, second, that for anyone whose rates are being increased that increase would be deferred, at least, until we are out of the current crisis.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I know revaluation causes a great deal of stress for business people. I have been through it in my constituency, as others have. It works out cost-neutral in the round. Some businesses see increased rates and others see decreases in them but it works out even in the round. I believe if we were to defer the increases for those whose rates are being increased, we would then see a loss of income for the local authorities and that would have consequences and that would be the difficulty there.

The point the Deputy makes on the format of the letters is very valid. If he passes on a few examples, I will ensure the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, sees them and perhaps he can make some changes there.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I ask the Tánaiste to condemn the blatantly racist anti-Traveller comments by Fianna Fáil Councillor Michael Crowe. The Galway councillor was on Galway Bay FM on Monday where he was opposing a house in Renmore being allocated to a Traveller family because of what he described as their vastly different cultures. He even went on to effectively justify the burning down of a different council house because it was going to be allocated to a Traveller family. It was absolutely blatant and disgusting anti-Traveller racism and it should be condemned by the Tánaiste, and also by the Taoiseach, given that Councillor Crowe is a Fianna Fáil councillor.

I also ask the Tánaiste if he recognises that this is just a very ugly side of an anti-Traveller racism which appears to be quite prevalent across the establishment parties at local authority level where, for example, every single year the one type of funding that is not drawn down by many councils is funding for Traveller accommodation.



**The Tánaiste:** I can absolutely assure the Deputy that this Government and I personally oppose racism in all its forms. I say that not just as somebody who is biracial but also as somebody who served on a local authority and never once voted against Traveller accommodation or social housing. I dislike the Deputy's attempt to try to tar us all with the one brush there, which is unfair.

On those particular comments, I have not heard them and it would not be right for me to comment on comments I have not heard. I will listen to them and will, perhaps, come back to the Deputy at a later date.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Over the past number of months, like many other Deputies in the Chamber, we have met different sectors in respect of the budget. One of these which stood out clearly to me to be struggling was the hotel sector. In west Cork, I met the owners of the Emmet Hotel, the Fernhill House and Gardens Hotel in Clonakilty, and the Celtic Ross Hotel in Rosscarbery. These are brilliant, grand, family hotels in west Cork, which all represent tourism in the hotel sector there.

One part of the discussions we had was on the great struggle for them to keep their doors open due to added costs, energy, staff, wages, etc. These hotels did no business during the Covid-19 epidemic. They are not like the few rogue-trading hotels in our capital which have bled people dry in recent times. The hotel owners in west Cork are telling me that family members will have to work in these hotels for free if they are to keep their doors open. The Minister for Finance in this week's budget said that the 9% VAT rate will end in February, when it will increase then to 13.5%. This will have a very severe negative effect on tourism in west Cork and throughout the country, an industry, I may add, which creates thousands of jobs.

In the interests of protecting much-needed tourism jobs, will the Tánaiste fight to keep the VAT rate at 9% for the next 12 months at least?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for his question. When I meet with hoteliers, and I do very regularly, the two issues they raise with me most are, first, the struggle they have to recruit and retain staff. We are helping that through the work permit system, providing training and other options, and by making work pay better. Some of the things the Deputy will have seen in the budget will help in that regard.

The second issue raised is energy bills. The Deputy will know how we are going to help with that through the temporary business energy support scheme, TBESS.

On VAT, the decision in the budget is that we are extending that concessionary 9% rate until the end of February.

**Deputy Emer Higgins:** I raise a concern around the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Bill. This concern has been escalated to me by medics who have studied the draft Bill.

First, I take the opportunity to say that I am so pleased with this week's announcement that we will be providing public funding for publicly available IVF for the first time ever.

As I said, it has come to my attention that the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Bill may be medically and scientifically out of date and could have unintended consequences. The reason is that provides for treatment for those with a specific need. Today, people without specific needs can and indeed do avail of fertility treatments. Who do I mean by that? I mean

same-sex couples, who avail of surrogacy, and women, particularly single women, who choose to preserve their fertility by freezing their eggs. It is essential that all fertility treatments currently available remain legally permissible, and both publicly and privately accessible, once the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Bill becomes law. Can the Tánaiste provide that reassurance today?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. First, I understand a sum of €10 million has been allocated in the budget to provide IVF services. The provision of State funding for IVF services is long overdue in my view. There is some help already through the tax system but it is not enough. I am glad that money has been provided. A big job of work is to be done in establishing the criteria as to who qualifies, how many cycles, and so on. That is a big body of work and I hope the Department of Health does not waste any time in getting that done.

The legislation is still going through the Houses at the moment. I saw some press reports about the issue of women who freeze their eggs for many good reasons. We will have to examine the legislation to ensure we do not inadvertently cause something to be unlawful when it is not the intention that it would be made unlawful.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** Thurles is one of the towns that has been chosen for the settlement of Ukrainians in modular units. I raise the issue of the services needed in the town so that we can properly accommodate our new occupants. GP services in the town at the moment are under extreme pressure. We have no primary school in the town with DEIS status and only one such post-primary school. I have raised these issues with the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, and he said it is the responsibility of other Departments to provide these services.

When the Ukrainians come to the town, and they will be most welcome in Thurles, we need the proper back-up services in place before they arrive, so the GP services are able to cater for them and our education system is able to provide the proper education for them, without putting anyone else at a disadvantage. It is essential that those resources are put in place for education and GP services to cater for the extra inhabitants.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy. I appreciate the Deputy’s sincerity in this matter. We should not forget that we are experiencing war in Europe. For the first time in nearly a century, we see the horrors of a war of this scale on our Continent. Some 5 million people have had to leave Ukraine, and roughly 1% of those have had to come to Ireland.

*1 o’clock*

That is 50,000 people, however, which is a lot of people. Our response is never going to be perfect. We can just do our best, provide the best accommodation we can and provide the best public services we can, and, crucially, provide access to education and to the labour market so Ukrainians who come here are able to work, as I know a lot have already. I know a lot of communities, particularly in the north inner-city of Dublin and also in some rural parts of Ireland, have accepted a lot of Ukrainians and have welcomed them. It is important that those communities who have welcomed people from Ukraine should be assisted and rewarded for doing so, and that is certainly the intention of Government. The response is going to be imperfect. This is the first time we have seen a refugee crisis like this affect Ireland and it is never going to be perfect, unfortunately.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage published a review of income eligibility for social housing support this week, which is a choice

time, given that the budget would of course dominate the news cycle. The result of this report is that thresholds for social housing will rise in only five of the 31 local authority areas. This should be extended to all local authorities. I know of many constituents in County Wexford who work full-time but are sleeping on couches, going to work from bed and breakfasts or living with their elderly parents, and I even know of one person who is sleeping in a shed, all because they are barely over the income threshold for support for their housing need. When is the Government going to realise the scale of this awful social problem and act to raise the income thresholds in County Wexford and in other local authority areas? People who are barely over the threshold are trapped in a financial twilight zone and need help now.

**The Tánaiste:** I think the Deputy is referring to a decision to reband some local authorities and to move some council areas into a different band, but there is a wider piece of work being done by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, at the moment and he hopes to have that work concluded by the end of the year. That relates to increasing the housing limits and income thresholds across the board. We, as a Government, agree that they need to be increased because incomes have risen and because house prices have risen. The Deputy will see in the budget that, for example, we increased the income limits for the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant so more people can qualify. The same principle applies in housing in that, because incomes have risen and because house prices have risen, we need to adjust upwards those income limits. However, I cannot tell the Deputy exactly by how much because I do not know. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will be in a position to make a recommendation on that, ideally by the end of the year.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** It was quoted in today's *Irish Independent* that at his parliamentary party meeting last night, the Tánaiste said that legislation would be required for the new 10% levy on building blocks and concrete and that further consideration would be afforded to this proposal at a later stage. Unlike some, I believe some type of levy may be required to address mica redress and apartment defects, but I believe now is not the time. Will the Tánaiste clarify what is meant by a further consideration and if this may include a temporary deferral?

**The Tánaiste:** To be clear, there are no plans for a deferral. It is the intention of the Government that this levy will apply from April of next year. It does require legislation and it will be in the Finance Bill. The legislative process is the opportunity for us in the House to properly debate it and make sure we get it right, which is very important. The devil is often in the detail when it comes to a new tax. Certainly, if people have realistic alternatives that they want to put forward, we will listen to what they have to say. I think it is right that the construction industry bears the cost, not the general taxpayer, but any levy that we impose on the construction industry will in some way be passed on, and we need to be realistic about that. I heard Deputy Doherty say earlier that the fines the banks are going to pay might in some way be passed on to customers. If we put a levy on construction industry profits, which is a potential alternative, does the same thing not apply? No matter what we do, there is going to be some element of it being passed on to customers. We just need to be honest with ourselves about that.

**Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne:** Last week, a revolutionary report commissioned by the Clare Public Participation Network towards an anti-poverty strategy for Clare was commended by this House and by the Minister, standing where the Tánaiste is now. Among many other findings was one that as of July 2022, there were 52 GPs in Clare who were part of the General Medical Services scheme. As this works out at roughly four GPs per 10,000 of population, Clare is 25 GPs below the national average. The programme for Government committed to strengthening general practice and emphasised sustaining rural practice. In this respect, why

did the Government not increase the allowance and modify the allowance of the rural practice support framework in its budget? What will it do instead to encourage rural general practice? While I welcome the strides made this week on GP visit cards, they are meaningless if they cannot be used in many parts of rural Ireland.

**The Tánaiste:** There is a disparity and an inequality when it comes to where GPs are concentrated. More of them are in urban areas than in rural areas and more of them are in better-off areas than in less well-off areas. That has been the case, unfortunately, for a very long time.

We have increased the rural practice grant and we have also provided dedicated funding for GPs who operate in disadvantaged urban communities, and that was only done in the last couple of years under the previous Government. I agree that we need to see what we can do to encourage more GPs to operate in rural areas. In the modern world, many do not want to operate single-handedly, and I understand that. GPs now want to work in teams and groups; that is the way the world has moved and we need to acknowledge that. We also need to make sure that out-of-hours services are adequately resourced in order that people are not on call too frequently, which inevitably wears them out over the years.

Given the Government's announcement in regard to a further extension of GP care without fees, there is an opportunity now to have an engagement with the Irish Medical Organisation and to look at some of these things in the round as to how we can make general practice more economically viable and more sustainable, and provide better services to people. I would point out that the number of GPs being trained has increased dramatically over the years. It was 120 not that long ago and under the Minister, Deputy Harris, it increased to maybe 250. The plans are now to go up to 350, which is the level we need to be at.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.06 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.46 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.06 p.m. and resumed at 1.46 p.m.*

## **Financial Resolutions 2022**

### **Financial Resolution No. 6: General (Resumed)**

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment).

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle fá choinne na deise labhairt leis an Teach. Guím fáilte roimh an bheirt Airí Stáit go dtí an díospóireacht fosta. Ba mhaith liom cúpla pointe a ardú faoi cháinainéis 2023. Tá cúpla ceist agam maidir le hiompar, busanna san áireamh. Eisíodh €100,000 fá choinne na ndúshlán leis an iompar, go háirithe sna ceantair iargúlta. Tá cead de dhíth ag na tuismitheoirí agus ag na páistí le suíochán a fháil, suíocháin a bhí acu anuraidh. Níl sin ceart agus tá sin práinneach. Tá mé ag labhairt maidir leis an €100,000 atá i gceist agus guím fáilte roimhe fosta. Táim ag iarraidh soiléiriú agus sonraí

faoi bhriseadh síos a fháil. Tá an t-airgead seo ann fá choinne fadhbanna leis na busanna agus chomh maith leis sin, leis an deontas capitation. Táim ag iarraidh soiléiriú agus sonraí faoi sin a fháil. Cé go bhfuil an t-airgead ag éirí fá choinne 2023, tá imní ar na scoileanna faoi 2024 agus tá mé ag iarraidh na fadhbanna agus na ceisteanna faoi sin a shoiléiriú fosta.

Chomh maith leis sin, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi mo cheantar agus mo réigiún féin. Tá mé ag labhairt faoin A5 ach go háirithe. Tchím tiomantas faoin A5, an bealach is tábhachtaí san iarthuaisceart. Tá sin ar na cláir ar feadh i bhfad anois. I mo chontae féin fosta, tá mé ag lorg sonraí nó soiléiriú faoin trans-European network for transport, TEN-T, an bealach Bonagee, an bealach ó Leifear go dtí Leitir Ceanainn agus an bealach ó Shrath an Urláir agus Bealach Féich. Tá na tograí sin ar an chlár caipitil do 2040 agus tá na bóithre sin i gContae Dhún na nGall ar an chlár thar na blianta. Tá siad práinneach, go háirithe ós rud é go bhfuil siad ar an phlean náisiúnta. Táim ag lorg deimhniú ó Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, faoin chás sin fosta. Sin mo chúpla pointe as Gaeilge. I have a few questions on the education side of things. This area was close to the Minister of State's own heart in his previous role, so I know he will still have good channels of communication with his colleague, the senior Minister, Deputy Foley, in the Department of Education. I ask him to raise these questions with her. The Minister mentioned that the mental health pilot would be rolled out following engagement and consultation with stakeholders. Can the timeline for this engagement process be outlined, as well as the thinking regarding when this pilot should be up and running? Teachers' representatives should also be included in those conversations, particularly those from the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, which campaigned for its representatives to be included at the beginning. Will the Minister of State also ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to outline a breakdown of the figures for the new mainstream teachers who are to be provided to special education classes? The Minister flagged an overall number of 686. Will she break this total down by special education teachers, SETs, special class teachers and special schoolteachers at primary level? Undoubtedly, the Minister of State is in no position to be taking note of all these questions in shorthand now. I know he probably does have a very good memory, but no doubt some officials in the Department will also be listening.

Turning to class sizes, in the press conference yesterday where it was announced there would be a reduction of one in class sizes, the Minister also said she would like to see another reduction next year. Will she restate that commitment? Regarding capitation, and I raised this already, schools have warmly welcomed the once-off 40% increase in direct funding for this year. They have also, however, genuine and serious concern that the capitation payment is not increasing from September 2023. Therefore, is there a contingency plan in the event that schools are in financial difficulties next autumn? There are many moving parts in this context in respect of costs, especially energy costs, and global challenges. It is difficult to start projecting as far away as September 2023, but I think there are ways of allaying these fears.

I see my time is coming to an end. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to speak. I will stick within my allotted time because I am very grateful for the cúpla bomaite chun labhairt inniu. Fáiltím roimh an airgead breise d'achan Roinn ach táim ag coinneál mo shúile ar na tograí caipitil i mo chontae agus réigiún féin. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus leis an Aire Stáit.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In case there is any confusion, that was the last block of speakers. We are moving on now to the new block. Two slots had not been filled in the last block and that was why Deputy McHugh was there. There are four speakers in this block. I call the Minister of State.



**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne):** Tá áthas agus bród orm labhairt sa Dáil inniu i bhfabhar agus ar son cháinainéis 2023. Tá sé cothrom agus cuireadh le chéile í ar son leasa an phobail. This budget enhances Ireland's reputation for looking after our most vulnerable, for promoting income equality and for encouraging enterprise and job creation. This is a budget that recognises the challenges of today and invests in our future. It is a continuation of the budgets of Fianna Fáil over many years, where it sought to create jobs and wealth and then to distribute tax revenues in the fairest possible way. This endeavour continues with this budget.

In recognising the unique challenges today-----

**Deputy Joe McHugh:** By way of clarification-----

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** Táim ag labhairt ar mo shon féin agus ar son an Rialtais agus mo pháirtí féin.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Tuigim pointe an Teachta ach tá an tAire Stáit i mbun cainte.

**Deputy Thomas Byrne:** The €4.1 billion cost-of-living package recognises the challenges that families, workers, businesses and young people face. As a Fianna Fáil Minister in a coalition Government, I am delighted to be supporting this budget. I am very proud that the principles of my party have been put forward in this budget by our Ministers, together with those from the other parties. I am very proud that Fianna Fáil is in government and that we are making real changes that are putting money into people's pockets.

Undoubtedly, people are facing hardships. Therefore, we have put together the largest social protection budget day package in the history of the State. As the old saying goes, we cannot change the direction of the wind, but we can adjust the sails. Ireland is a small, open economy and we cannot always control events, but we can decide how we respond. Thanks to our strong economy and full employment, we can respond aggressively to this crisis. In Ireland today, more than 2.5 million people are in employment. This is the most people who have ever been at work. All we hear, though, day in and day out from the Opposition are complaints and problems to be exploited, with no solutions offered and no recognition that this country is in one of its best places ever and that this situation has enabled us to undertake the redistribution we have in this budget.

I am very proud of the role that Fianna Fáil is playing in this Government by delivering the type of progressive and protective measures we have announced. Yesterday, the Taoiseach said here that there is a divide between those who want to solve problems on this side of the House and those among the extreme left that we have for an Opposition who wish to exploit problems. Many in the Opposition scramble for sound bites. Fianna Fáil is finding solutions to problems people are facing today. As we demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic, we will not shy away from taking decisive actions in the interests of the people, and of all the people.

In primary education, our history demonstrates the transformative effects education can have on our society. I look back to our Constitution in 1937, to Donogh O'Malley and his contribution to education, that of Patrick Hillery in expanding third-level education and even that of Eamon de Valera in bringing Trinity College Dublin, TCD, into the State system. We have much to be proud of in this country. All that history and the progress we have made is continually denigrated by those on the Opposition benches. I am certainly not going to continue to accept that.

The Government is now reducing class sizes and reducing costs for families and there has also been a huge increase in funding at every level in education. We now have a historically-low staffing ratio at primary level. We can see this already when we visit primary schools, with smaller classes than we saw several years ago. This will improve even further next year. Turning to special education, we are doing a great deal in this area. We always need to do more, because, quite frankly, it seems there are more children with diagnoses who need the attention of the State and extra supports in primary and secondary schools. Moving on to third level, I am also glad to see that a significant proportion of those who have got college places this year have got there via the higher education access route, HEAR, or disability access route to education, DARE, schemes. It is great to see that level of inclusivity at third level.

Yesterday, I attended the GradIreland careers fair at the RDS. What I was struck by most was the positive energy to be found among those students, mainly final year students and recent graduates. They are interested in the future. To me, they were inspiring. Notwithstanding the problems that are out there and that must be faced, the aspirations, excitement and interest those students have is never reflected on the Opposition benches. We never hear about creating opportunities in this country. We never hear about what investment we are going to have to undertake to ensure there are jobs for our graduates. We have record numbers of job openings now.

We also have record numbers of young people attending third-level education. I salute them and we will work in every way to support them. This is why the student contribution fee has been reduced this year. There will also be a permanent reduction next year as well for most students. Taking last year's budget, for example, we changed the adjacency rules which means that more people qualify for the non-adjacent grant rate. In Meath East, this decision has meant the grant situation has changed drastically for those students living in Donore, for example, and studying in Dundalk or those living in Dunshaughlin and studying in University College Dublin, UCD.

*2 o'clock*

This is about fairness.

On pensions, budget 2023 delivers for everybody in society. That is what Fianna Fáil has always been about. At the outset, the €12 a week increase is an additional €624 for recipients annually. A once-off double week will be paid to pensioners, at Halloween and at Christmas as well. There will be a lump sum of €400 for those in receipt of fuel allowance. Living alone allowance will involve a lump sum payment as well.

Significantly, the qualification threshold for fuel allowance is being increased from the new year. This will bring over 90,000 pensioners into the fuel allowance scheme. One of the main complaints I get from pensioners who may have a very small pension to put with their State pension is that they do not have fuel allowance. Tens of thousands of those pensioners will now be brought in.

