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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 5 Deireadh Fómhair 2022

Wednesday, 5 October 2022

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 9.10 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

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 Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - to discuss a response to the consultation with survivors of institutional abuse.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan - to discuss the Owenahincha wastewater treatment infrastructure.

Deputy Pauline Tully - to discuss issues of concern with the home care grant scheme for older people.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill - to discuss with the Minister for Justice the funding for domestic violence services in budget 2023.

Deputy David Stanton - to discuss deferring or delaying the move from daylight saving time to wintertime this year to support energy saving.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor - to discuss if funding from the Arts Council for a gallery will be extended to its inhouse theatre.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - to discuss issues with Go-Ahead bus service provision in north Wicklow.

Deputy Paul Donnelly - to discuss the Citizens Information Board policy in relation to paid employees and volunteers in an office setting.

Deputy Martin Browne - to discuss availability of eating disorder treatment for children with ARFID and similar conditions.

Deputy Michael McNamara - to discuss why all agricultural cargo coming in to Dublin for Shannon Airport is cleared and inspected in Dublin.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell - to discuss continued and improved services in Clifden Community Hospital, Galway.

Deputy Thomas Gould - to discuss the number of children awaiting a children's disability team initial appointment in Cork.

Deputies Mark Ward, Darren O'Rourke - to discuss the need to address urgently chronic service delivery problems with Go-Ahead.

The matters raised by Deputies Mairéad Farrell, Christopher O'Sullivan, Paul Donnelly and Jennifer Whitmore have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Hospital Services

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a theacht isteach inniu agus éisteacht linn. Mar a thuigeann an Leas-Cheann Comhairle agus an bheirt Teachta atá ag tógáil na ceiste seo inniu, tá fíorthábhacht ag baint leis an ospidéal ar an gClochán. Ní mór a chinntiú go mairfidh sé, go bhfásfaidh sé agus go mbeidh sé ann go dtí go mbeidh an t-ionad nua curtha ar fáil ar an gClochán.

It is very hard to do total justice to this issue in two minutes each for Deputy Farrell and me but I will try to be brief and cut to the chase. The solution is to speed up the building of the new community nursing unit, CNU. Planning is to be lodged during this quarter. I cannot for the life of me understand why it will take three years to build and commission and the unit. I just do not get that. I think Ardnacrusha was started within four weeks of a decision being taken. It is time we went back to moving things forward.

In the meantime we need a full complement of staff in the hospital in Clifden, including physiotherapists. Our understanding is that the jobs to date have only been advertised locally in the local newspapers and radio. Not only is it not possible to get people locally but in many cases nurses and other skilled professionals are coming in from outside Ireland and the European Union. It is time Saolta University Health Care Group and the HSE got together to address international recruitment and ensure people are available to provide services here. HR also needs to be improved.

I will make a final point, and I would other points but I do not have time to do so. To visit Merlin Park University Hospital in Galway or a respite or step-down facility if one were provided in Galway would require a five-and-a-half hour return journey. That is intolerable.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Rabbitte, anseo chun an cheist seo a phlé mar tuigfidh sé cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an t-ospidéal seo, ní hamháin i gcomhair mhuintir an Chlocháin ach i gcomhair mhuintir Chonamara go ginearálta. Tá an Teachta Ó Cuív tar éis go leor de na deacrachtaí a lua ach is minic go mbíonn daoine ar

thralaithe san ospidéal i nGaillimh faoi láthair. Ní dhéanann sé ciall, beag ná mór, nach féidir an t-ionad seo a úsáid. Mar a luadh cheana féin, breathnaíonn sé ar nós go bhfuil fadhb earcaíochta ann agus go gcaithfimid breathnú air sin ar bhonn idirnáisiúnta, go háirithe ó thaobh fisiteiripeoir a earcú. Chomh maith leis sin, caithfear brú ar aghaidh leis an ionad nua.

I am very pleased it is the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, who is taking this Topical Issue matter because I know she understands the importance of this facility in Clifden, not only for the town but for the wider Connemara community. It is very clear that all the Oireachtas Members in Galway West are speaking with one voice on this matter. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy Connolly, is bringing it forward with Deputy Ó Cuív and me. Everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet on this.

There is an issue with recruitment, particularly in the area of physiotherapy. This needs to be looked at on a wider international scale. This facility is of great importance. If we are looking internationally for other places, we also need to do that in this case. As Deputy Ó Cuív stated, we also need to push the new facility forward. While people are on trolleys in Galway University Hospital, it makes no sense that recruitment and the new facility are not being prioritised.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I wish her a speedy recovery.

I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. I acknowledge that they are speaking with one voice and that everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet on this. I acknowledge the vital healthcare role that Clifden District Hospital plays and the excellent level of care and support which it provides to patients and their families in the local community and surrounding areas.

As Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and older people, Deputy Butler, is acutely aware of the challenges that Clifden hospital is currently facing. She assures the Deputies that she is committed to working alongside HSE Community healthcare west to address these issues.

As Deputies will be aware Clifden has been primarily designated to provide convalescence care to patients stepping down from acute hospitals. However, with the evolution of Sláintecare and the transition of care from acute to community settings, the need for step-down beds has reduced. In fact, the demand for step-down care is currently an average of less than one patient a day.

Clifden District Hospital also provides respite beds to allow family carers in the community a welcome break. The Minister of State has been advised by the HSE that the average respite demand and occupancy is approximately three beds per night. This brings the total average occupancy of Clifden District Hospital to 3.2 beds per night.

In the Clifden area, St. Anne's community nursing unit is a designated centre registered with HIQA to provide a home for older people. Unfortunately, St. Anne's has faced significant challenges over many years to secure sufficient nursing staff, despite national, international and local recruitment drives. To address this issue, there needs to be a dedicated approach to recruit staff in the short term to continue these vital services. In making that statement, the Minister of State is acknowledging what the Deputies have said about recruitment. In recognition of the service needs in the Clifden area and to seek to redress the nurse staffing shortage, HSE

community healthcare west commenced a process two years ago under the Croke Park public service agreement. In August 2020, under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission and conciliation services, the HSE informed the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, and SIPTU that it would issue a common roster, which commenced on 26 September of this year. This roster will cover both Clifden District Hospital and the St. Anne's community nursing unit site in order that the staff could be assigned to both sites, which are less than 1.3 km apart, based on service needs.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was advised by the HSE that one of the staff representative bodies communicated with the HSE on Friday, 23 September, to say it had instructed its members not to co-operate with the revised roster. Community healthcare west is committed to ensuring the safety of its residents and patients and, accordingly, has put in place contingency arrangements in light of any potential action by staff from 26 September. Unfortunately, over the weekend of 23 September, the HSE was unable to secure cover to fill the rosters due to gaps in St. Anne's community nursing unit, which the HSE required to ensure the safe care of residents and patients. Community healthcare west, therefore, developed contingency arrangements for the patients in Clifden District Hospital. Patients and their families were contacted by HSE nurse management last week and were offered an alternative option of Merlin Park University Hospital. To clarify, the HSE has advised the current services will continue as normal.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, advises the Deputies that all those booked into respite in Clifden District Hospital last week and this week are receiving the service in Clifden. The HSE simply took contingency measures following advice it had received indicating that staff might not co-operate with the new roster. These measures will be implemented only if insufficient staff are available. The HSE will continuously review the staffing and operate services with safe staffing levels. There are no plans to cease services in Clifden hospital at present. The Minister of State will continue to engage with the chief officer in community healthcare west to ensure the continuation of the possible expansion of services in Clifden hospital.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am pleased, if it is actioned, that there is a commitment to continue services in Clifden hospital, but all the rest of the Minister of State's prepared reply gives the impression that we are all going in the other direction. I do not know how many other Deputies are like me, but I frequently get calls from people who are being pressurised to take loved ones out of the hospital, with nowhere for them to go. They may not be fit to go home or may live on their own. I find it strange, therefore, that this step-down facility is not required. My understanding is the lack of physiotherapy means they are not being referred to Clifden hospital. We need recruitment, as we have reiterated time and again. Nobody is proposing unsafe working conditions.

I join with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in wishing the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, all the best in her recovery. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, hit the bull's eye on the previous occasion when the three of us Deputies were debating ambulance services. She might do it again this time.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Indeed, we hope this is a good omen. I too wish the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, a speedy recovery. As local Oireachtas Members, we have met representatives of the HSE and the unions. It angers me that what should be worked out between the unions and the HSE is being brought into this Chamber. At the end of the day, the unions are not here to defend what they feel. We need to find a solution to this but that is not for us to sort out; it needs to be sorted out between the unions and the HSE. We know how important respite

services are, as we heard from the hundreds of people who attended the meeting in Clifden. If staffing and recruitment is the issue, we need to look at it on an international basis. That is the crux of it.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: HSE community healthcare west has informed the Minister of State that it is committed to a new 40-bed community unit, and that needs to be expedited, which would address the 1.3 km arrangement in regard to rosters. She welcomes the fact the HSE is examining the possibility of providing enhanced community care services in Clifden hospital. The integrated care programme for older persons, ICPOP, teams, as we all know, are fantastic. There is a multidisciplinary approach, with a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, OT, and whatever else is needed as part of the integrated programme for older person services. ICPOP services ensure that older people with complex care needs can access care quickly or near their home through care pathways specifically designed for older people, targeting falls, frailty and