On the EU, we have seen a real positive impact over many decades of EU funding. That continues through the PEACE PLUS programme, which the Government will be contributing to along with the UK and the EU. The Government has received, and it is still distributing, €1 billion of funding from the Brexit adjustment reserve and I am proud to have played my role in helping to negotiate that. That continues. Ireland will receive almost €1 billion in EU funding from the recovery and resilience facility but, more importantly, Irish companies will be able

to benefit from that facility all around Europe because we have one of the most export-driven economies.

I look forward to this budget being passed. I am glad of the important assistance in the form of energy supports that has been given to our citizens. We will continue along that path towards income equality that we have worked on for many decades. All of the statistics show that the position in this regard has only been improving in recent years, despite what the Opposition would tell you.

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I want to make reference, in the context of my portfolio, to the experience I had in the past month. I visited the Horn of Africa, in particular Kenya and South Sudan, and witnessed first-hand the absolute devastation that is happening there. People are at risk of famine of a scale we have not perhaps seen since the mid-1980s. People are currently dying. There were children suffering from malnutrition, the impact of which I saw first-hand. Mothers, fathers and community leaders talked to me directly. They asked if I would do two things. They asked if, when I returned to Ireland, I would talk about this matter and be their voice. They also asked if I would make sure that the Government continues to support them. Ireland is one of the key providers of support in this area through the work of Irish Aid and through the incredible work of the Irish NGOs that are helping on the ground, day in and day out, along with their UN support colleagues to deal with this situation.

I was incredibly proud that as part of this budget we are doing two key things in respect of the Horn of Africa. First, we are making €30 million of extra funding available immediately. That will make a difference. It will enable those NGOs to continue their work. We need to see other countries come play their part, but we will very much continue to play ours in terms of what we can do. Critically, we have increased our overseas development assistance budget. This will increase to €1.2 billion as part of the budget. That is a 17% increase. Last year was the first year that we crossed the €1 billion threshold. This year the amount involved will increase to €1.2 billion. This represents a steady and significant growth in what we are doing. As we all know from the various other aspects of this budget, there were many calls in respect of the resources we have available. However, in the context of some of the most vulnerable people in the world, we are reaching out and recognising what our role is internationally. That role involves being a country that has a proud aid programme that is admired and recognised for targeting those who are farthest behind and helping them the most. That is something we will continue to do as part of the aid programme, particularly in the Horn of Africa where we will be to the forefront in the next year as we have been in previous years.

We also recognise our commitment to Ukraine and to the impact the unjustified horrible war started by Putin has had on people's lives. We will continue - and we will make extra funding available - to support Ukraine and to respond to that crisis.

I would like to address the other aspect of my Ministry. I am the Minister of State with responsibility for the Irish diaspora. It has been an incredibly rewarding job because the diaspora is at the heart of what is good about Irish people no matter where they are in the world. We have a programme which supports the diaspora. That programme, the emigrant support programme, has supported more than 530 organisations with grants of over €200 million since it started in 2004. It is incredible to see - I have had the opportunity to do so first-hand - the work that Irish organisations do right across the UK, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Anywhere they are, Irish people are willing to come together and work in community-based organisations

to help others who left this country, whether it was in the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1950s or more recently. A tremendous aspect of the support and work is there for our culture, for our games and for all that we associate with Ireland as part of the work which we do. We have a €12.5 million programme that we will take into next year. That will enable those organisations to continue to meet the challenges they face on a daily basis in supporting those Irish communities. I look forward to working with them as part of that process.

Those are the two areas of my direct responsibility within the budget. It is an excellent budget that shows clearly the three parties in government working together to deliver. It is a budget which, at its heart, is all about fairness and support and helping our people in communities.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy McAuliffe is down for four minutes but there are more minutes left because the other speaker is not here. I do not know how the Deputy will divide it up.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I happy to take the time if the Deputy does not arrive.

This weekend, Fianna Fáil will hold its Ard-Fheis. There will be thousands of members from across the country who will be coming to the Ard-Fheis for the first time since we entered Government. Many of them can be proud of the budget that we have presented to this House. There are many shared goals with our coalition partners, but I can see Fianna Fáil's fingerprints all over this budget. I can also see the values that many of those members of the party have in the detail of the budget. Despite the Opposition trying to present it as a collection of bankers and developers being at the Ard-Fheis, those involved will be people from every community. It is those people who will benefit from this budget. There will be families with young children who will be paying less in childcare. There will be families with children in primary school who will be paying less because they will have free schoolbooks. There will be families with students who will be paying less because of the reduction in student contribution fees. There will be people who need the State's support who will get one of the largest increases in social welfare, including targeted supports. All of those communities right across Ireland, including older people who will have additional access to the fuel allowance and, importantly, the better energy warmer homes scheme, which will allow them to insulate their homes for free, will benefit from this budget.

They will come to the Ard-Fheis this weekend with higher energy bills. In order to resolve that, we have put in place a sustainable, affordable, costed, implementable way of tackling the energy crisis. It will not negate all of the increases that Putin has imposed on the people of Europe and I look forward to seeing the European co-ordinated approach on a windfall tax because that will help fund us.

This Government has managed the economy in a way that we can make an €11 billion intervention without borrowing. That is significant. We do not want to create €11 billion to put into our back pocket. We want to distribute it, support people and tackle some of the issues that have been as problems for more than a decade, particularly those in the area of women's healthcare. We now have free contraception for all women under 30. We will have zero VAT on period products and zero VAT on hormone replacement therapy, HRT, and a new publicly funded IVF model. These are the many interventions that people have talked about for some time and that had not been addressed but that have now been addressed by this Government. We can vote for the resources in the budget, but the challenge will be for us to actually implement them. In this budget there is more money for people with special needs and more money for SNAs, with pro-

vision for more than 20,000 SNAs. The secret and the job of government is to implement such resources. We have managed the economy, protected families, protected incomes and ensured that jobs stay in place. Now we have to get on with the job of delivering these programmes in order that people can benefit from them.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to speak.

Delivering a budget - or delivering an alternative budget, as many Opposition parties do - is challenging and onerous, and they are pretty difficult to put together. Therefore, while I do not agree with much of what is in the Government's budget, I wish to state for the record that I recognise that the elements I disagree with are the result of the Government making poor political choices and not the result of any effort on behalf of the officials who work behind the scenes to put the budget together. Similarly, I thank the policy team in our party for putting together our alternative budget document.

Budget 2023 was delivered as Irish households face the biggest drop in living standards since the 2008 financial crisis as earnings from work fail to keep pace with soaring inflation. We have just been treated to a couple of minutes of the greatest hits of Fianna Fáil. However, the party's Deputies left out the economic crash. They left out my poor auntie, who has to talk to her kids on Skype. They left out the fact that Fianna Fáil brought this country to its knees and drove it over a cliff. When they talk about Fianna Fáil and how proud they are of its legacy, let them not forget what that legacy is and how it is felt in every single home the length and breadth of this State. I will not thank anyone in Fianna Fáil for a trip down memory lane with them because the memories for many people, in my family and in other families, are painful. As Deputies pointed out, we see again the icy cold hands of Fianna Fáil all over this budget and, indeed, the hands of their very best friends in Fine Gael. There has never been more than the width of a piece of paper between the two parties when it has come to policy decisions. It is not so much that the Opposition is the hard left, as was described, but, rather, that we face the hard right every day, which I think has its effect on how we appear to the Government.

Many workers have waited all year for this budget. They wanted to see what the State would do to ensure that their work would pay. There are many things the Government can do to influence how we make work pay, but two areas are the national minimum wage and the delivery of collective bargaining for trade unions. Workers are being battered by the cost-of-living crisis. The 80 cent increase in the national minimum wage is far from what was needed to ensure that work pays. Furthermore, the increase is totally inadequate as the first step towards progressing to a living wage. Again we see the contradiction at the heart of some governments. They say they are interested in a living wage, but when the opportunity is presented, as it is every year at the time of the budget, to move meaningfully towards a living wage, that very small step is not taken, which makes me think they are not serious about delivering a living wage at all. In recent months there have been increases in rents and fuel, food and energy costs, to name but a few, which has meant that the cost of living has spiralled out of control for workers. A real and substantial increase in the minimum wage on the journey towards a living wage was what was needed in budget 2023. The recommendation by the Low Pay Commission, which was agreed by the Government, absolutely failed to grasp this. It was no wonder to me that the trade union representatives issued a minority report and dissented from that 80 cent recommendation. I said the same to the chair of the Low Pay Commission at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade, and Employment yesterday. A higher minimum wage could have helped business by driving higher consumer demand. I think we all know that workers on low



incomes, when they get money in, spend that money. They spend it locally and in the domestic economy. Increasing the minimum wage and moving meaningfully towards a living wage is an investment in local business. The Government's recommendation of a minimum wage of €11.30 represents a 7.6% increase. It does not keep pace with inflation and, as Government members will know because we have said it to them time and again, if it does not keep pace with inflation, it is effectively a pay cut for the lowest income workers in this State. Yet yesterday and in the run-up to the budget we heard again from big business owners and their representatives that a small increase, a modest increase, in the minimum wage would hit them hard. They should know, however, that that money will go directly into their budget and their coffers.

This is the third budget in a row in which billions of euro in funding and supports have been provided, very rightly, to businesses to keep them afloat, particularly to those businesses that are vulnerable but viable. They absolutely need that. However, they should not be allowed to do what they did after Covid and pay massive dividends to their shareholders. The supports that are there should be for the businesses that need it. When businesses talk about welfare for themselves on the one hand, they need to understand that that is a two-way street and that workers have to benefit as well. Often the people on the business side of the House will say that more money in the economy through wage increases will cause a cost-of-living spiral. Of course it will not, no more than putting money into businesses to keep them afloat will cause an inflationary spiral.

While there is stuff in this budget that one would welcome absolutely, there is an awful lot in it that will not deliver, particularly for low-income workers. That is a shame.

**Deputy Patricia Ryan:** This budget is akin to trying to put out a fire with a watering can. It is a waste of effort. There are billions being spent but spent in favour of high earners, vested interests, golden circles, vulture funds, developers and institutional landlords. It is payback for the Fine Gael core voter, with the odd crumb for the few people who will vote Fianna Fáil and the Greens in the next election. We will be told that trickle-down economics will be the rising tide that raises all boats. However, as our older people, the working poor and anyone living in rural Ireland will tell the Government, trickle-down economics does not exist. The difference between the have-yachts and the have-nots is that the have-yachts have a boat to be risen. Our older people and ordinary workers and their families are left to try to keep their heads above water. It is telling that those earning €100,000 will benefit four times more than those earning €35,000. In reality, those low-income earners and our older people will see meagre increases quickly eroded by inflation, carbon tax and spiralling rents. What is also telling is Fine Gael Deputies' defending single people earning more than €70,000 getting support from the State with their energy bills. It is a damning indictment of the Government's performance that it feels that people on relatively good incomes need support from the State.

There will be no change for teachers struggling to find affordable homes to rent. So much for the hope to reduce pupil-teacher ratios. Unless the Government has plans for robot teachers, I do not know what it is going to do. There will be no change for nurses starting at the bottom of the ladder. They want to stay to try to fix our health service but are being forced to move abroad, where they can afford to live. Of course, that suits the Government as the majority of our young people can see that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are bad for them and bad for this country.

The budget forecasts that the economy will flatline next year at 0.4%. It also predicts that inflation will rise by 16% over this year and next year. There is little in the budget to deal with

the fallout from this.

Sinn Féin's fully costed alternative budget favours our older people and ordinary workers and their families. It provides targeted support to those who need it most, not a golden shower for those at the top. Sinn Féin in government will cut childcare costs by two thirds, not the quarter promised in this budget. It will value our older people, people with different abilities and those who care for those people.

Active Retirement Ireland - not Sinn Féin - stated that this budget falls short in protecting older people against the cost-of-living crisis. It stated that the winter fuel allowance will not go far enough for older people after two increases in gas and electricity costs in 2022 alone. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, was patting himself on the back for that a few moments ago. He needs to stop. Active Retirement Ireland goes on to state that the budget does not go far enough for the most vulnerable. We need to see the charge for blood tests and prescription costs scrapped in order to make healthcare more affordable. Budget 2023 is falling short for our older people, who deserve to live with security, independence and dignity. A Sinn Féin government would support households through the winter months by reducing electricity prices, rolling out cost-of-living payments to assist with other energy costs and protecting the most vulnerable. In 2023, we would deliver an income tax package to put money back into people's pockets, reduce the cost of fuel, support renters and shield lower-and middle-income householders from the impact of inflation. Sinn Féin would give workers and families a break.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** In the short time available to me I will raise a number of issues, some of which pertain to my own constituency of Limerick while others relate to the Minister of State's brief of enterprise. I welcome some of the measures in the budget but am really disappointed by others, particularly those relating to rent. While the €500 tax credit will be welcomed by a lot of renters, it will not go far in easing the cost of renting in Limerick and across the State. The Government said previously that a rent tax credit without rent certainty and a rent freeze would be a transfer of Exchequer funds directly to landlords and that is exactly what is going to happen with the new tax credit. For most people, it only amounts to around two weeks' rent, given current rent rates. Rents in my own city have increased by 15.5% in the last year, while the number of properties available to rent continues to decline. There has been no real movement in this area and the renters I have spoken to in the last day or two are really disappointed. They were expecting some sort of bailout.

As the Minister of State knows well, the housing crisis is probably the number one issue we are facing across the State. It is having a huge impact on everything else. FDI companies I met recently told me they are putting projects on hold because they cannot get staff because there is nowhere for them to live. People are stuck in emergency accommodation, those on the social housing waiting lists have no chance of ever getting a house and those renting who want to buy their own homes have no chance of doing so either.

The other issue in my constituency that I have raised consistently since I was elected in 2016 is the chaotic situation in the emergency department at University Hospital Limerick, UHL, but there was no plan in the budget yesterday to address it. The only plan the Government has is to deliver a 96-bed unit which, in effect, will deliver 48 new beds in two years' time. That is simply not enough. In order to bring UHL up to the level of other comparable hospitals, it would need an additional 200 beds but there is no plan from the Government to provide such. It has told the people of Limerick and the mid west to suck oranges. The people have been abandoned but they deserve much better.

The next issue I wish to raise is that of low pay. During the pandemic we were all appreciative of the low-paid workers who kept shops open. We were grateful to the cleaners and others earning the minimum wage or, in some cases, even less. They were expecting some recognition in this budget. If this really was the “give-away” budget some have described, it would not contain a minimum wage increase of only 80 cent. That is pathetic. As Deputy O'Reilly said, the Mandate trade union has said it represents a pay cut once inflation is taken into consideration. The programme for Government contains a commitment to move towards a living wage but there have been no significant increases to the minimum wage in the first three years of this Government's term and this 80 cent increase will not take us much closer to a living wage. This is a missed opportunity.

The final issue I want to raise relates to the enterprise brief and is yet another missed opportunity. In 2019 on behalf of Sinn Féin I launched a policy proposal on the establishment of an Irish enterprise agency. In short that policy seeks to reorganise the 31 individual local enterprise offices, LEOs, into one centrally-led, national jobs agency with the aim of supporting and growing indigenous Irish businesses. The policy recognises the imbalance in our industrial strategy and the State's huge dependence on foreign direct investment, FDI, in terms of both jobs and tax intake. The purpose of the new State jobs agency would be to grow our indigenous business sector to provide balance in our economy, workforce and public finances. The Sinn Féin policy document highlighted our severe over-reliance on FDI for jobs and for the State's tax income without dismissing the hugely positive impact of hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs provided by FDI. We need to refocus the State's attention on domestic business.

The new agency, in addition to providing business supports to SME owners, would encourage good pay and working conditions for employees and develop remote working hubs in regional Ireland, thus helping to address the decline of many of our town centres. The agency would also have a multimillion seed capital investment fund which could be used to take equity stakes in start-ups or existing businesses, similar to what Enterprise Ireland does with exporters. These investments could provide stability to businesses, protect jobs and allow businesses to scale up. In return, dividends on profits would be returned to the Irish enterprise agency and the State for further investment. Companies would be expected to show that all employees have good pay and fair working conditions, including proof that no gender pay gap exists, to be eligible for any State financial support from the agency.

In October 2020, in response to my questions in the Dáil, the Tánaiste gave a commitment to consider the establishment of an Irish enterprise agency specifically focused on helping micro-businesses, co-operatives, and SMEs. In that context, it is disappointing not to see a commitment in budget 2023 to establish such an agency in order to protect our economy going forward. This is a missed opportunity. I urge the Government, having forgotten about it in budget 2023, to act as a matter of urgency and establish an Irish enterprise agency or similar body.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I will focus during my six and a half minute contribution on health and transport. On health, I will focus on three areas that relate to the rights of workers in the health service on which this budget has either been silent or has failed to react appropriately. The first relates to recruitment and retention across all levels of care but in particular in our acute hospitals and across the grades of nursing, midwifery, healthcare assistants and others. We have a story to tell that starts off well when it comes to nursing in this country. We have around 1,800 new nursing graduates every year and immediately after graduating, approximately 96% of them stay to work in Ireland. However, that number quickly evaporates as the harshness of the conditions of working and living in Ireland, in terms of trying to afford housing, build a life and

have a good standard of living, begins to bite. We are losing nurses at an unbelievable rate, as well as other grades across the health service. Approximately 6,000 health service employees will be recruited as part of this year's budget but we do not know where they will be recruited from. The vast majority of our nursing staff are now recruited from overseas. They are really well trained and are great workers but we are not able to retain them either because the same housing and cost of living issues impact them as much as they impact the graduates that come through our own education system. We are allowing really great trained staff, irrespective of where they were trained, to slip between our fingers. The staff in our health service are working their fingers to the bone. We applauded them during the pandemic and did everything we could to try to acknowledge them during the crisis. They are still working their fingers to the bone, covering shifts and trying to ensure that we have a health service that functions.

I received a reply to a parliamentary question today on pandemic recognition payments for healthcare staff who do not work in the HSE. Incredibly, the tendering process for a company to administer and process those payments only finished this week. An external company is being brought in to try to find all of the eligible healthcare staff in our hospices, nursing homes, section 39 organisations in the community, and in home help and home care agencies and process their payments. It is an absolute shambles. The chance of these workers getting their payment before Christmas, never mind as part of this budget, is diminishing ever further. That is a failure of the workers in our health service. We are also failing our section 39 workers who have been conducting a 14-years-and-counting campaign for pay restoration and pay increases. Such pay increases are long overdue but these workers remain outside any formal process and are not even being dealt with at arms' length. The trade unions that represent them are not getting a response from Ministers to their letters. These are the workers who work with the most vulnerable in our communities. They need help and support but they are not getting it from their own Government. This budget was silent on all of these issues. The recruitment and retention crisis in our health service is going to continue because it will not be resolved by this budget.

On transport, the Labour Party asked for a radical proposal, namely, a €9 monthly climate card. That would do one of two things, one of which is increase the number of people who would use public transport through vastly reducing the cost. As a follow-on, it would improve Ireland meeting its carbon targets, on which we are way behind. Transport is a key reason for that. The measures announced were continuations of what are good measures, in terms of the fare reductions that have already been put in place, but they are not the radical measures we need to encourage people into public transport or to meet our climate targets.

We have anomalies in those schemes. For example, there is a crazy situation on the north county line where towns like Balbriggan and Skerries are outside of the 90-minute fare, even though people within those towns can get to where they need to go, be that college or work, well within 90 minutes in the morning. However, commuters from Rush, Lusk, Donabate, Malahide and Portmarnock are included in that fare. Throughout the country, in particular in my constituency and constituencies around Dublin, there is a poor or, at times, non-existent service provided by privatised bus services. There is a major problem with the Go-Ahead Ireland service in north county Dublin, North Wicklow, and areas of Kildare. Buses are not turning up in the morning and people are missing work, are late for school or college and are missing hospital appointments which they have to reschedule. We need a transport system that works. When these contracts end, they cannot be renewed. We need a State-owned public transport system, such as Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann, which is resourced properly, to run our transport services.

Another Tweet from a constituent of mine this morning thanked Go-Ahead Ireland bus ser-

vices and said it was another taxi fare for them this morning. Taxi services, another area of our transport system that has been totally ignored over the past number of years, have to step into the breach.

The Labour Party supported a scrappage scheme for cars linked to electric or cargo bikes. They are expensive. A lot of people are driving old cars which are not efficient. They may have a second car in a family. People would be willing to scrap such cars if there was an incentive to buy an electric or cargo bike. We would like to see the Government revisit that.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I am happy with the budget. It is a budget that has Fianna Fáil fingerprints all over it. We have worked really well with our colleagues in government, Fine Gael and the Green Party, to ensure that those in society who are marginalised and the squeezed middle are looked after well in the budget. The Fianna Fáil I joined way back in 2000 was a centre-left party. Parties sometimes deviate from a pathway they are on. This budget rings true to the true causes, aims and aspirations of our party.

There are a lot of good measures in the budget. One is the lowering of childcare costs by 25% per week, a double payment of children's allowances this winter, home energy credit payments being paid in three instalments of €200 each and supports for small and medium-sized businesses. I wish to hone in on some examples of how people will benefit from the budget measures. A person with a disability living on his or her own stands to see a saving of €2,464. A lone parent with two children under the age of 12 could see a saving of €2,288. A home carer caring for a loved one in a home environment who is in receipt of the fuel allowance could stand to benefit to the tune of €2,540. A single renter with an income in the range of €40,000 per annum stands to make a saving this year of €1,330. There is a lot of good in this. I am proud of my party and what it has brought forward in this budget.

I want to comment in particular on the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley. Of all of the measures in the budget, I as a former teacher, was delighted to see a huge budget this year for special education and to make primary school books free. It harked back to 1967 when Donogh O'Malley, of my party, made second level education free. We need to strive and do more. The pupil-teacher ratio for September 2023 will be 23:1. More can be done, but I want to commend the Minister, Deputy Foley, on all of her efforts in this budget.

Regional airports funding is very welcome. I look forward to seeing the final figures being revealed for Shannon Airport in my constituency. Shannon Heritage owns a number of iconic sites in the midwest region, including Bunratty Castle and Folk Park, which were due to transfer from the Department of Transport to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, that is, from the Shannon Group to Clare County Council. There was hope that the budget would have explicitly stated that there was a funding stream for that. It is to be hoped that detail will come out in due course because everyone is waiting with baited breath to hear a funding announcement to make that move successful.

I wish to make the some final quick points. The concrete levy of 10% is something I have a number of concerns about. Just a few weeks ago we passed a massive redress package for home owners with defective mica and pyrite concrete blocks in their buildings. It was right to do so. The detail of that will be stitched into regulations and brought forward in a redress scheme homeowners can apply for very soon - it is to be hoped before Christmas. I do not know if it is fair to put a 10% levy on each person who tries to undertake a building project, be it with concrete blocks or liquid poured concrete, over the coming months. To me it seems that they are being



burdened with a levy that the suppliers and manufacturers of these blocks should pay for.

The dogs on the street know who made these blocks. CHR plc, in my constituency, was a major manufacturer and supplier of these blocks. Cassidy Brothers in Donegal is known. We cannot always say that on the street, but we can say it in here. It is those companies we need to go after. The Office of the Attorney General is preparing a landmark legal case to take some companies through the courts system and recoup the costs on behalf of the taxpayer. That needs to be expedited.

Finally, Sinn Féin has spouted for days that we need an electricity cap. We have all seen pigs fly in politics, but I never thought I would see the day where it would follow Tory policy. We have seen the ruination that has brought to the British economy over the past week. It is in turmoil, freefall and tailspin. To hear Sinn Féin talk about a home energy electricity cap is insane. It is costing that at €1.6 billion, but commentators have said it would cost €10 billion. Maybe it is getting advice from Liz Truss. Maybe the famous photograph of Michelle O'Neill shaking hands with King Charles III rubbed off a little bit, because it is coming back with daft ideas from Britain. Maybe it will give up its abstentionist policy in the House of Commons because it is certainly trying to bring forward a suggestion of Tory policies here.

**Deputy Neale Richmond:** I wish my colleague all the best in his analysis. It is certainly an interesting one. I appreciate the time I have, albeit short, to make a few comments on this budget.

In a budget of €11 billion, it is impossible to give an opinion on every line and detail. I wanted to choose a few select points and offer a few considerations the Minister of State might take back before we get the finance and social welfare Bills in due course. To quote a former Taoiseach, the late Garret FitzGerald, this is a good budget. That has to be recognised. When we consider what member states across the European Union and other countries around western Europe, including our nearest neighbours, have to do to in order have the resources and financial ability to do what this Government is doing in this budget, it makes us the envy of many other member states.

This is a credit, most importantly, and first and foremost, to the hard-working people of this country and the businesses of all shapes and sizes across the country that kept the lights on during the pandemic and made every possible sacrifice to ensure that tax revenues went up so much. This has resulted in an economy with, in effect, full employment and continuous economic growth. These are very important things. The social challenges are great - no one is pretending they are not - but the current position gives us the basis to start addressing the challenges in a way that so many other countries simply cannot.

One area I am particularly enthused by is the fact that the budget clearly puts money back into people's pockets through a genuine income tax package to address USC in a manner that rewards work and gives people the opportunity to continue in their pursuits. One thing I welcome that is not in this budget, but which has been highlighted for consideration, is an effective third rate of income tax. That would be important. It would put us in a far more regular position alongside many other economies. A third rate of tax would be great for employment. I hope that after the assessment is done it is something that we put on the table for consideration for the Government. A range of payments is very important to deal with the potential and rising cost-of-living and energy crisis we face. None of us can be sure of its sheer magnitude or of what will happen, be it related to the ongoing, brutal war foisted on the people of Ukraine by Vladi-

mir Putin and his oligarchs or the extremely worrying situation in the United Kingdom and the reaction on the bond market to the sheer budgetary madness that was announced last week.

The sort of payment we see in order that people have the chance to cope with some of the rising costs is the fact that €1,000 will come off third level fees this year and €500 will come off next year. It will make a tangible difference to families throughout the country who are totting up the costs and seeing where savings can be made, as will the double child support benefit and, indeed, the additional winter and fuel allowance benefit package.

I think we all agree that housing was the biggest issue in the general election of 2020, regardless of constituency. One would have to be a fool to say otherwise. The fact that there is a commitment to build 9,000 extra social homes is welcome in this budget but we have to keep building and address the rising cost of construction and the labour shortage.

After housing, what came up in my own constituency on countless occasions was the issue of childcare, that is, the cost and availability of childcare and, indeed, the ability of childcare providers to simply keep the lights on. That is why I very much welcome the measures announced in this budget. I welcome the Together for Better funding model that was announced prior to the budget, but we can do more in this area.

One area in which I have asked for genuine consideration over the coming weeks is the situation of childminders. Not everybody can put their child into a registered aftercare facility, crèche or Montessori centre. When we look at the funding model of Together for Better, it is a question of why we have 100% take up of childcare providers in Leitrim but only 81% in my own constituency. That area of core funding has to be looked at. There is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all approach to this. Costs are rising. The availability of staff is decreasing. It is an area that absolutely requires a fresh look but that is not to take away from what is extremely welcome in this budget.

The easiest thing to do would be to come into this Chamber, go through an €11 billion budget and pick out the two or three things that are not exactly perfect. However, we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good when it comes to this budget because much is being done for every aspect of society.

I am extremely enthused about the commitment to recruit 1,000 extra members of An Garda Síochána and 400-odd extra civilian staff. That is vitally important to the aims of getting gardaí out on the street, on the beat and in our communities. That is the most important thing. It is not just about addressing crime rates but the genuine perception and concern when it comes to antisocial behaviour, be it on our public transport or in our neighbourhoods. I fundamentally believe that those additional gardaí have to be accompanied by the supports for the gardaí with regard to equipment, vehicles and access to ICT and, parallel to the budget, by a genuine review of our sentencing policy in this State.

We have legislation in this Chamber already. A Private Member's Bill has been introduced by Deputy Griffin, to cite ramming as an offence and the other legislation is from me, which would introduce a mandatory minimum sentence for anyone who would assault a peace officer, be it a member of An Garda Síochána, a firefighter or a paramedic. This is the sort of thing people really want to see. If we have more gardaí on our streets making our communities safer, they need to see that those who attack members of the Garda and the State will go to prison for an extremely long time.

There is much to consider in this budget. I have gone into the WhatsApp groups, houses and neighbourhoods in my community and there is a welcome for this. People are worried about what is around the corner but this budget fundamentally puts the State and, most importantly, our society on the best possible footing to meet those challenges in the coming weeks and months.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this today. I have listened to a good few contributors in between committee meetings this morning and I will say something I have said many times since I came in here: the Government is more reactive than proactive. Let us be honest - we do not always agree on either side of the House - but we are all here to represent the people outside this House.

All the announcements were being drip-fed to the media prior to the budget brought a level of expectation to the people for whom we are supposed to be working. The people in middle- to low-income households were worried about energy costs before the budget and, unfortunately, they are still worried about it after the budget. It was a missed opportunity to cap the energy crisis which, as Sinn Féin said last summer, would have given more certainty. A worrying story was reported last week in a local paper in Cork, about Castlemartyr village, which is an area in my own constituency. A drop-off box had been set up as part of a collection for torches and batteries for old people. Despite us patting ourselves on the back or the Government patting itself on the back, as a fella said to me a long time ago, a pat on the back is only a foot and a half away from a kick on the backside.

I will also touch on investment in mental health. As a former spokesperson on mental health, I was extremely disappointed with the €14 million additional moneys that the Government has set aside. I have been coming in and out of here for the past four years battling over this and even Mental Health Reform is saying a minimum of €35 million should have been the investment. Our budget proposal was to invest in €81.7 million in mental health. Other speakers have mentioned what we are putting into the health service and, yet, we are still closing beds. We are still closing respite beds. Nothing that was promised in the last budget has come to head.

Transport and connectivity was another area. One still cannot get a bus from Youghal to Midleton in County Cork to connect up with the train for connectivity. These areas would assist people because, obviously, energy prices have risen very high. Certainly, the Government should be promoting public transport but those are very simple little things.

I welcome measures regarding schools and school buildings. I will be and always am fair, in that I welcome that moneys have been invested in east Cork because there is a considerable issue in this area. However, we also have a massive issue with school transport, which I will take the opportunity to raise while I am here. I do not know whether there is anything that can be done to alleviate the fact that a person over 70 cannot drive a school bus. I spoke to school bus operators who are willing to do a six-month or 12-month medical on this to speed up and facilitate stuff.

We spoke a while ago about energy costs and retrofitting. There also needs to be urgency when it comes to facilitating businesses that have invested considerable money in solar panels and, yet, cannot sell the excess electricity back to the grid. I was hoping that the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, would be here. Good news broke two weeks ago in east Cork about a big hydrogen plant to go on the site of the Whitegate oil refinery. The following week, unfor-

tunately, one of the main players there, Shell, pulled out. However, there is a considerable opportunity for our own wind and hydrogen energy. I spoke to a couple of businessmen. One of them said that we have the potential to be the Dubai of Europe when it comes to wind energy and the associated energy that goes with it. Another businessman told me that one of the by-products of hydrogen is oxygen. He said we will have so much of it that we will be able to give it to the hospitals. The old saying goes that where there is an action, there is an instant reaction. I urge the Government to take that on board with urgency because we do not want to fall behind.

The biggest fear I have when we talk about tax breaks and tax proposals is that more than 1.8 million people will not benefit from this budget when it comes to tax. Those are the people who are struggling.

I will leave the Minister of State with one thought. I hope he can revisit this if it comes to an emergency, which it is. We are coming into the winter months. Old people are absolutely terrified. I would love to see the Government do a U-turn and say we need to cap energy prices and go back to what we were in May last year to give the people certainty.

**Deputy Willie O'Dea:** There is a ritualistic element to the debate. I have seen many of these debates over the years and you have to be for or against. Those who are for or against make speeches against one another and in many cases read speeches against one another. However, the difference is that in the old days, we got a much longer opportunity to speak. I regret the change and now we all seem to be confined to four, five or six minutes. With the few minutes available to me I do not have the opportunity to go into all the different aspects of the budget. It was a huge budget with €11 billion in expenditure. There are one or two things I would like the Minister of State to address when he is replying to the debate.

The first is that this year, the Government will spend an enormous amount of taxpayers' money, and rightly so, on providing State contributory old age pensions. That sum will be considerably added to as a result of last Tuesday's announcement. As the years go on, the burden will become even greater but we must ensure our elderly population have peace of mind and a sense of security in their twilight years. There is, therefore, an onus on the Government to make this whole system sustainable but what I fail to understand is how the recent announcement of changes in the administration of the pension system is going to make the system more sustainable.

It is my understanding the cornerstone of the proposal was that at the moment, a person who reaches the age of 66 years and has his or her full contributions paid is entitled to a full old-age pension. If there are no contractual difficulties etc., a person can continue to work and receive his or her pension. My understanding of the proposal is if a person forgoes his or her pension until he or she is 70 years of age then he or she will get €70 more per week and there are graduated figures in between. Let us leave out potential or projected inflation as we do not know what they are going to be anyway. Take somebody who is presented with a choice at the moment. The person intends to continue working on at the age of 66 years and is entitled to the old age pension. If the person forgoes the pension for the next four years then according to my arithmetic it will cost him or her €55,000 in today's money. A figure of €70 per week in four years' time to compensate you for the loss of €55,000 between now and the age of 70 years will mean that before you start benefiting in net terms from that change, you will be 83 years of age. What person would, in their sane financial senses, opt for such a system? In my view there will be very few. We are presented with this as a cornerstone of making the whole system more sustainable but so few people will be taking it up, if any, that I cannot understand, quite

frankly, how it is going to make it more sustainable.

The other thing that was missing in the recent Government proposal was how we are going to get over this contractual requirement to retire at the age of 65 years. It can be done immediately by legislation and does not require a constitutional referendum but if it does, let us have one. We have arguably had such referendums for much less important matters than giving people security and peace of mind in their twilight years.

Before I conclude, I make brief reference to the proposed levy on concrete products, including concrete blocks, pouring concrete and other such products. I accept the taxpayer is not at fault here; he or she is not responsible for this debacle. I accept the people who are responsible for it should be made pay if that is possible. I also accept that when there is wrongdoing, and clearly there was here, there should be consequences. However, the question is, consequences for whom. The taxpayers are going to have to fork out this €5 billion one way or another and we have a levy that will have to be applied for 50 years before the sum is made up, according to the figures. Would it not be ironic if a subset of taxpayers, namely, people who are going to be hard-pressed because they want to build or purchase houses - and they are hard-pressed indeed - was to be made pay twice over by contributing to the €80 million per year levy? This is going to happen if that levy is passed on, which it inevitably will be. This is due to be discussed on Committee Stage of the Finance Bill and the measure is not due to kick in until 3 April, as I understand it. The Government will have to reflect very carefully indeed between now and the Finance Bill. This should be discussed fully within the Government parties. It will be discussed in committee when that particular section of the Finance Bill is dealt with but I urge the Government to think very carefully about the consequences. It is not that I do not want wrongdoers to suffer, because I do, but I do not want the victims to suffer in an attempt to get at the wrongdoers.

**Deputy Joe Flaherty:** We sought a progressive and decisive budget and one that was mindful of the once-in-a-lifetime challenges facing the country in the form of the energy and cost-of-living crises. The Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Michael McGrath, have certainly responded and I thank them both, as well as their staff. Doubtless they spent many long hours over recent months to come up with budget 2023. It is important we also acknowledge that a budget is just a snapshot in time and no one budget will ever resolve all the issues in their entirety. We have one party in this House that reckons it will take it ten years to sort out the country yet it expects one budget to effect wholesale and transformative change. What we have seen is a decisive budget focused on the key objective of this Government, which is equality of opportunity for all. We will certainly build on this in subsequent budgets during the lifetime of this Government. What we have seen this week from the Government is a real statement of intent in the areas of housing, health, education and childcare. We will continue to build on that in subsequent budgets as we work towards being one of the most inclusive and progressive societies in modern Europe.

I will address a number of key components of the budget. I thank the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, for listening to our concerns about the rates issue in County Longford where, following the escalation of decarbonisation and the closure of the ESB power plant, the local authority was faced with a €1.3 million rates shortfall. I am thankful the Government has once again committed to making up the shortfall in rates in County Longford. That is an important component within this budget.

The Government was very inclusive and listened to the recommendations of Members on all



sides of the House. In the months leading up to the budget we were all very much aware of the massive energy crisis affecting SMEs throughout the country. To its credit, the Government has responded with the energy rebate scheme, which will be retrospective from September and run until February. It is a massive support to businesses that are struggling and will be rolled out quickly and effectively. The overwhelming message from that community is that it is welcoming this measure and that is important to put on record.

It has been a brave and a bold budget for education and I commend the Minister, Deputy Foley, on her work and on delivering so strongly. We see a commitment to continue with 453 building projects throughout the lifetime of the Government. That is important to us in County Longford in particular as we have a number of notable building projects, including the convent, St. Mel's College, our two secondary schools in Ballymahon and the community college in Lanesborough. This budget is a real statement of intent about education. We have seen that with the abolition of charges for schoolbooks in primary schools. I hope within the lifetime of this Government we will see the elimination of schoolbook costs at second level as well.

There are highs and lows in any political life but Tuesday was one of the good days because we sought to reach out and assist those who have been worst affected in the face of the energy and cost-of-living crisis. Our President has in the past spoken of the need to ensure we have a glass floor within society through which no group is ever allowed to fall and never has the Government of the day's commitment to those who are struggling been more evident than in budget 2023. As I said, a budget is merely a snapshot in time and will not encompass or deal with every issue but we have seen massive expenditure. As previous speakers have said, our budget is in many respects the envy of many of our European peers. That is down to the prudent and effective management of our finances by the Government of the day.

*3 o'clock*

At times it is a difficult, three-party Government. However, we have seen the value of the Government in this budget and we have seen its commitment to those who are worst affected in a time of unprecedented crisis. I am especially proud to be associated with the budget. It delivered on many of the issues that I highlighted to both Ministers. I am delighted that my concerns were taken on board. On the whole, the society that we serve and to which we give so much is in the main pleased, happy and, more importantly, reassured by this budget. People are reassured that they know the Government has taken account of the challenges and difficulties that many families are facing. The Government has responded in kind through budget 2023.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** I spoke on the budget on Tuesday night. As I said then, despite lots of highlighted figures and talk of unprecedented expenditure, the net fact about this budget is that the majority of workers, pensioners, social welfare recipients, people with disabilities and vulnerable low and middle-income households will be worse off next year than they were last year. The measures taken have not protected people from the spike in the cost of living or the ongoing housing crisis in terms of extortionate rents and house prices and of course homelessness. That is the net fact, no matter what way the Government tries to dress it up or spin it. People will be worse off. One-off payments that slightly mitigate things for a few months will not hide that fact as we head into the new year.

I want to zone in today on a few more specific issues. How is it acceptable that the much-trumpeted 80,000 new recipients of the fuel allowance will not get the €400 payment before Christmas? That is not acceptable. The Government has been forced to accept that those

80,000 or 90,000 people need fuel allowance because of protests and pressure. Because the Government is not going to actually give them the fuel allowance until January, they will not get the €400 payment. They need it every bit as much as those who are going to get it but they are not going to get it. That is not acceptable. The Government should rethink that one.

The vast majority of those in receipt of jobseeker's benefit, illness benefit, enhanced illness benefit, maternity benefit and disablement benefit, in other words people who are not long-term recipients of social welfare payments, get no fuel allowance, will get no lump sum payment and will get no Christmas bonus. How is that acceptable? Where is the help for them to deal with this excruciating cost-of-living crisis as we head into the winter months? They are going to get the bill hikes the same as everybody else but they are not going to get any assistance at all in terms of the payments that are being given out and much-trumpeted by the Government. That is not acceptable.

Another small but important issue for those who are affected is the abolition of the infamous Croke Park hours. The austerity hours imposed on public sector workers are finally abolished. However, I have discovered that, among others, service officers here in the Dáil and, I think, the ushers and similar grades will not get the return of their overtime payments based on the abolition of those hours. Overtime will still be calculated on the same divisor, as it is known technically, as if the Croke Park hours still existed. Very regularly the service officers and ushers in here are asked to accommodate Culture Night or late-night activity in the bar. Is it fair that they are not getting what they are fully entitled to in terms of overtime payments which should have come back with the abolition of the Croke Park hours? I suggest the Government look into that. We often rightly praise the staff who keep this place running. There may be many other public sector workers in similar grades affected by this. If the hours are gone then the overtime payments should be restored.

As I debated with the Minister of State, Deputy English on the radio this morning, the biggest, shocking, disgraceful failing of this budget is in respect of the most severe aspect of the cost-of-living crisis, namely, the ongoing housing and homelessness crisis, the crisis of unaffordable rents and house prices. It is difficult to know where to begin with how this budget has failed. I have highlighted and will continue to highlight the failure to raise the income thresholds for social housing eligibility. This means that people who got a marginal increase, for example those who get €4 extra a week with the tax band changes, may now find a very bitter sting in the tail of this minimal, pathetic increase in their income. They will now be flung off the social housing list, as has been happening to thousands of people over recent years because the Government has not raised those thresholds despite promises. Worse than that, they will not be entitled to the housing assistance payment, HAP, either. They go a few euro over the threshold and now they have no help, even though they have not got a prayer of being able to afford the rents out in the open market or buy their own home. That is outrageous.

It is outrageous that €5 billion has been put in the rainy day fund while at the same time, all the strategic housing developments that are being built, all the apartment blocks, are not being bought up by ordinary purchasers but by investment funds, which then rent them at extortionate rents. Often the State pays anyway through HAP, rental accommodation scheme, RAS and leasing arrangements. Why on earth would the Government not use that money to buy up that property, the vacant and derelict properties and the tenancies of people who are being evicted into homelessness? That would save those people the housing misery and homelessness they are suffering. It would actually save the State money in terms of HAP and RAS payments. Why will the Government not do it? Why will it not impose rent controls and stop the profiteer-

ing of the vulture landlords and the energy companies?

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 37 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Jackie Cahill:

To discuss specialised long-term dementia care in the Tipperary area.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:

To discuss recognition of qualified teachers in the Cork Life Centre; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Steven Matthews:

To discuss retrofitting schools that were built pre-2008 as we face into winter with increasing heating bills.

Deputy Patrick Costello:

To discuss the HSE position that children will not be treated under a proposed long Covid model of care.

Deputy Brian Stanley:

To discuss difficulties caused by the withdrawal of welfare officers from local face-to-face services in rural towns.

Deputy Catherine Connolly:

To discuss treating offshore islands as one area with a "local action group" under the LEADER programme.

Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Mairéad Farrell:

To discuss continued and improved services in Clifden Community Hospital, Galway.

Deputies Kieran O'Donnell and Joe Carey:

To discuss an update on a public service obligation, PSO, to establish EU hub connectivity from Shannon Airport to Schiphol, Amsterdam.

The matters raised by Deputies Cahill, Stanley and Matthews have been selected for discussion.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Financial Resolutions 2022**

**Financial Resolution No. 6: General (Resumed)**

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment).

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Ministers for being here this evening for this debate on the budget. I welcome the fact that there is now over €23 billion being set aside in the health budget for 2023. It is extremely important that we continue to grow and develop our healthcare services and that we try to identify the areas where additional funding is required. We have done this in the budget, in the sense that €443 million has been set aside for dealing with waiting lists. It is extremely important that we use that money effectively and that we make every effort to reduce those waiting lists. Some of that work will have to be done outside of the HSE hospitals, but we also need to make sure we get value for money in relation to the delivery of the healthcare that people require. We also need to look at how we can make the premises of the HSE hospitals and care facilities available to help to reduce those waiting lists. For instance, do we need to look at how we can use some of those facilities at weekends, particularly on Saturdays? How can we have the appropriate number of staff there to be able to provide the care and back-up support for delivering those services in respect of whether it is day care procedures or whatever medical consultation is required?

One of the big challenges we have over the next 12 months is in respect of having an adequate number of staff in all our healthcare facilities. We are competing in a worldwide market for medical care staff. All of the staff who are leaving Ireland are extremely well trained and have experience. No matter where they travel to in the world, they can get employment. We have got to make it attractive to retain the staff that we have here and make sure that they have adequate supports. It is extremely challenging for any person working in the medical area who has a young family and is trying to do the balancing act of looking after a young family while giving their full commitment to providing healthcare. We need to be far more effective in giving those supports to our healthcare workers. I am not sure that we have done that in the past. We also need to be able to be flexible to take on board the challenges that people who are working in the healthcare sector have when they also have young families.

On healthcare infrastructure, we have much catching up to do. We have already put a huge amount of money into upgrading our facilities for elderly care. It is interesting, and I just got the figures today on the costs of running those facilities. These are community nursing homes across the country. It is now costing more than €550 million per annum. That money is spent wisely, but it is important that we make sure that every one of those facilities is up to modern-day standards and can deliver the care that is required. In the context of healthcare in general, it is important to note that private nursing homes do not have the same financial support that is available to public nursing homes. It has not been upgraded in the past number of years. We now need to make sure that they are adequately funded. We have had a number of private nursing homes close for different reasons. We cannot afford to lose any beds in either public or

private nursing homes. It is important that the adequate amount of funding is available.

Likewise, on home care, we also need to bring more people into that area who can provide home care to keep the maximum number of people in their own homes but, at the same time, provide the care that they require. It is interesting that in the Cork-Kerry region, for instance, over 18 months ago we had more than 1,800 people working and providing home care. We lost 400 people in a very short period. We came from 1,800 down to 1,400 providing home care. That is just in the Cork-Kerry region. It is just a difficult challenge to reverse that drop-off in the number of people who are providing that service. Therefore, we need make sure – this applies to all people who are leaving our healthcare sector – that there is an exit survey to make sure we can identify what the issues are, why people are leaving and what we can do to reverse that.

It is important that we continue to provide healthcare support in the community. It is interesting that in this budget there is €138 million for healthcare and social care services, with €29 million out of that for new developments. That is very welcome. Likewise, there is €150 million for older persons and €18 million is in relation to new developments, which is, again, very welcome. The other area where we are putting in extra money in this budget is mental health, with more than €58 million being invested.

I was at the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts this morning. We had the HSE in before us to discuss dealing with its 2021 budget. We went through the figures and challenges there. Again, like what we faced with the community hospitals, we now face in the mental health facilities as well, where we need to make sure that we invest heavily in infrastructure in this area. It is very difficult for staff to work in a place where up-to-date facilities are not available. Therefore, any place where it is identified that the facility is not up-to-date, we then must make sure that we can upgrade them and, if necessary, in some cases, we might have to build totally new facilities.

I just want to touch on the area of GPs. They form an important part of our healthcare provision. It is interesting that we have a huge commitment by them, but we do not have the same level of support that is in other jurisdictions in relation to back-up support, such as administration and nursing staff. Over the next few months we should engage with the Irish Medical Organisation to work towards having additional support staff put in place in GP surgeries so they can deal with the increased demand.

We are facing huge changes in healthcare over the next eight years. We currently have 760,000 people over 65. Within eight years, that will have risen to 1 million. This is going to be a major challenge. GPs are the first port of call for people who require healthcare. We need, therefore, to put in place an adequate level of supports for those GPs so that they can deliver healthcare and reduce the number of people that they are referring into hospitals where they do not have a choice because they cannot get access to the care that is required.

I touched on the issue of nursing homes. Again, we face challenges there where they are now facing the difficulty of trying to retain staff. We need to work with them to make sure that we can have the required number of staff in each and every healthcare facility across the country, whether it is in hospitals, community hospitals, nursing homes or day care facilities. We now need to look at how we grow the healthcare sector and make working in it attractive. I am not sure that we have done enough of that over the past ten years. As a result, people are leaving that sector and moving into other areas of employment. It is important that we meet the challenges. We have had an increase in population of more than 1.2 million in the past 20 years,



which is 60,000 per annum. This year, the population may very well increase by 150,000 if you look at the people who are coming back from abroad, the natural growth in population and also the more than 50,000 people who have now come in from Ukraine. We could have a growth in population of 150,000. That will be more demands on our healthcare sector. We need to respond to that demand in every area, whether it is paediatrics, cancer care or elder care. Right across the board, we need to respond. The way we can respond is by making sure that we have an adequate number of staff in all areas.

Again, I thank the Minister for Health and the both Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform for their commitment to ensuring that we have an adequate budget for healthcare in the coming year.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** Regarding the budget, certainly, “the devil is in the detail” rings a bell. One would see that when looking at the commitments around GP care. We know that commitments made previously in relation to under-12s, which has, in fact, been legislated for, has not come to fruition. There is much ambition in relation to that. It is welcome, if it can actually be implemented. In counties such as mine - I presume this is the case in many rural towns, especially - people cannot even access a GP in many cases, or else they will wait two or three weeks for a basic appointment. The roll-out of free GP care is welcome. However, it actually has to be implemented. It would have been preferable had that been run by GPs before it was announced because it clearly came as news to them.

When it comes to the devil being in the detail, the rent credit is also an issue. Rents have been increasing not just in our cities but also in counties like mine. The average rent per month is now nearly €1,000 in County Roscommon. In the first three months of this year, rents increased by 18% in County Galway alone. I am referring to rural towns where people are really struggling to pay rent. A rent credit is welcome. It is something for which we have called for years, but what is the point in putting in place a rent credit without imposing a pause and or ban on rent increases in the first place? Rents are continuing to rise and there is no sign of them slowing down. Therefore, the tax credit will work regarding rents only if the ban on rent increases comes with it. Rent is one of the issues in respect of which we see young people in particular really struggling. They are finding it impossible to save for a mortgage. They are the very people who are once again being driven out of this country to faraway places. We are definitely losing our best and brightest to emigration once again.

I spoke to a young worker yesterday who is about to take up a job on a salary of €26,000 per year. She will get nothing in the tax package introduced by the Government this week. Someone earning €130,000 will see a benefit of €830 whereas a teacher or nurse on €35,000 will see a benefit of only €190. That is not fair. We have heard a lot about low- and middle-income workers - the squeezed middle – in recent weeks and months. They have not been served in this budget, and they are going to continue to struggle.

With regard to social welfare, it is deeply disappointing that no weekly increase will be seen until January. The lump-sum payments are welcome to some degree but in many cases their equivalent will be spent even before they are received. It is disappointing that we have yet another budget that does not recognise the minimum essential standard of living when it comes to social welfare increases. It is still the case that, at the time of every budget, there is a circus over what an increase will be. It is never linked to anything. The increase is not linked to inflation and does not protect from poverty. It is just a figure plucked out of the air. We are no closer to protecting people from poverty when it comes to social welfare. When we talk about

social welfare and social protection, it is important to note that the smallest group of recipients comprises jobseekers, people who have lost work. The majority are carers, including family carers, and also people with a disability and the elderly. These are the people who will see no badly needed increase in their weekly income until January. That was a mistake.

I welcome the moves made on the fuel allowance. I have asked many times for the eligibility criteria to be considered because the scheme has been far too rigid. It is really unfortunate that the extensions as regards eligibility will not come into place until January. That will leave people without support by way of the fuel allowance and locked out of all supports to meet energy costs in the next few months and into the winter.

On the subject of lone parents, the likes of SPARK and One Family Ireland have voiced their disappointment over what the budget does for lone parents. It is deeply disappointing that we have seen no moves on the child maintenance service and the establishment of a proper service to examine child maintenance for lone-parent families, who deserve nothing less. It is disappointing that we did not see a recognition of the cost of disability after the report that we know was furnished to the Minister. There should have been moves on this in the budget. Many other organisations, representing family carers, older people, people with a disability, are disappointed with this budget, so the Government does not have to take it just from Sinn Féin.

On the cost of living, we need clarity on the double payment that will be made in the autumn. The budget book was very clear in stating the double payment in October will be paid to those on long-term social welfare payments. The position on this is similar to that pertaining to the Christmas bonus. It does not include the likes of the illness benefit, yet the Tánaiste said today on the floor of the Dáil that it includes all payments. We need clarity on this because people need to know.

On what is available for rural development, it is disappointing that there is no increase in LEADER funding, which has been sought. This will be detrimental to rural communities. It is also disappointing that funding for the statewide sheds of the Irish Men's Shed Association and Ireland's Women's Sheds across the State was not reinstated. They do wonderful work for people living in rural communities, many of whom are isolated.

The devil is in the detail of this budget. We have much work to do on poverty in this State and getting people through the cost-of-living crisis.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** As a Government Deputy, I am proud to be associated with this budget. We have been lobbied a lot over the past couple of months. We have been in an unprecedented crisis given the war in Ukraine. We have made a very serious attempt at addressing the cost-of-living increases for those under the most pressure. At times in politics, we receive a lot of criticism and many issues are raised with us, but since Tuesday we have received many calls from people saying they are delighted with this budget. There has been a serious attempt made to address the cost-of-living crisis people are facing. I am delighted to be a Government Deputy who has lobbied our Ministers for a progressive budget like this. An unprecedented €11 billion has been put into the economy to address the cost-of-living crisis facing us. It really justifies the reasons why we went into government two and a half years ago.

There are two things I would like to see in the Finance Bill. I would like to raise them with the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, and then move on to aspects of the budget. The first concerns the means test for the carer's allowance for parents with incapacitated children. This

is a matter I raised in the Dáil a couple of weeks ago. I have a family in my constituency who have been put in financial hardship by the conditions of qualification for the scheme. Since the father of the family got a bonus in his employment this year, the mother's carer's allowance has been reduced to less than €50 per week. The couple have a child with serious health needs – a child who cannot talk, walk or swallow. The child was not expected to live beyond 18 months or two years, but, due to the excellent care she has received in her home, she received her first Holy Communion this year. There are not too many of these children in the State. I urge the Minister to remove the means test to qualify for the full carer's allowance through the Finance Bill. There is a precedent for this. People can qualify for a medical card and the domiciliary care allowance without a means test. Since the number of families in the circumstances I describe is extremely small, I urge the Minister to reconsider this matter through the Finance Bill. For a family with a child in need of care 24-7 and a mother who gave up an extremely good job to look after that child and who is doing so exceptionally well, I urge the Minister to reconsider the matter in the Finance Bill.

The second issue I wish to raise, on which I have been quoted in the media today, is that of the concrete levy. I fully accept the concept of the levy and of recovering money from the industry for mica and pyrite remediation. We now see apartment buildings in Dublin with defects. The bill will continue to grow but the levy needs to be postponed for a period until the cost of concrete returns to a level such as the one that obtained before the war in Ukraine. The price of concrete has risen by 50% in recent months. Next April is just not the time to impose a 10% levy on concrete products. We all want to see the maximum number of houses built and to control the price of houses. I was talking to a concrete provider yesterday who said the levy will add €120 to the cost of each load of ready-mixed concrete. While I fully accept the principle of a levy on concrete and that such a levy has to be imposed, I urge the Government to postpone it until a date later than April 2023 to allow costs to come back into line.

The Minister for Finance gave the example of what a pensioner living alone and in receipt of the fuel allowance will gain from budget 2023. He said it will total €2,374. In my lifetime, I have never seen such a huge increase for people on social welfare. The cost of living and cost of fuel will be enormous this winter, but this is a huge step in alleviating fuel poverty.

The double weekly payment, the Christmas bonus, a once-off fuel allowance payment and living-alone payment, as well as a weekly increase that is permanent, and the three €200 energy credits are a major attempt by this Government to ensure that people stay out of fuel poverty this winter.

We have been inundated with calls from constituents who recognise the unprecedented effort that has been made in this budget. A working family with kids in school or college will gain a total of €5,640 from this budget. That underlines the massive effort being made by the Government to ensure that the impact of the cost of living on families will be neutralised. This shows that the Government is fully getting to grips with the crisis facing the economy and has made a major effort to ensure that families will not be in fuel or food poverty this winter.

Another area this budget addresses, and one which I had pushed for, is a separate targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS, budget for climate negation measures. As a farmer, I am fed up with being told what we cannot do. At all the forums I have attended I have always stressed that my industry, the agrifood industry, wants to concentrate on producing food sustainably. I judge all climate negation measures by the fact that if they do not impact on our ability to produce food sustainably in this country, then they will be successful. If they impact

on our ability to produce food, then they will have failed. This separate budget that has been introduced for TAMS is directed at putting in place solar panels on farm buildings at the moment. I urge that be brought further to include constant aeration of slurry, rubbers on slats, different fertilisers that involve significantly less run-off and production of organic, pelleted fertiliser. There are many things that can be done within the agrifood sector to reduce emissions and meet our emissions targets.

In regard to the €90 million that has been put into this separate TAMS budget relates to a point I made very strongly to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine about the fact that we have a TAMS budget for infrastructure and that we needed a separate TAMS budget to tackle climate change. I am delighted that this has been recognised in the budget. It is a huge step forward in our task to meet the 25% emissions reduction target that was agreed a couple of months ago. We can build on this and drive forward. A further €3 million is being allocated over the next four years to kick-start farm-based anaerobic digestion. This is hugely welcome. A great deal of technology exists. Farmers around Europe are ahead of us in this regard. Animals on farms throughout Europe typically produce an income. They also produce an energy income. They are a valuable source of income. We can go a long way towards our renewable energy targets inside the farm gate. I am delighted to see these initiatives in the budget. I have worked hard in the parliamentary party to push this agenda and thankfully I got a receptive response. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and now the money has been put in place. We have to continue to build on that.

Yesterday evening, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine visited Lisheen in my constituency visiting the bioeconomy research centre. The technology being produced there is a vehicle that can be used to produce modern technology to allow us to meet our targets in agriculture going forward. We have already seen one project emerging from the research centre where used plastic is turned into a wax in the former Bord na Móna plant in Littleton where used plastic is turned into a valuable commodity that can be used to make glue and for other purposes in the future. That is where we have to go but it can only be done with investment. I am delighted to see that investment in the constituency of Tipperary in this budget. With this kind of investment and these types of initiatives, we will be able to go a long way towards meeting our 25% emissions reduction target. It had to be in budget 2023. In the past we were slow off the mark on such investment but we now have a separate budget for it. While there are many positive things in this budget this initiative on how the agrifood industry will meet its climate change targets is most welcome. I am delighted to be associated with this budget.

**Deputy Martin Browne:** I am happy that Deputy Cahill got those phone calls in the first ten or 12 hours because, since then, listening to our local radio station, Tipp FM, there is a great deal of disquiet among our constituents in Tipperary about the gaps that are left by this budget and the number of people who will fall through them. A budget of this size should have given people certainty that they will be able to meet the challenges as we go through the winter. However, to fill the gaps in our public service, the chance is gone. There is no long-term plan in this budget, just a series of once-off measures that leave cohorts of people on the sidelines. Many fixed-income working people are also being left on the sidelines. That is what is coming across on the radio and in the phone calls we are receiving. Take, for example, the fuel allowance. While we welcome the extension of the fuel allowance, there is no doubt that it is too limited. We argued before about working family payment recipients. They should be included in it but they have been locked out again. Even the cost-of-living support package will only be available to long-term welfare recipients. This potentially locks out those on payments such as

illness benefit and newly unemployed people's jobseeker's benefit. Will the Minister give us more details on that? Deputy Kerrane also raised this issue.

What was behind the decision to allocate an inadequate €12 increase in respect of pensions and core welfare payments that will immediately be eaten up by inflation? These increases are deferred until January. Deputies across the House made an issue of the cost of living and how people are struggling. Now they are being asked to wait for three months or more before many of these increased payments will commence. That does not make sense. Family carers and older people are being forced to wait until January, all the way through the winter. We all expect the weather to start to pick up from January onwards, yet they have to wait until January to get these increased payments.

In regard to tax, there is no denying that the tax package puts the interests of high earners above those on low and middle incomes. Those earning €130,000 will benefit to the tune of €830, while people earning €35,000 will benefit by just €190. I have been contacted by people on disability or invalidity allowance who are due to transfer to the pension shortly and who may not now be entitled to the lump-sum payment. I would like clarity on that for them. Would they not have been better served with the system and the resources instead of giving it to people who are earning €130,000 or more?

Assistance with the cost of home heating oil was left out of the budget. This, again, disregards many rural households.

In regard to those with disabilities, there is €11.7 million to address the backlogs in accessing assessments of need. I realise that many families are in the situation they are in because after all that has happened in this country, it all comes down now to just addressing the backlogs. There is no forward thinking about what is coming down the road; it is just about addressing the backlogs. It is purely a monetary issue with this Government. It does not deal with the systemic or staffing problems that every one of us knows to be the problem. Mental health services got a mere €14 million extra at a time when Sinn Féin had identified a need for, and would have provided, an additional €81 million. Long-term housing planning is also lacking. What is happening on the report on social housing threshold which has been sitting on the desk for months?

What planning has the Government done to ensure that GPs can handle the welcome increases in medical card eligibility? Any GPs being interviewed on local or national radio will tell you that this was landed on them with no thinking at all and they can see the problems that this is going to create.

There are no additional hospital beds in the health service.

Where is the energy cost certainty for those businesses which called for a cap on the prices? I could go on.

This budget is a missed opportunity again to make a real difference in people's lives especially when the Government is spending so much money, namely €11 billion, as the Government says itself. I was listening to an economist the other day and he reminded people that €7 billion of that is just to stand still, as there is only just €4 billion to go forward.

As far as Sinn Féin is concerned, the Government has no long-term plan but just a series of sticking plasters and they will fall off very shortly.



**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** Sometimes I think we are looking at different budgets. Some €11 billion of a budget is very significant indeed. I remember the days when we were taking figures of €6 billion, and so on, out of the economy. It is a seismic budget. What is the alternative in continuing with existing spending and expanding that, to not doing that? Of course, €7 billion has to be spent doing that, with the remainder to be spent on different measures.

The tax measure is of great significance for so many families because we look at this through a poverty focus and lens. Giving people tax back at every level is about keeping people out of poverty and is about helping them avoid difficulties. These are people who have not faced difficulties in the past but who will this winter and who deserve a break and extra assistance whether through the energy grant or the tax changes. It is so important that we try to address in advance what we know are going to be difficult times for people and the tax changes, therefore, are of great importance.

Changing the band obviously affects everybody over that band but the proportionate benefit to people on lower incomes is much more significant. To say that this measure is targeted at high earners is simply missing the point entirely. We are desperately trying to support people who are in the squeezed middle and who need more money of their own back in their own pockets in order to have better control over their own spending.

The idea being advanced that this is a failed opportunity to have energy cost certainty is made as if such a thing was possible. If we had energy cost certainty, we would know exactly what we needed to do, which is the whole point of what we have been facing which is the very essence of uncertainty. How can one possibly give people certainty with the external threats we have been facing? What measure of certainty can we give to people that they will not have to pay bills beyond a certain level? The taxpayer will have to pick up the cost, however, one way or the other. No matter what one does, there is a measure of uncertainty, whether that is for the State or for the household. One tries at least to be honest about that.

This idea that we are somehow going to give people certainty because a person's Bill is only going to be whatever number of hundreds of euro and no more, and completely neglect to be honest with people about the fact that the taxpayer themselves will have to pick up the cost no matter what, is a dishonesty. It should not persist any more.

Again, the social welfare package is deliberately targeted. Of course, there is the extra €12 and the measures kicking in after Christmas but that is deliberately balanced by upfront payments between now and Christmas, designed to target people who will need it most. There will be a double payment to all social protection recipients, including pensioners, carers and people on disability payments, in October and in December. There are lump-sum allowances to be paid to those receiving the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance and the working family payment. There is a cost-of-living payment to the carer's support grant. These are directly identified to try to target people in advance of Christmas, when we know that big bills will be coming, and to then have the longer-term measures in place.

This is a good structure where one faces into each budget year having to address the particular context of that year. We have had Covid-19 over the past number of years and it is obviously the energy crisis now. That is exactly what the Government has to do. It has to look up in front to see what the big challenges are, their timing and how we can address that.

Some of the criticisms are that the Government has done too much in one-off payments

and has not brought in enough permanent structural measures, as such. The budget, however, is year-to-year. There are no permanent measures. Everything changes and the budget is addressed every year. The tax changes are never permanent nor are the social welfare changes, as we do not know what situation we will be in this time next year. We do not know how much money we will have this time next year. We think that we will have a solid budget surplus, we hope we will, but we genuinely do not know. There has to be an honesty in how we present the budget to people and tell people that this is the amount of money we have this year. It is more than we thought it was going to be so we can address these different concerns that we know people are going to have.

Next year could be very different, last year it was very different and there has to be a measure of honesty about that.

There are two things I very much want to welcome. First, are the childcare changes which is something that I and so many others in this House have been campaigning for for so long. I believe this is the beginning of a very big structural difference we can make.

The second thing - where I agree with the National Women's Council - is that this is a big budget for gender equality. There are the steps on childcare, in particular, but also on a whole range of other measures of social welfare and so on, which are big steps towards gender equality and reflect directly the work that we are trying to do in the Committee on Gender Equality in implementing the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly.

Last year the Minister for Social Protection very considerably extended the eligibility for carer's allowance and it will be interesting to see when this kicks in in June how many more people have applied to avail of the carer's allowance under the new thresholds and how that will work out. I hope that it will work well because the change was so significant.

I also welcome seeing this year the changes to the domiciliary care allowance and to the way in which that is paid. It will now be paid for babies who are born and remain in hospital. We had a vaguely ridiculous scenario in the past where the parent had to go home from the hospital and go back in, which made no sense at all. I am very glad to see that the Minister has changed that and has indeed increased the rate of payment. The last thing that a parent of a child in that situation needs to have to do is to engage with the social welfare office, or engage in that for any reason whatsoever.

I call again on both the Minister for Health and the Minister for Social Protection to take the initiative to establish an Intreo presence in the paediatric and children's hospitals for the ease of parents to be able to access the additional needs payments that they are entitled to, that they should be able to get easily. They do not need an additional stress in having to get it.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. Níl aon dabht ach go dtarlaíonn an cháinaisnéis seo i gcomhthéacs idirnáisiúnta atá thar a bheith dúshlánach. Chuir cogadh mídhleathach na Rúise san Úcráin ardú ar phraghas an fhuinnimh ar fud na hEorpa agus ar phraghas an bhia ar fud an domhain, agus sa domhan i mbéal forbartha go háirithe. Níl aon amhras orm ach gur iarracht d'aon ghnó í seo chun daonlathais an iarthair a dhíchobhsú agus chun deighilt a chruthú inár dtacaíocht don Úcráin. Tá bia agus fuinneamh á n-úsáid mar airm chogaidh.

Is é an cháinaisnéis seo, go mór mór, freagairt an Rialtais ar an ngéarchéim idirnáisiúnta seo. Is pacáiste suntasach é, a dúradh ar fad atá os cionn €11 billiún. Is cáinaisnéis fhorché-

imnitheach é, rud atá thar a bheith tábhachtach domsa. Is iad na daoine sin ar ioncam níos ísle ná ioncam seasta acu a gheobhaidh an tairbhe is mó sa cháinaisnéis seo. Luíonn méaduithe ginearálta leasa sóisialta, taobh le híocaíochtaí spriocdhírthe bónaís, chun cabhrú leis na daoine is lú saibhre inár sochaí a chosaint. Go háirithe, fáiltím roimh na harduithe ar na tairseacha don íocaíocht teaghlaigh atá ag obair, a sholáthróidh tacaíocht do theaghlaigh a bhíonn go minic lasmuigh dár gcóras cosanta sóisialta.

Tá roinnt fógraí sa cháinaisnéis seo a bhfuil fáilte mhór rompu maidir le maoiniú na Gaeilge. Ar ndóigh, tá bunú cainéal teilifíse Gaeilge nua dírithe ar pháistí, Cúla4, ina measc siúd. Tacaíocht fhíorluachmhar a bheidh anseo do thuismitheoirí atá ag tógáil clainne le Gaeilge. Cruthóidh sé sin fostaíocht d'ardchaighdeán inár gceantair Ghaeltachta, díreach mar atá déanta ag TG4.

Caithfidimid infheistíocht a fheiceáil go fóill i dtithíocht inacmhainne sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Ní féidir le Gaeltacht ar bith maireachtáil mura bhfuil sé d'acmhainn ag a cainteoirí dúchais cónaí ann. Tá obair thábhachtach déanta ag Comhlucht Forbartha na nDéise chun an talamh a réiteach dó seo agus tá a fhios agam go bhfuil Údarás na Gaeltachta ag tacú freisin. Caithfidimid bogadh ar aghaidh leis seo chun tithíocht a chur ar fáil inár gceantair Ghaeltachta do pobal na Gaeilge ar chostas réasúnta.

Deirtear, mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Tá go leor sa cháinaisnéis seo do dhaoine óga agus dá dtuismitheoirí. Molaim go háirithe mo chomhghleacaí den Chomhaontas Glas, an tAire, an Teachta O'Gorman, as an méid a bhain sé amach chun costais cúram leanaí a laghdú suas le 25%. Is leasú bunúsach é seo ar an gcaoi a idirghníomhaíonn an Stát lenár gcóras cúram leanaí, a ghlac freagracht níos mó as an soláthar. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil sé ar intinn ag an Aire leanúint leis an obair seo isteach i gcáinaisnéis na bliana seo chugainn.

Mar an gcéanna, is mar idirghabháil costais mhaireachtála go mbeidh leabhair scoile a dhéanamh saor in aisce ag leibhéal na bunscoile, ach is athrú struchtúrach é seo freisin maidir le freagracht níos mó a ghlacadh ag an Stát as costais an oideachais.

Mar Theachta den Chomhaontas Glas, agus mar iarmhúinteoir bunscoile, tá lúcháir orm a fheiceáil go bhfuil painéil ghréine do scoileanna á bhfógairt, rud a laghdóidh billí fuinnimh do scoileanna agus, go deimhin, a chruthóidh sruth ioncaim do bhoird bhainistíochta a rachaidh i dtreo acmhainní oideachais, geansaithe peile, uirlisí ceoil do pháistí agus mar sin de.

Mar a dúirt mé níos luaithe, bhí tionchar idirnáisiúnta ag an gcoimhlint san Úcráin, agus tá na tionchair is measa á mbrath sa domhan i mbéal forbartha, agus san Afraic, go háirithe. Tá praghsanna bia atá ag dul i méid ag cur le fadhbanna athraithe san aeráid agus ag brú na milliúin daoine in oirthear na hAfraice go dtí an gorta. Táim bródúil go bhfuil an Rialtas seo ag iarraidh sa bhuiséad seo ár n-oibleagáidí idirnáisiúnta a chomhlíonadh, ag leanúint lenár infheistíocht i gcúnamh forbartha thar lear agus ag cur leis. Ní leor é go fóill, agus ba cheart d'Éirinn leanúint dá glór a úsáid sa phobal idirnáisiúnta chun an tsaoráid caillteanais agus damáiste a bhrú agus a bhrú, go háirithe ag COP27, ach is céim sa treo ceart í.

Mar sin, mar fhocal scoir, is é seo an tríú cáinaisnéis ag an Rialtas seo. Bhí tionchar ag dúshlán ollmhóra idirnáisiúnta ar gach ceann acu, Covid-19 ar an gcéad dul síos, agus anois ag an gcogadh san oirthear. Táim bródúil as an obair atá déanta againn i ngach ceann acu chun na daoine is leochailí a chosaint ar dhúshlán nach bhfacthas a leithéid riamh cheana.

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Ba mhaith liom a rá gur buiséad an-mhaith é seo agus molaim an

beart atá déanta ag an Aire agus ag an Rialtas. Níl aon dabht ach go raibh dianghá leis na rudaí atá saite istigh ann. One thing in particular I have campaigned for in Fine Gael, and I put down a motion on this at the Fine Gael Parliamentary party some time ago, was an empty homes or vacant homes tax. I can think of no better way to have a go at the 160,000 empty homes around the country, in particular the 37,000 empty homes and apartments in Dublin city, and to put pressure on the owners when they lie vacant for a significant period.

As I said, I have campaigned for this and I have worked with the Peter McVerry Trust in Drogheda as I campaigned. They came to Drogheda and I brought them around and showed them homes which were vacant and empty. Some of the homes had birds nesting in the roof spaces for years, flowering shrubs growing out of the windows and, as we all know, rodents dancing and having a merry time in the kitchen, with the doors locked and nobody inside for years. Nobody gives a bloody damn, or that is the truth of it until people like the Peter McVerry Trust say otherwise.

It is about time that this Government woke up to these issues. I had to campaign hard for this and there was significant opposition to this move, as we all know. The reality is that when an empty homes tax was introduced in Vancouver, a major city, the number of vacant homes has dropped 30% since 2017. That is some figure. Imagine if we could do that in Dublin, in Drogheda or right around the country.

There are significant and appropriate exemptions for families or people who own these homes, for example, if somebody is in hospital or in a nursing home. The data show there are many significant and important exemptions. The key thing is not to get the income from the tax; the key thing is to get the house let and to get people living there. There is evidence that we have significant purchasers of properties in the major cities and other significant areas who are very well able to buy these homes, but they buy them to leave, they buy them to appreciate in value, they buy them to make a profit for themselves. Nobody is turning the key to go into those apartments or to use the kitchens or the facilities.

It is time to put an end to that and I believe this is a start. I acknowledge what some of the people on my left are saying, namely, it does not go far enough. Of course, it does not go far enough but, by God, it is a damn good start. As we debate the budget and the legislation that is to back this up, I will be making my submissions on it. If the housing committee meets on this issue, I hope that it takes evidence from people in other countries as to how this can make it tougher on those who are abusing the privilege of owning a home and excluding people from it by virtue of just sitting on it.

The other point I would like to make concerns another campaign in County Louth which is not mentioned in the budget. Nonetheless, it is part of my thinking and Fine Gael has referred to it. This relates to using compulsory purchase orders to release into the community homes that were vacant or abandoned. It was a very active programme in County Louth and over a three-year period more than 100 houses were brought back into commission, with families living in them, for an average cost, including the site cost, of under €200,000. There is progress. There is a way forward. It is time for the Government to follow up further on this. Of the empty homes officers who are dotted around the country, some of them work very hard on empty homes and others, regrettably, do other administrative work, which, to me, is a joke. If they are on the empty homes desk, that is what they should be doing - ringing up, putting pressure on, getting people to respond to queries, finding out who the owners are and if they cannot find them, they should then go through CPO to get the homes occupied.

The Government is serious about housing. The budget for this year is more than €4.5 billion. Let us continue that work. As part of our armour, let us use the pressure of this empty homes tax, beginning this year, based on facts and on what has happened in other jurisdictions. Let us increase the tax on these homes if people do not use them and if they do not put them into commission in the first year. In Vancouver, that tax was raised from 3% in the first year to about 5% or 6% now. I welcome that. It is what we need to do. I am not one for shouting about what I do, and not too many other people shout about it either, but I want to say I am very happy with this and I very much support this. I might be sitting on the backbenches but my voice, hopefully, will continue to be heard. Should I have the exalted position that the Minister of State holds in the future, I will be very happy to shout there as well.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Is that a job application?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** At least I have no chance of getting that job.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** Put in your CV while you are at it.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Emer Higgins):** We move to Sinn Féin. I call Deputy Seán Crowe, who is sharing time with Deputies Brian Stanley and Ruairí Ó Murchú.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** We know that health and housing have been the dominant issues in the past two Dáileanna and I would argue they have been the dominant issues over all of the Dáileanna when I have been a Deputy. I would also argue that budget 2023 fails to deal with either of them and just tinkers around the edges.

The big solution for renters in this week's budget is a €500 annual tax credit. Again, it is welcome and better than nothing, but it is a sticking plaster approach and the problem is just getting worse. In the last Daft report, a three-bed house in Dublin 24 that a family might hope to live in was €1,971. This credit is potentially only worth a week's rent to them. If rents go up another 12%, for a family moving into a house down the road next year, fully half of that €500 credit is wiped out in the increase. A tax credit with no control on rents is simply throwing good money down the drain. It will help workers and families in the short term, but will still leave them vulnerable to the long-term spiralling of rents and does nothing for security of tenure. Some suggest it may even fuel inflation in rents. I ask the Tánaiste if one person's tax credit is another person's tax income.

Sinn Féin would have put a month's rent back into every renter's pocket and banned rent hikes for the next three years. Renters deserve real action and real relief, not one-off measures that potentially do more harm than good. We must address the root causes of the problems if we are to be fiscally prudent and not simply populist parties, trying to buy the electorate with tax credits and income tax that narrow our tax base further and tie our fate to that of a small number of multinational companies.

This budget is yet another example of how the Government has no real plan to address the fundamental problems facing our health service. There will not be one more acute bed in our capacity after this budget. We consistently hear big numbers being thrown around about the health service.

*4 o'clock*



Every year, we are told that that year's is the biggest budget ever. We have a growing and ageing population. As such, we will spend more on our health service each year just to stand still. The Minister announced that hundreds of thousands of people would have GP care. That is welcome, but it was put forward as if it were some sort of magic wand. Hundreds of thousands of people have no access to a GP because this Government has allowed the retention and recruitment problem in our health service to become a crisis. There has been no mention of additional trainee places for nurses, doctors, radiologists and other key professions where gaps need to be filled. People cannot access the most basic elements of healthcare, namely, GPs, dentists and scans. Even if someone can get on a GP's, dentist's or consultant's books, it can take weeks, months or years to get an appointment, depending on which the person is trying to see. I am tired of these grand ideas when there is not a shred of a plan to implement them. Last year, the Minister announced that there would be 10,000 more staff in our health service. That was welcome, but we have recruited fewer than half of that number. This Government is great at telling people what they want to hear when it does not have the slightest intention of seeing it through.

The Government's commitment to retrofitting has been lacklustre. The current scheme ignores the oldest, coldest and poorest homes and prioritises those with the greatest means rather than the greatest need. According to the response to a recent parliamentary question asked of the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, it would take up to ten months just to get a home surveyed for a Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, free energy upgrade. The whole process would take more than two years. We must introduce tiered supports, with deep retrofits for low- and middle-income homes funded by between 65% and 100%, depending on income. This would make retrofits a realistic option for those who remain locked out of the Government's schemes. It is all well and good for the Government to say that it will match people's investment if they happen to have €10,000 lying around, but that is far from the reality for most of those households that I deal with every day. A deep retrofit of the family home is the single greatest way for many families to reduce their carbon output. If the programme is to have meaningful results, we should support those with needs rather than those with means.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. While the budget contains some welcome measures for which Sinn Féin has been advocating for years - I will claim those as a victory on our part - others that the Government is introducing are being implemented in a half-baked way. The failure to implement a rent freeze ensures that renters will continue to face financial uncertainty, given that landlords will use the tax credit to hike rents. We have long advocated for renters to receive a tax credit worth one month's rent and for this to be accompanied by a rent freeze. One cannot be done without the other, but that is the problem with what is in the Government's budget. Students will lose out because they cannot avail of it, nor can the lowest paid workers, given that they are not in the tax bracket. Units are not registered either. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, is from the same constituency as me and will know from the people coming to his office that there is a great deal of unregistered rental accommodation. Unfortunately, an opportunity is being missed.

The budget provides no additional social and affordable homes for purchase. The provision of these units is an essential component in resolving the housing crisis. Speaking as a member of a party of affordable home purchase, I am disappointed by this. The Government has written a blank cheque for landlords, increasing rent subsidies by €97 million. These were introduced as a short-term measure. Like me, the Minister of State will remember when they were intro-

duced.

The vacant homes tax is a step in the right direction, but a small one. As the Minister of State knows, the value of many of the properties in question is low. In Laois, they will be rated at €99 per annum. Three times that makes €297. That is not enough of an incentive to get vacant properties back into use. It needs to be stepped up, and I advise the Government to go further.

The lowest paid workers will receive a derisory 80 cent increase in the minimum wage. That does not even keep up with inflation. We called for an increase of €1.40 in line with our plans to reach a living wage by the end of 2023. The Government's income tax changes also fail to benefit lower paid workers. According to the Central Statistics Office, CSO, the medium wage is €36,095, meaning that fewer than 50% of workers will receive a benefit from the higher tax threshold moving from €36,800 to €40,000. We would have reduced USC on a tapered basis so that low- and middle-income workers would benefit more. This measure would have meant an extra €700 for those on €35,000 or less but the Government's means €190. That is a fact.

The budget does not deal with the root cause of the energy price crisis. Instead, the Government has written a blank cheque for energy companies. As previously, the energy credits for households will be pocketed by the energy companies. We wanted a cap on energy prices. The incentive for the companies not to hike up prices would have been the introduction of a windfall tax to ensure that they would be financially penalised for price gouging.

Workers and families face a further increase in the carbon tax in October, yet the Government's retrofit plans do not prioritise low- and middle-income households. Sinn Féin proposed a number of targeted retrofit schemes that would prioritise regions like the midlands in particular, where there is a high dependency on solid fuels. We also proposed a tiered scheme based on household income.

The Government has continued its scheme to subsidise the purchase of large electric vehicles. I do not have a problem with grants for electric vehicles, only large electric vehicles like SUVs and Land Rovers. From the figures we have received over the past year, many of those are in places like south Dublin, where there is adequate public transport. People in Laois-Offaly are subsidising those.

Turning to health, we welcome the decision to adopt our long-advocated proposal to expand the GP visit card. This is a welcome step towards the reformed system under Sláintecare. However, there are no targets to address the crisis in the hospital system. This is disappointing. There are no figures in the budget for additional critical care beds despite Ireland being well below the international average at approximately half the OECD level. Sinn Féin's alternative budget committed to expanding hospital capacity rapidly, including through an extra 37 ICU beds.

While there are some welcome measures in the budget, and despite the fact that the Government is committing large amounts of public money, it has failed to put much of that money where it is most needed, particularly in health and housing. That is disappointing.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I was considering raising a number of points, starting with unfairness. Deputies will know the example of the person on €135,000 who will get a tax break of €830 and the person on €35,000 who will only get €190. I was going to go through each issue individually, but then I said "Maybe not", because what are we doing here? We all accept that

we are in the middle of an energy crisis and the EU, in particular the European Commission, is finally getting around to dealing with it, albeit slowly. We know that the geopolitical situation is not going well for Vladimir Putin - I do not mean to take away from the difficulties that the people of Ukraine are facing - but the one thing he seems to have going for him is the financial and energy crises across the western world. We need to get our act together.

Under our proposal on capping prices, people would have short-term clarity until February, letting them know what bills they would be paying. As Deputy Stanley mentioned, we are calling for a windfall tax on energy companies to ensure leverage. This is a legitimate short-term solution. We know that there is a wider problem that needs to be dealt with and the EU should have been on the ball faster. Ireland also needs to play its part. We could have the old argument about how this Government was not going to do anything to decouple gas and electricity prices, but we are in a different place now and we need that decoupling to be delivered. Without decoupling, Ireland and every other country will face economic carnage.

Some of the budget's measures are good. We accept that a cut of €1,000 in the third level fees that someone must pay for his or her kid is a significant measure. That is accepted. The problem is we have a budget built on a major flaw. We are still dealing with original crises, especially concerning health and housing. We welcome the €500 tax credit for renters, but we do not accept it will do the business. We have all seen the sky-high rents. Everybody here has quoted them, from one end of Ireland to the other. It is an abject failure. I am not sure how people are able to make some of these payments. I do not understand how the system has not fallen apart already. Until we start doing the business, that is, until we start to build enough houses, including council houses, affordable mortgages and cost rental, we will be going nowhere. This is where we really need to do things.

Regarding healthcare, we must deal with the fact of the backlog and the failures which mean we do not have the required positions in community and primary care. We all know the issues existing concerning disability services. Even where people have established rights to services, everything has been granted and assessments of needs successfully gone through, and all the rest of it, they cannot access those services. Until we deal with those aspects, we are an abject failure and there is no point in saying anything different.

As I said, some things are to be welcomed. Then I ask myself what it is we really want here. What is a worthwhile target and project? All I am going to say is that we need a new Ireland. I do not think anybody would find it shocking that a member of Sinn Féin would stand up and espouse Irish unity as a solution. I do not, however, mean it in the sense of a fourth green field. I am talking about the fact that on Saturday, 1 October, at 1 p.m. in the 3Arena, we are having a Together We Can event. It is a conversation on Irish unity, and includes several people who sit in this Chamber, from across all parties. I welcome this fact. The meeting obviously has people from North and South. It even has people like Colm Meaney, who would have acting skills on a similar par to mine.

The point of the event is that we are living on a changed island now. We are in a completely different place. We all know the old Orange state has gone. Beyond that, we now have an opportunity to build something better. When I am talking about doing that, I am talking about an Ireland where we all undertake these pieces of work together. It would be an Ireland where we would build a decent Irish national health service, develop a decent housing system that delivers for all our people and deliver an education system across the board and one where we have a conversation about how we will all live together. There has been a failure at Government level

to do these pieces of work. I welcome the cross-party support for this event and I also welcome anyone going along to event in the 3Arena. It is on at 1 p.m. and tickets are still available on Ticketmaster and at the door on the day. We have a genuine opportunity to build something real and better on this island.

**Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin:** I have to reflect on the last contribution because it doubles down on a previous contribution concerning the Sinn Féin reaction to the budget. I am conscious of the Europe we are living in now. Looking at the UK, its economy is going down the tubes because the British people were asked to eat a flag in a Brexit referendum a few years ago. I see that in Italy a party with neo-fascist roots has been elected because people there have been asked to eat a flag. The same thing has happened in Hungary, Poland, Austria, France and the US. It seems to me that the No. 1 response from the main Opposition party has been to encourage Irish people to eat a flag as well and I find this utterly depressing.

When I look at this budget, many parts of it are to be welcomed. It is not possible to look at some of the measures announced this week and not welcome many of them. I am thinking of the education system. For many years, I campaigned on the issue of schoolbooks and on changing the conversation in education from one of money to one of child development. I say that because, as I repeat often, the interaction between a parent and a school, and between school leaders and parents, can often be about money. That is a humiliating relationship if people do not have that money. Therefore, if we delete those conversations by inserting the State, which I think Fine Gael has finally concluded is a good thing, we will unleash the potential of that relationship to be built on something other than money.

Therefore, the announcement of free schoolbooks at primary level is welcome. We should, however, always go further. We should do that at second level as well. We should ban voluntary contributions. We should talk about all those things in the education system that act as barriers to conversations between parents and school staff. Principals do not want to be fundraisers. The Minister of State knows that so many parents' associations become effective fundraisers.

On the capitation announcement, there really was not one. This is where the structural element versus once-off measures comes into clear focus. It was announced that €100 million will be allocated to address how schools will be able to get over the winter. This was not a structural announcement, though, and I wish to see more detail on it. I say this because, inevitably, when a school cannot meet its electricity or other energy bills, and one third of the cost of running a school stems from energy outlays, then that responsibility is going to fall back on the fundraising capacity of a school and parents will again be asked to put their hands in their pockets. Therefore, I want to see more movement in this regard as well.

We are concerned that much of this budget, as my party leader, Deputy Bacik said, is a treadmill budget. It will see us over the next couple of months, but we could well be back here in the new year talking again about these structural issues that have not yet been addressed by this Government. It made an announcement concerning free GP care last year, but that has not yet been introduced for children of a certain age group. Announcements were also made regarding pandemic payments to certain healthcare workers and they have also not been delivered on yet either. Additionally, people in the Construction Defects Alliance are deeply concerned that the Government is suggesting the €80 million to be raised through the levy on concrete blocks will be enough to be able to fund the addressing of retrospective construction issues in future.

Turning to housing, we absolutely could have a more visionary approach in respect of giv-

ing people certainty on rents by having a rent freeze and certainty on evictions by having a ban on them. Moving on to the area of SMEs, as the Labour Party's enterprise spokesperson, I would say we are very concerned about the Government's lack of preparedness for a jobs crisis over the winter. We could see many people on reduced hours or, indeed, losing their jobs because of the crisis small businesses are facing. While the Government has made announcements, I do not think they go far enough. I certainly do not think that supporting businesses is going to be enough; there must also be support for jobs. The Government did that during the Covid-19 crisis, and this is the basis on which it should approach this situation as well. There must be investment in programmes and schemes that will support businesses in trying to keep jobs, and this endeavour must be focused on the workers.

I was struck by the last few words of the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, when he spoke about families and businesses. It is not, however, just families and businesses that need to survive, but also the workers. It must be ensured that those workers still have jobs to go to in January, when, as I said, we could very well be back here in the new year talking about these issues again. Turning to the issue of childcare, the measures announced for that area are welcome because we had been talking about childcare for some years. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, is to be congratulated because he has stuck with this and he has made the difference in this budget. Again, though, we believe that in the context of a cost of €275 million we could have a further intervention for families and a cap on fees of €200. I say this because we again stand apart in this regard as our childcare fees are the highest in Europe. We also pay for schoolbooks when people in other European countries, and in the North, do not. People here also pay for GP visits when nobody in the North or the UK does so.

My final comments will refer to my initial ones. I am proud to be here as a representative of the people of Dublin Bay North to interact with the Government regarding this budget. I have seen what has been happening across Europe, however, and I have also seen the main motivation of speakers from Sinn Féin, the main Opposition party, this week, and it worries me. I say this because for 100 years, or more, we have convinced people that if they could just eat a flag, it would make all of us much better. There must be a different way. The State must be bigger, it must be on people's side and it must support and empower them. People cannot eat a flag because it will not nourish them or make them happy. Our budget debate needs to be much more profound than that.

**Deputy Brian Leddin:** I am at risk of repeating much that has been said about this budget this week already. However, I cannot but acknowledge the many good things that have been secured in this budget that will make our society better and fair.

My Green Party colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, secured significant cuts in childcare fees. There is a 25% reduction in fees this year, moving to a 50% cut in two years. Funding for more childcare places and affordable childcare are critically important for our society, for parents, children and employers. It gives stability and security to the sector and was very good news for families throughout Ireland.

I welcome this budget because we are introducing free school books for primary school children and solar panels for every school in the country. I welcome this budget because of the historic €90 million allocation for nature and biodiversity. That is an 83% increase since the formation of this Government. There are energy credits, social welfare increases and a fuel allowance payment in this budget that will help our people through this winter. I welcome the major increases in the retrofitting budget with continued focus on low-income homes that will



help insulate our people from high energy prices in the future.

However, in certain areas this budget did not go far enough. In my view, it is not sufficiently aligned with our climate policy. I say so particularly with respect to transport. I acknowledge there are good measures in the area of transport. The 20% cut in public transport fares and the 50% cut in fares for our young people are being extended to the end of 2023, but it has been reported that my party fought hard and expended political capital to get this. This should not have had to be the case. It is a policy that is popular and is right, and I would have expected it would have been enthusiastically supported by our coalition partners. I see the evidence daily, as I use public transport, of the benefit of this measure. There was a step change in usage when it was introduced a few months ago.

I want to talk about gaps that are in this budget and I will begin with vehicle registration tax, VRT. With respect to VRT measures that were implemented a number of years ago which aim to reduce inefficiency in the private transport fleet, to some degree they are succeeding, but I would argue they are not succeeding nearly quickly enough. We must drastically reduce the sale and use of fossil fuel vehicles. Those reforms are also not effective at reducing SUV sales. We can see that such sales are surging. They are a scourge on our roads. They impact on our climate but also on the safety of our people. It is my strongly held view that we have not used VRT to discourage SUV sales sufficiently. This should not be politically difficult. We are talking about the SUVs that have not been purchased yet. The only people who would have been upset are the car dealerships and the motor industry generally. We can and must stand up to them.

We have given generous grants to the taxi industry in recent years to purchase electric vehicles. It was time, in my view, to give supports to other sectors. My own preference was that home help workers would be supported. These are people who must use their own vehicles for their work, who are low paid, who provide a critically important and undervalued service for our elderly and infirm, who for the most part are rurally based, who cannot afford to purchase electric vehicles, yet who often must drive tens of kilometres daily in the course of their duties, thus, through no fault of their own, making a large contribution to our transport emissions.

With respect to active travel, beyond the overarching programme for Government commitments, there is nothing in this budget. It would be wrong of me not to acknowledge those overarching spending commitments. They represent an unprecedented investment in public transport and in walking and cycling infrastructure, and I am seeing the roll-out in my own constituency. I give credit to Limerick City and County Council and its active travel team for being unique among Irish local authorities, I think, in managing to spend their allocation and in developing a pipeline of well-designed projects for the future.

However, there was much more that could have been done with respect to a reduction in VAT on bikes, electric bikes and cargo bikes. With respect to cargo bikes, there is a shortage of drivers in the retail sector and we could have easily addressed that issue with supports for cargo bikes for businesses. The bike-to-work scheme remains limited to the PAYE sector. I believe broader supports are needed to encourage uptake in other cohorts, especially among the retired, the unemployed and those in education. Those are merely examples of where we could have done better in the budget.

It is important to understand that system change is needed in transport. Currently, our policies and our system promote growing car use and we are overly reliant on electric vehicles as

a solution. It is not nearly enough that we transition our private fossil fleet to electric vehicles. This is not system change. In many ways, it is bedding in the system we already have, one that is the problem.

From a transport and climate point of view, we did not get it all right in this budget and our policy approach generally is not right either. We should be much more ambitious in the next budget but we have an opportunity now as the climate action plan is being revised to make amends for the gaps in this budget. It is critical, in my view, that we introduce a meaningful vehicle-kilometre reduction target. We simply will not reduce transport emissions by 50% by 2030 and we will not bring about system change unless we do this. Applying a vehicle-kilometre reduction target to all vehicles, not only those that run on petrol and diesel, is meaningful and beneficial to society. Our neighbours in Scotland are doing it and we should too.

I am looking forward to engaging with the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues in respect of the points I have made today.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Dealing with the cost-of-living crisis is the top priority in budget 2023. The Government introduced a very significant €11 billion package on Tuesday to support households and businesses. The budget will continue to invest in public services, particularly our education, health, childcare and housing services, while increasing social protection and pension rates, supporting enterprise and delivering tax relief for working people.

The €4.1 billion cost-of-living package is very welcome and necessary as we face into a challenging winter. In particular, I welcome: the €600 energy credit, which will be paid in three €200 instalments in November, January and March; the €1,000 tax credit for renters, €500 of which can be claimed this year and €500 next year; childcare fees being reduced by up to €2,100 per child; a double payment of child benefit in November; a double payment of welfare payments in October as well as the normal double payment at Christmas; a €500 grant for carers and those with disabilities; a €1,000 reduction in college fees for all students; major expansion of eligibility for the fuel allowance to bring more than 80,000 households into the system in January; fuel allowance to include a €400 lump sum; a working family payment to include a €500 lump sum; and a double SUSI payment in one month, paid in December. All of these are extremely welcome. Many colleagues spoke about them earlier and it is good to hear the members of the Opposition also welcome many of the measures. Of course, I cannot fail but mention the much-needed energy supports for the SMEs which require support over the next number of months, with up to €10,000 per month being offered there.

Working families with one child will save up to €4,500. A working family, for instance, with three children, one of whom is in college, will see a saving of up to €5,640. A pensioner living alone in receipt of the State pension will see savings of up to €2,375, while a person with a disability living alone will see savings of up to €2,460.

It is also recognised that the cost-of-living crisis will impact every household. The €600 electricity credit reflects this. This direct payment will assist households to manage their bills over the winter regardless of whether they use oil, gas or solid fuel to heat their homes. The significant adjustment of tax bands to ensure people earning under €40,000 do not have to pay tax at the higher rate is extremely welcome. This recognises the fact many people earning between €35,000 and €40,000 and above are not eligible for many social supports such as the housing assistance payment, HAP, and social housing. I welcome the permanent increases in social protection payments, such as the broad increase in core rates.

The budget will make a real difference in people's lives. Moving beyond the direct payments, we can see improvements in other areas that will improve lives also. For instance, in education, the Minister, Deputy Foley, is rolling out free school books to all primary level schools. This will benefit 500,000 students and their parents next year. The reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio to 23:1 recognises the challenges facing children after the disruption of Covid. It should be noted that this is the third year in a row of tackling the pupil-teacher ratio. An additional 686 special education teachers and an additional 1,194 special needs assistants, SNAs, will make a huge difference for children and the learning environment. Parents with children in childcare will see a saving of up to €2,106 per child, a real difference which will help parents.

There is a massive investment in health too, with 6,000 new staff and the removal of hospital inpatient charges for public patients, worth €800 per patient. There is a €443 million package to reduce waiting lists and a €9 million package to reduce oral health waiting lists. Those changes will make a real difference for hundreds of thousands of people in need of such care. There is also investment in mental health.

Students will benefit from the reduction in fees, the bonus SUSI payments, which I have referred to, and the permanent increases in grants from next year.

In the few moments remaining to me, I will touch on just one issue the Opposition has raised, namely, the capping of energy rates. We need only look across the water and at what happened even today to see that borrowing rates are going through the roof and there are serious challenges facing that economy, challenges which could have an impact on our economy too. We have to be conscious that if we follow that route, we too could be impacted in that way.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I welcome the opportunity to speak about the budget. It is a huge budget and has been welcomed across the board. I had intended complimenting members of the Opposition on also having acknowledged the tremendous efforts on the part of the Government to support people. Unfortunately, nobody from the Opposition is present at this time as they have left early on a Thursday. This budget should get due debate. We have given over time to do so and Government Deputies are here to speak about it.

I acknowledge the tremendous and unswerving effort of my Green Party colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O'Gorman, on the delivery of a 25% cut in childcare costs for parents and minors. That is probably the most significant State intervention support for parents in respect of the affordability of childcare ever, and we are only at the halfway mark. The intention and objective of the Government and the Minister are to reduce childcare costs by 50%. We will approach that in next year's budget, but the reduction in this budget is massive. My children have just finished childcare but I have been spending on childcare for the past 12 years and the cost is eye-watering. If we can reduce that cost by 50%, it will put money back into the pockets of parents. I note the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, in his speech yesterday estimated that that measure represents about €175 per month back in the pockets of parents. That is massive. It takes pressure off. It is not just people with children who will benefit from that; grandparents will as well. Often grandparents are left with childminding. That can be stressful and difficult for grandparents but they feel obliged to do it. We are making childcare affordable, which is hugely important.

To go back a step, the pay agreement for childcare workers has been broadly welcomed by the childcare sector, by SIPTU and across the board, and that is incredibly important. We leave

our children with early educators and childminders and they need to be paid properly for the tremendously important work they do for our children, so I welcome that as well. Additional core funding has also been provided in order that we can have extra hours as well as funding for childcare workers.

There are a number of other areas in childcare. We forget sometimes, because of budget day and the big reveal, although most of the budget tends to be in the public domain two or three days beforehand, but earlier this year we expanded and brought forward the school meals programme. We expanded the number of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, schools. I think up to 60,000 children will get school meals this year because of that Government intervention. I can think of nobody more vulnerable in society than a hungry child in a classroom. I highly commend the Ministers, Deputies Humphreys and Foley, on that measure. There are also the solar panels for schools. It makes complete sense to put solar panels on schools. It helps them with their electricity costs and they can sell the excess generated back to the grid. It is a small source of income for schools. We often see schools under pressure for income and then parents feeling under pressure on voluntary contributions. Anything we can do to help schools to accumulate a little money is to be welcomed. This is a really smart move. I welcome it.

In transport, again, because of budget day, we forget what we did in the previous year, when we reduced transport fares for the first time since 1947. Deputy Leddin referred to the transformative changes we have to make in transport and how we get people around and get them to work, school and recreation. It has to be on public transport. Public transport has to be affordable and punctual, and cutting fares is a measure towards that affordability. The 20% reduction in fares was maintained in budget 2023. We had agreed it would continue to the end of 2022, but now it will be extended to 2023. It should continue permanently. That is what we should work towards as a Government.

We have continued to develop transport throughout the country. Significant sums of money have gone into all levels of transport. There are new buses. I live by a new bus route to come from Wicklow up to Bray and Dublin, starting early in the new year. There are train carriages arriving into North Wall this week. They are on the seas at the moment. They will go into service around the country. That is continuous, forward-looking Government investment and an understanding that these things take time. When we go from year to year and people do not know what their budgets are, it is hard to plan. There should therefore be forward thinking, rather than going off cliff edges with budgets, in order that people can plan and transport companies such as CIÉ and Irish Rail can plan to purchase that stock.

Under the DART expansion programme, a large number of electric trains are on order. The largest ever order for electric trains was placed earlier this year or last year. I think it is for up to 750 carriages. That is for the greater Dublin area, but we also have the Connecting Ireland programme and new buses being purchased and new services being rolled out. We have towns that never had a bus service before now being served by buses. It is really making a difference in those towns. Buses are not just for getting to work; they are for getting to school and hospital appointments and for recreation and communities. We often think of transport as a service in the morning and evening for people to get into work, but transport builds community. I could go on about the positives of public transport all day, and I have often done so, so I will cut it short now.

We talk about this budget being a cost-of-living budget. Energy costs are through the roof

and gas prices are spiralling because Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine and cut off gas supplies. That is the reason energy costs are high. They are high for everybody in Europe, and everybody is suffering as a result of high energy costs. The introduction of the three €200 energy credits, in November, January and March, to coincide with the billing cycles will help people. We do not want anybody to be afraid to turn on the heat or the lights. The energy credits will help. People should know that they are on the way and will come with the billing cycles.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, will look with fairness at mounting energy costs for people as bills build up. The moratorium on disconnections is very welcome. People should be assured that the Government is supporting them with the electricity credits, the various double social protection payments, the double childcare payments and the double fuel allowance payments. There are targeted measures as well. There are double payments of children's allowance, which is paid to everybody. That is what we do.

As for the grant system we have, the short-term challenge on energy is, ultimately, to get through this period while gas prices are high and the war is ongoing. We do not know how long that will last, but the Government is committed to helping people through that period. We need to think further into the future about how we never again fall into the problem of this dependency on fossil fuels, the prices of which are going in only one direction. Be that diesel, petrol, oil, gas or whatever other type of fossil fuel, it is running out and it will only go up in value and cost. We therefore need to think to the future and to renewables. I think it was the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, who spoke about the resources to go into MARA, the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority. Ireland's energy future is in renewable energies, our offshore capacity and our massive sea area. We can become an exporter of energy to Europe. Countries like Holland and Germany are looking at us with jealousy because of the size of the ocean reserve we have, the capacity we have in natural resources and the hydrogen we can develop for export. We can export that renewable energy through copper, through the two electricity interconnectors to England, one of which is under construction and the other of which is in operation, as well as the interconnector to France, or we can export it as hydrogen. We will also be able to use that hydrogen for our own electricity generation. Gas plants will be converted to hydrogen and that is the future. We will retrofit every home so that homeowners can take advantage of the abundance of electricity we are going to have. We will heat our homes with electricity and will have solar panels on every roof. We have talked about free solar panels on schools but we also have the grant that we rolled out this year. A €2,400 grant is available to every home in this country, which makes a lot of sense. If one puts a 2.5 kW solar installation on one's roof, one will probably cover one third of one's electricity needs and at the rates being charged for electricity at the moment - we do not know how long that will last - one will get one's money back in around seven years. That makes a huge amount of sense. More and more people are getting solar panels installed and more and more companies are providing solar equipment. As that ramps up, it will create more jobs. These are clean, green jobs that will last into the future. That is how we will have an economy that is secure in its energy, in the direction it is going in transport, in decarbonisation and in cutting down on our carbon emissions. It provides an economy that is secure so that we can fund health and education and support our people through these really difficult times. That is the future vision that I have for this country. That is the future vision the Green Party has had for a long time and I am so happy to be part of a Government, with our coalition partners, that is putting these things into practice and putting in place the policies from the programme for Government we agreed.

Finally, I want to comment on the vacant homes tax that was introduced, which is a first in



this country. This is Ireland saying that it can no longer tolerate vacant homes and that we are going to take action on it. There cannot be so many vacant homes when so many people do not have a home. I welcome the measure and thank the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, for introducing it. We can expand on it, bring more properties into play and make it an activator of houses rather than a revenue generator. I also welcome the Minister for Finance's comments on property and the Commission on Taxation and Welfare. He welcomed the commission's proposals on changes to the local property tax and the site value tax. They require careful consideration and consultation across government and I look forward to same.

**Deputy John Lahart:** It is worth noting that there is literally no Opposition Deputy in the Dáil Chamber right now. As I look across at a phalanx of empty benches, it is a point worth noting.

This is a good budget for families, small and medium enterprises and businesses generally, schools, students, those who police our streets, those who are at the receiving end in terms of need in acute healthcare, public transport users, employees, schoolchildren and the most vulnerable in our society, including those who are addicted and their families. It is also a very prudent budget. For six years I have been a member of the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight and at every meeting with previous Ministers for Finance I have raised the issue of corporation tax and the warnings by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, about our over-reliance on corporation tax and our vulnerability with regard to corporation tax as a source of expenditure. This is the first Government in my experience that has taken the advice and warnings of IFAC seriously. It has put a significant sum away and plans to put an even more significant sum away next year to protect and insure against any other shocks that the economy may experience.

The background to this budget is the weaponising of energy by Russia resulting from its invasion of Ukraine. Many of the challenges we are facing right now would not have arisen had energy supply and energy sources not been weaponised in such a way. It is important for the public that this connection continues to be made because it is so easy to lose connection with the reality underpinning some of the incredible measures, particularly around energy, that have been required, including the commitment to pay businesses of a particular size up to €10,000 per month to assist them with their energy bills.

I was out and about at a number of constituency engagements this morning and several constituents asked me what I thought of the budget. I told them that what I think of it is not really important and asked what they thought of it. There was a broad welcome for the budget. That is the impression I am getting. Having spoken to a number of businesspeople in recent weeks in relation to the energy piece, I know that many of them will be breathing a very deep sigh of relief, not just today but in terms of how this budget will assist in the months ahead.

A number of family-friendly measures are worth mentioning. Obviously, the childcare costs measure is a big one for young families and the situation with regard to childcare and crèche fees will be improved again next year and built upon. Things like the energy credits, free primary schoolbooks, reductions in university fees and the retention of reduced public transport fares are welcome, as are the pension increases for older families, couples and individuals.

There is another key measure which I will take some responsibility for, unless someone says I was not the only one to raise it. I raised it at the aforementioned budgetary oversight committee after a constituent of mine raised it with me and pointed out that some businesses are doing

extraordinarily well. Last year the Government introduced a measure enabling businesses to give a €500 tax-free gift to their employees. The piece for the employer was that he or she did not have to pay PRSI on it. The constituent I spoke to asked if that could be raised to €1,000 this year because there are employers out there who would like to make that kind of gift to their employees. I raised it with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, who passed it on to the Minister for Finance. Not only has the increase to €1,000 been included in the budget, but provision has also been made for an employer to give that gift twice. Imagine employees receiving a gift certificate or One For All voucher in mid-November or on 1 December. This quite substantial measure has been somewhat overlooked in the reporting of the budget but I would encourage those employers who are doing very well to consider using it.

The budget has been reasonably good for third and fourth level students but I want to highlight the plight of PhD students. This Government is more committed than any previous government to higher education and has the first Cabinet Minister with full responsibility for higher education. However, we are not giving enough to PhD students to enable them to study. Without the resource of PhD students, the country will be poorer in terms of enterprise opportunities that may lie ahead. In particular, I want to mention educational and clinical psychologists. The health service is so short of clinical psychologists and they have campaigned for an increase in the amount they receive to €24,000 per year. I ask the Minister not to focus solely on clinical psychologists because educational psychologists have as important a function in our society. We really need to look at that PhD piece.

Garda resourcing has come very much into focus in the last number of weeks and while I am glad to see the recruitment figures for next year, there are also pretty significant attrition rates in An Garda Síochána. This is not just due, as would traditionally have been the case, to retirements. Some gardaí are leaving because they cannot afford to live in Dublin, while for others the nature of the job is so challenging, including a lack of promotional opportunities, that they have decided to seek alternative employment. That should be a cause of concern for the Minister and the Government.

I would like to see more resources allocated to new technologies which, as the Acting Chair knows, is a subject close to both our hearts. The Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has gone through the Dáil and now has to go to the Seanad, and includes provisions relating to scramblers. Technology, including drone technology, will be needed to police the use of scramblers. I would like the Garda and Minister to have a conversation about that.

The building blocks measure is probably an issue. There are apartments in my constituency that need remediation, and people expected measures in this budget. This is the measure that the Minister for Finance has decided will help to pay for pyrite, mica and defects generally. I have two issues with it. Obviously, it will affect every builder or contractor who buys concrete materials or blocks. The problem is that the people who will ultimately pay for that comprise a much smaller group. They will, more than likely, be first-time buyers or whatever. These measures have to be paid for. They are significant. Social housing construction is outstripping private housing construction. If this was repeated next year, the State would pay itself, through local authorities and approved housing bodies, because they are the ones who would be purchasing materials or paying contractors. That is not what we want.

Ultimately, something dramatic has to happen with the Construction Industry Federation of Ireland in respect of facing up to the reality, in particular in regard to defective apartments and

homes in Dublin. I want to assure my constituents and those who have raised this issue in the Construction Defects Alliance that this is an issue that will not be left sit.

We talked about public transport fares. Reducing fares is great, but if there are no buses on routes reduced fares are of little use to anyone. I note the apology by the National Transport Authority, NTA, to commuters yesterday. That is about as useful as reduced fares when there are no buses on routes and young students, in particular young female students, travelling late in the evening, are left stranded at bus stops and do not know until the last minute what is happening until the bus that is due disappears from the schedule. My understanding is that when free school transport was extended in the summer and there were not enough buses, the Department seemed to find buses from everywhere. I would say to the NTA that it has its own public service obligation to commuters. It needs to go out and find buses for these routes until such time as a contractor can supply buses to those routes. An apology is simply not sufficient and flies in the face of Government measures. The Government has taken successive steps in regard to making public transport much more affordable and attractive. The NTA simply cannot provide buses on the routes to supply and meet the demand that is out there.

The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is present. A number of items relating to acute neurological healthcare are welcome. I welcome the funding for an issue that is close to my heart, namely, Huntington's disease. The Minister of State knows that I served for a number of years on the Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force. There is an additional €10.5 million for the drugs strategy and a further €4 million for the expansion of community and residential addiction services, which are so important. There is almost €1 million for care pathways for high-risk drug and alcohol users. One measure I welcome is the €1 million for monitoring new and emerging drugs. This is a budget that is very broad in its scope and encompasses those who are signed up to the social contract in our society. It has done its very best to meet the challenges that face this country heading into winter 2022 and spring 2023.

**Deputy Bernard J. Durkan:** I have listened carefully to the previous contributions. I have listened to many contributions on the same subject over many years. The usual clichés used to be trotted out, such as “Too little, too late”. Somebody resurrected that phrase again, with some encouragement, in the past few days. The phrase “Opportunities lost” is now a fable. We were told we could have done more and did not do it, and that the budget is a failure. All of those things have been trotted out at various times in the past.

The budget is excellent. It does what is needed now to address the issues that are pertinent and pressing and that are affecting people's livelihoods, their cost of living and their families. It does not resolve everything; no budget ever did. There were always people who said the Government could and should have done more and that if they had been in government, they would have done more. The important thing is that they are usually the Opposition. They would always do more, until they get the chance to do something and then there is something missing.

All credit is due to Ministers for their presentations and the manner in which they went about addressing the issues that are pertinent and pressing now. In education, that involved school transport and pupil teacher ratios. There are some outstanding issues in the school transport system. I have raised the issue a few times and it is to be hoped it can be resolved relatively easily, in particular students with concessionary tickets.

I want to briefly mention that this was made possible because the country was run well in the past two and half years, even in difficult circumstances and in the face of an international

and national economic crash before that. If this country had not stood its ground in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and 2011 and faced up to its responsibilities, we would not be able to do anything now. It would not be possible. We would still be going around with begging bowls.

I recall people saying a couple of years ago that money should not be put into what became the rainy day fund on the basis that it was raining heavily outside at the time. If precautions had not been taken then, we would not now have independence and be able to do the things that need to be done. There is always an unforeseen threat coming down the road. That remains the case still, and it may remain the case into the future.

I was on a committee with the now Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications between 2006 and 2008 when the energy industry was being reviewed. The European Union was, correctly, attempting to create an international grid in such a way that there would be some electricity at all times readily available and generated, and Europe would eventually be independent in terms of energy production. That did not happen for many reasons. In this country, we failed to deliver it. I will not mention any names, but an announcement was made to the effect that we had sufficient energy, or even surplus energy, for the foreseeable future and there was nothing to worry about. Of course, that person was speaking against the background of a country that was on its knees in an economic recession. That prediction was completely and absolutely wrong. At the time, EirGrid should have looked much more carefully at the situation that presented.

There is also an issue regarding wind-generated electricity. I have heard an argument, that still continues to this day, about offshore wind generation. Offshore energy generation means that people want it to be away from them in order that they do not have to put up with it. I would warn against too much reliance on offshore wind energy at this stage because it requires at least ten years of heavy investment that has not yet been put in place. We would have to import it and produce more energy onshore. There are still some places where we can produce more onshore.

#### *5 o'clock*

There were other interruptions such as the undergrounding of all cables. I recall going to Italy some years ago and looking at the cables all over the place. They were up the sides of mountains and so forth. It was good enough for there but we were to go underground in the same way as the Netherlands. There is something of a difference between the terrain in the Netherlands and here. Digging into rock formations takes much more ingenuity than driving across a level plain. Much more needs to be done yet with some urgency.

There is no use in waiting for the lights to go out to take the means that are available and within reach and put them into operation. That is an area on which we need to focus in the future. I agree with my colleagues that the time will come eventually, I hope, when electricity can heat homes and good insulation and energy conservation will do that. It is a good combination.

It is expensive to retrofit houses and so on. It is not easy by a long shot. The biggest contribution that can be made is double or triple glazing of doors and windows. It completely eliminates the escape of heat and noise for those who live in areas where they are concerned about noise such as near motorways or airports. The issue can be, and needs to, be dealt with in a more focused way. We need to examine it and see how and when we can produce the end result, as opposed to saying we have it up and running and it will be done by offshore investment. It will not because it is not there, but it needs to be looked at in a meaningful way.

I could not make this contribution without a mention of housing. Housing remains to be done in an even more meaningful way than it is being done. It is a considerable challenge as it was five or ten years ago. Twenty-seven years ago, I predicted that housing would be the biggest challenge facing the country in the next 20 years. Guys laughed at me in this House and outside it, but I was right. I will make the next prediction now that, sadly, a food shortage will be the next crisis that hits the globe along with the other military challenges we see at present.

That is why we have to balance. I am not chiding my colleagues in the Green Party but we have to challenge those who suggest that we can afford to reduce our food-producing capacity in this country and at the same time survive; we cannot. It does not work that way. We provide food in this country for approximately 50 million people. The knock-on effect of that, if food shortages increase, will be that 50 million people who are barely affected now will be affected by any food shortage in the future. Such a shortage will come rapidly and will be severe. We can think about that because it is a fact.

The budget is tremendous. It addresses the issues as they need to be addressed now and does not overdo it. It holds something in reserve in the event that we have to go again. However, the bit that I have to laugh about is this: the budget has not got through the House and, already, some commentators are asking whether there will be a mini-budget. They do not seem to look across the water to see the result of a mini-budget over there. Even with all the resources it has, the tide can quickly turn into a crisis. We need to talk and act very carefully in a structured way. That is being done.

Suffice it to say that housing and health remain issues. We are not underspending on health, incidentally. Some €22 billion on health is a fair spend. It is a considerable sum and takes a lot of getting. We have to organise it more efficiently than we have in the past and try to ensure that we make the changes that are necessary, long before they become a crisis to cater for the demands that are likely to arise in the future. That is my humble suggestion in that area but I know the Minister and the Government are conscious of that.

I said, years ago, that there was a necessity for an emergency housing programme. I still think that is the case. Even though there has been success, it is efficient to get ahead of where we are to be. If there are 100,000 people on housing waiting lists of all descriptions - both public and private - in a given year, by the time we get to resolving that, there will be 200,000 on the lists, unless we make considerable changes. We have to cater for asylum seekers and, rightly so, and for our indigenous population. Between them, we need to address it in an extra special way.

Debate adjourned.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Health Services**

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I will make a point before I start and I intend no disrespect to the Minister of State who is here. I have looked for this Topical Issue matter on a couple of evenings and it has been selected for this evening. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has



responsibility for the area that I wish to discuss and I am disappointed I was not informed by the Ceann Comhairle's office that she was not available. The Minister of State is hard-working and this is in no way a criticism of my party colleague. She has been very helpful to me on a number of issues and I have been discussing the issue of dementia care with her. We all wait for our slots in Topical Issue debates and it would be only proper and courteous that if the Minister with responsibility for that area is not available, we be told in order that we can wait for a time slot when that Minister is available. It is no disrespect to the Ministers of State who are present but Deputy Butler is the Minister of State with responsibility for dementia care. She is developing a new strategy for dementia care and it is to her I wished to make my points on dementia care in County Tipperary.

When a Minister is not available, the Ceann Comhairle's office should inform us of that and give us the opportunity, if we so wish, to wait for an opportunity for the relevant Minister to be in the Chamber. I make no criticism of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I have an excellent working relationship with her. This evening did not suit her work schedule, which I fully appreciate and accept, but I wish to make the point.

Dementia, unfortunately, is becoming an ever-bigger issue in our society. We had an historic budget this year that we have been talking about for the past number of hours. It includes €180 million for older persons. I give great credit to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for securing that in this year's budget. She has worked extremely hard to get her budget increased and has managed to do so for older persons in this year's budget. She has clearly stated that she wants to develop a dementia strategy following this budget allocation. I also welcome the announcement that a further €50 million of funding will be allocated to deliver a target of 24 million hours of home care in 2023. The Minister of State's priority and focus on development of dementia services and supports will continue. There has been an increase of 15% in new home-care hours ring-fenced for people with dementia, with a continuation of dementia home supports and continuing funding of the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. This is all very welcome news that will be viewed positively by many families throughout the country who have loved ones living with dementia.

I will highlight a serious need for long-term care for people with dementia in my home county of Tipperary. While I appreciate and fully support the fact that we should care for older people in their homes as much as possible, there are times when this is simply not an option for families. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I visited a dementia-specific nursing home village in Bruff, County Limerick, which is leading the way in dementia-specific care in that area. I was most impressed by the standard of care in this facility, the resources available and the specialised approach being taken to the residents. It was top class.

That is what I am looking for for my county. I am aware the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is developing the strategy. Both she and I were there that day at the village in Bruff and we saw the excellent care and the model that is there. I want to push with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for us to get that nationwide and obviously as a Deputy representing Tipperary I am looking for the county to host one of the pilot dementia village projects.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Cormac Devlin):** I thank the Deputy. Before I call the Minister of State, in fairness to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, she is generally here for the Topical Issue debate herself, as Deputy Cahill knows.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** I accept that fully and am not criticising her in any way. I just feel

the Ceann Comhairle should inform us and give us the choice if the Minister or Minister of State with responsibility is not available.

**Acting Chairman (Deputy Cormac Devlin):** That is a fair point.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this issue. Improving services for people with dementia is a priority for the Government and the past three years have seen significant new investment in dementia-specific support services and care countrywide. Next year will see a further €12.16 million investment dedicated to dementia and this is in addition to the cumulative €27.9 million provided across 2021 and 2022.

I will bring the Deputy's concerns back to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. In fairness to her, she is very much to the forefront of fighting for funding in her area and is a pleasure to work with in the Department. This funding over three years is allowing for the rapid expansion of dementia diagnostic services and post-diagnostic supports through the provision of new memory assessment and support services as well as two new specialist memory clinics in Cork and Galway. It is also providing for numerous other initiatives including: dementia-specific day care; quality improvements in hospital and mental healthcare; improved access to the National Dementia Adviser Service; dementia-specific education for home support workers; and the implementation of a national clinical guideline on the appropriate prescribing of psychotropic and antipsychotic medication. In addition, it is targeted at increasing the proportion of new home support hours specifically for people with dementia to 50% in 2023, which is up from 5% in 2021 and 11% in 2022.

In recent years the national network of memory technology resource rooms has expanded to 23 centres. Of these, two are located in County Tipperary. One is in Thurles and the other in Clonmel. These provide an occupational therapist assessment and guidance along with the opportunity to find out about assistive technology options to help manage memory difficulties. Dementia-specific day care is provided in Clonmel and Thurles and taken together all these investments are rapidly improving access to diagnostics, post-diagnostic supports and ongoing care for people with dementia.

While national policy on care for older people is focused on supporting people to remain at home for as long as possible, the national dementia strategy recognised that for some people long-term residential care may be required when home care is no longer feasible or appropriate. A majority of people with dementia reside in generic residential care facilities and this is reflected in the 2016 revised HIQA National Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People in Ireland. The standards place a strong focus on quality of life and a person-centred approach to care for all residents, including those with dementia.

With regard to residential care for people with dementia in north Tipperary, following a meeting last month at Government Buildings, HSE mid-west community healthcare is preparing an options appraisal document for older people services in the north Tipperary area. As agreed at the meeting, the service is reviewing all options for the Dean Maxwell unit and the progression of the new older persons unit in Nenagh. The service is also examining the overall requirements for older people services in the region. HSE mid-west community healthcare is committed to delivering the best possible older people services to the people of north Tipperary and it is expected an options paper will be presented in quarter 4 of 2022. As for dementia-specific residential care services provided in south Tipperary, the Cashel residential older people

29 September 2022

services provides an 11-bed dementia-specific service for women configured as nine single rooms and one double. All other long-term residential beds are profiled as generic beds in order to meet the need.

The Deputy talked about the great facilities and excellent care in Bruff, County Limerick. I will also bring that to the Minister of State's attention.

**Deputy Jackie Cahill:** In case there is any misunderstanding, I am not criticising the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in any respect. She delivered a Jigsaw project for Thurles that is fully operational now. We were waiting a long time for it and I am thankful. She has such an excellent record of delivery that I wanted to make the points about a dementia unit to her personally. She is developing the strategy for dementia.

The case I want to make is parochial and fairly straightforward. I have seen the facility in Bruff and it is an excellent model. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, intends to examine a range of long-term residential care models for people with dementia and I want to strongly press that we want one of those facilities for Tipperary.

Early next year the National Dementia Office will publish a model of care for dementia that outlines care pathways for people living with dementia, from identification of symptoms through assessment, diagnosis, disclosure, care planning and post-diagnostic support. Other Government Teachtaí Dála will also be pressing the Minister of State to have their county included. We have a need for it in my county. There have been ongoing discussions about long-term beds in the Dean Maxwell unit in Roscrea. I am aware there are ongoing discussions with the HSE that were initiated by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I hope these will bring a resolution of long-term public beds for Roscrea. While those discussions were ongoing we talked about a dementia village and, as I said, we went to see Bruff. I am asking strongly that when the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is putting our national strategy together, she consider County Tipperary for a pilot project. Unfortunately, if there is a unit put in place it will be fully utilised.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I outlined earlier the unprecedented level of investment made by the Government since 2021 to improve diagnostic and post-diagnostic care and support for the 64,000 people with dementia throughout Ireland. Last Wednesday was World Alzheimer's Day. This provided an opportunity to reflect on what more we need to do to ensure people with dementia can live well as valued citizens of this country. I am pleased to note that early next year the HSE will publish a model of care for dementia that outlines care pathways for people living with dementia, from identification of symptoms through assessment, diagnosis, disclosure, care planning and post-diagnostic support. This model of care will be used as a basis for future dementia-specific investment.

As I said previously, HSE mid-west community healthcare is preparing an options-appraisal document for older people services in the north Tipperary area. It is expected this will be presented in quarter 4 of 2022. There may also be opportunities to identify scope for a dementia-specific independent living unit to support people to age well independently for as long possible in the Roscrea area.

It was a good idea to go see the Bruff centre. I am interested in calling down to see it as it seems to be the way forward.

## Community Welfare Services

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I welcome the opportunity to raise with the Minister of State the need for local face-to-face community welfare officers. It is an important service and sometimes it is vulnerable people who need it most. They may have no transport, may have run out of money or may not be in receipt of any payment from anyone anywhere. They may be out of work or perhaps out of work due to ill health and not had their claims processed yet. The service is therefore the last hope for people in dire straits through no fault of their own. There was a strong network going back over the years in every county and in key local towns. There might be between six and ten of them in a county, depending on the size of it. It is for people who do not have a computer and may not have a phone or phone credit. It is important that the walk-in service is there. Sometimes I come across people who are accessing that service who have a learning disability or intellectual disability and may not be *au fait* with laptops. They may not have a laptop and may not even have a phone. There is more demand now than ever for this service. The additional needs payment is welcome for people who are in energy poverty or energy hardship, to meet once-off demands with the current energy crisis and so on. There is a growing demand for that service. It was never needed more than it is at the moment. It is the last hope for those who are in a bad situation or who are in dire straits.

I raised this with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, on 8 September and she sent me back a reply stating that continued in-person customer engagement remains a pivotal feature within the community welfare service. She outlines that this is still available at two locations in Laois. I would contradict that. This is not the fault of the local community welfare officers. She also says there is a free-phone helpline in Dublin and that people can send an email. She says there is no longer a requirement for a person to meet a community welfare officer to make a claim. There is. That is what I contend. The Minister goes on to say that it is important to note that the assessment and decision on claims and any further customer interaction is carried out locally, based on community welfare officers, as it always has been. Her letter states that the delivery of a locally based community welfare service remains the cornerstone of the service.

I would question that seriously, given the way it has been centralised. This service has been overly centralised over the last couple of years. Gone is that network of face-to-face walk-in services where the community welfare officer came to a particular health centre, Government office or wherever for two hours, typically, on some morning during the week. The one community welfare officer would cover a whole county doing it. They would not even need to spend all their time at it, just a couple of hours in each town. Now people are being told to email Dublin or contact the national helpline. Telling people that is absolutely daft. People are being told to download forms on a computer. We are talking to people in a lot of cases who do not have a computer and are not computer-literate. This service has really deteriorated. The assurances given by the Minister here and what she said in the letter do not reflect the reality on the ground. That network of community welfare officers is no longer in place. I ask the Minister to address this.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I apologise on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys. She is at a conference in Cavan today for rural development Ministers from the OECD. I thank Deputy Stanley for raising the issue. The supplementary welfare allowance scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system that provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient. The community welfare service, CWS, remains a flexible ser-

vice which meets the varied needs of vulnerable people and the Minister wants to be absolutely clear that it continues to provide local access to local community welfare officers, CWOs, in local areas across the country and there are no plans to change the service. Her Department has maintained staffing levels in the CWS nationwide in recent years, during times when demand decreased. This is reflective of the commitment to continue to support delivery of locally based services to customers.

CWOs can facilitate urgent and in-person meetings in 51 Intreo centres across business hours five days a week. In addition to meeting citizens in the Intreo offices, branch offices and Department of Social Protection offices, CWOs can facilitate an appointment within a short time of a person requiring a meeting at a mutually agreed location including the person's home. The Department of Social Protection has introduced innovations this year which have increased efficiency in processing applications for the supplementary welfare allowance payments. One of these is the establishment of a back-office team to undertake preparatory work on applications. That includes registration of claims and the gathering of supporting documentation that is necessary to assess and finalise a claim. Providing this clerical assistance has been found to be very effective in releasing the CWOs from administrative tasks and allows them to focus on delivery. It allows for increased capacity of CWOs to meet people locally or to travel with them as customers as required, and also for more timely processing of claims.

The Minister firmly believes that a modern community welfare service should be easily accessible to all customers. For this reason customers no longer have to meet in person with a CWO to make a claim. This significant change ensures enhanced access to the welfare system. It means, for instance, that those who require community welfare assistance in a more remote rural area no longer need to wait for an outreach service to be available. The application form is available to download for those who can access it online. It can also be requested by phone through the dedicated CWS free-phone line, and also by email. The Minister cannot emphasise enough that while changes to modernise and improve the service for customers are a feature of welfare services, the delivery of a locally based service will remain a cornerstone of her commitment in the Department. I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. Unfortunately the reality in County Laois does not correspond with what he has outlined. Councillors from the Government parties raised this matter at the monthly meeting of Laois County Council last Monday and are very exercised about it. It is a real problem. I understand the Minister cannot be here and appreciate that the Minister of State is standing in for her. I ask the Minister of State to get the Minister to investigate this and examine what the situation is on the ground. What she sent me in this letter of 8 September and what the Minister of State has outlined is just not the case. The Minister of State has outlined that it is a safety net. It is a safety net and the last hope for a lot of people. The Minister of State mentioned that people are doing back-office work and preparatory work. Sometimes the people who are going in need help filling out forms, be it the community welfare, the supplementary allowance form, the additional needs form or the urgent needs payment form. They need help with those. The CWO going around and having the local network of five or six clinics in a county provided that help for them. The further we take things away, the more complicated they get.

The other thing that is missing is that there was a local appeals system. There was a superintendent in each county or one for every two counties. If a case failed, there was an opportunity for the person to appeal to that superintendent. Now it goes to D'Olier Street and by the time



it comes out of D'Olier Street, God help anybody who would be waiting on it. The Minister of State knows from his own office that it can take six or nine months or longer to get stuff back from D'Olier Street. If there was a justifiable, genuine case there, the appeal could be made to the local superintendent who would review the case again and maybe there was additional information required. We cannot pull away all of that. People talking to a phone, getting through to a chasing line telling them to press this button, press that button, or trying to download forms on a computer when they do not have a computer just does not work. This is causing real hardship. People who are in this situation are already in hardship. I do not want to see them put in further hardship. I am appealing to the Government and the Minister of State to review this and try and get the network back in place in County Laois.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** I omitted to say in my earlier remarks, although Deputy Stanley is probably aware of this anyway, that in the Laois-Offaly constituency there are no CWO vacancies and there is a full complement in Laois of six and in Offaly of five. In respect of the changes that have been made around modernisation, it has been in response to a lot of calls from Oireachtas Members and public representatives, including a colleague of Deputy Stanley's, Deputy Kerrane, who on a number of occasions in this House has called for community welfare services to be made available online-----

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** And face to face. She has also raised that.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** -----for customers who do not want to meet face to face. If I could finish, it is very clear in the earlier response I made that the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is committed to a blended format, making sure that it is accessible. It goes without saying that of all Ministers in the Government who are rooted in rural areas, everybody on both sides of the House would fully appreciate the commitment she has to the maintenance of rural services.

### **School Facilities**

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I was contacted by the line Minister, who was unavailable. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, for being here, because the question is on refurbishment and retrofitting. The Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, OPW, has good experience in the fine work that the OPW carries out on many of our buildings across the country.

I want to ask about the retrofitting of our schools across the country. Many of us visit and talk in schools. Schools we visit can have varying, different standards of buildings. I visited a school recently in Rathnew, namely, St. Coen's, which was newly built and is absolutely fantastic. There are high energy-efficiency measures within the building - everything from the taps to the water conservation measures and more. It has water attenuation tanks outside that catch rainwater from the roof and then regenerate back into the building. The roof was wired for solar panels but they did not have them. They asked me to look into that, so I would be delighted to go back to them now to tell them that we are putting free solar panels on schools. That is a bit of good news going back.

However, other schools we visit – the Minister of State knows ones I am talking about – where you go in and there are the badly-fitted windows, the central heating is pumped up to 90 and the heat is all going out through the windows. The heating is blasting out, but yet the children are cold in the classrooms.

I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister for Education on it, and the response came back about the energy retrofit pathfinder programme, which is a programme to identify and assess schools for retrofitting. I just do not know how a school actually applies for it, how it is assessed or how it gets onto that pathfinder programme. We know the tremendous work that the teachers do in the classroom and the school principals are absolutely up to their eyes, so I do not know if they would have time to sit down and look into how to apply for a retrofit for their schools. It would be good if we could make it easier for those schools to apply for those energy retrofits to get the assessments carried out to see what the best return for them is, for example, new windows, thermostatic controls, lighting controls or something to help them with those huge energy bills, especially where they are dependent on oil heating. It is expensive, wasteful and bad for our environment.

I do not know if the Minister of State has any information on that. However, I would like to be able to go to the schools and tell them about the pathfinder programme that was introduced and is a collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. How do school apply for that programme?

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** At the outset, I want to thank Deputy Matthews for raising this issue. My office had, through the offices of the other Ministers for whom I am deputising, reminded them to tell colleagues if they were not available, so I do not know what happened in respect of the other issue.

I want to thank the Deputy for raising this issue, as it provides me with an opportunity to outline the current position on retrofitting and sustainable energy in school buildings for the Department of Education. The Department is at the forefront of design with respect to sustainable energy in school buildings. This performance has been recognised at both national and international levels.

The National Development Plan 2021-2030, which was published on 4 October, provides capital funding of more than €4 billion for investment in school infrastructure during the period of 2021-2025 and there continues to be a strong climate action dimension in this. The Department of Education's technical guidance documents set the benchmark for sustainable design in school buildings with a clear focus on energy efficiency. Schools that are designed and built in accordance with the Department's school technical guidance documents have been receiving A3 building ratings since 2009, with current schools typically achieving up to 20% energy performance and 25% better carbon performance than required by the current building regulations, along with 10% of primary energy provided via photovoltaics and infrastructure provided for electric vehicle charging. All new technologies and approaches are tested to ensure compatibility with school design and operational requirements. Successful and repeated results are then incorporated into the new school designs and refurbishments.

The Department's policy is supported by a strong research programme with more than 50 research projects at various different stages. In the interest of sustainability, it is critical that renewable applications are properly suited to the schools' needs, so as to reduce energy costs and carbon and not just apply for the sake of having renewables. It is also critical that we minimise the demand for energy before we invest in renewable energy applications. This has been assisted in previous years with wall and attic insulation programmes and a water conservation programme, which the Deputy referred to.

The Department of Education and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications jointly funded the pathfinder programme, which the Deputy also referred to. That is administered through Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI. The pathfinder is a great example of collaboration, ensuring deployment of new design approaches and technologies are introduced in an education environment and an evidenced-based approach. The programme continues to assist the Department of Education to explore options and test various solutions in the school building network. It is paving the way for and informing a much larger national programme for the energy retrofitted schools built prior to 2008, as included in the national development plan, NDP. It is facilitating research on a range of typical retrofit options, which will have to be tried and tested, and is providing valuable development information for a solution-driven delivery strategy, which will be founded on a solid evidence base and proven to be robust and scalable, of renewable solutions within the school sector.

The pathfinder programme has retrofitted 41 schools across the country to date, with work on an additional 15 currently at various stages of design. Each school undergoes a comprehensive assessment to ensure that the measures are suitable for that school and will deliver value both to the school and the environment. The works typically include upgrades to the building's fabric, including walls, roof, doors, windows, airtightness improvements, lighting, heating and other renewable technologies. As part of the cost-of-living measures to be enacted this year, €90 million is being provided in a once-off additional funding to support increased running costs for primary and post-primary in the free education scheme in dealing with the challenges that they face due to high energy costs. This will be paid at a rate of 40% of schools' basic and enhanced rates of capitation.

**Deputy Steven Matthews:** I completely agree that the first step should be energy reduction. That is what we should be pursuing. It is encouraging to hear that 41 schools had pathfinder works carried out and another 15 are under assessment. That is kind of what my question is about. How does a school apply for or get on the radar of the Department for an assessment to be carried out?

I visited a school in Wicklow town recently. It was a school that had two buildings. One was the original 1955 block with high ceilings and high windows. It was the type of classic, old Irish national school building. I went in to have a look at it and I could see very simple measures that could be introduced there, for example, interior wall insulation, rather than exterior, because it is a classic looking building and you do not want to take away from that classic look. There were very simple measures that could be carried out that would reduce the heating costs in that school. If we can reduce the heating bills for the school, it will reduce the pressure on principals who want to keep the schools warm and comfortable for children and staff. The bills roll in and that money could be better spent on other provisions in the class. I have no doubt that many principals would have many other things to spend the money on rather than high energy bills.

Particularly, in relation to St. Patrick's school in Wicklow town, I would appreciate if the Minister of State could relay to the Minister for me that it is a school that would be very suitable for that pathfinder programme. Generally, how does a school apply? Does it go on the SEAI website like a residential or business user would? Is there a direct line to the Department where you can tell it the school is freezing, the bills are huge or the windows are drafty and ask to be put on the pathfinder programme? If the Minister could come back to me at a later stage, I would very much appreciate that.

**Deputy Patrick O'Donovan:** I will ask the Department of Education, through the office of

29 September 2022

the Minister, Deputy Foley, to respond to the Deputy directly.

On the retrofitting of older buildings, Deputy Matthew's commented that the OPW is steeped in this. Every old building presents its own challenges. In many cases the buildings the Deputy referred to are listed buildings. This includes primary and post-primary schools, that are either listed on the city and county development plans or, in some cases, are protected structures. That creates a difficulty as well for the board of management in terms of what can be done on the external elevations and windows. We have to be practical as well in relation to making sure that these buildings are comfortable. This is where often there is a clash in the prioritisation of needs. We all have in our constituencies old buildings where children are trying to be educated. These buildings are on the list of protected structures or somebody's list of protected structures. Unfortunately, however, the comfort and needs of the children, teaching staff and support staff often fall far down the pecking order. Where there is a mass concrete building, the difficulties associated with attaching external or internal insulation must be borne in mind. If it is a stone building, the stone has to be able to breathe. The lime has to be able to breathe. This comes with a lot of complications, and these are not easily rectifiable.

We encounter these problems in the Office of Public Works when dealing with older buildings, particularly given the fact that a building will actually tell one what it is and is not capable of taking by way of modern infrastructure placed upon it. Therefore, it is not easy, particularly where buildings built before 2008 are concerned. Many of these were built in the 1960s and 1970s, and many of us were educated in them. To be quite honest about it, there is probably a bigger question to be asked regarding whether it is sustainable to try to insulate a building of the scale, nature and age that I describe instead of constructing a replacement one, for instance.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.42 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 4 Deireadh Fómhair 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.42 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 4 October 2022.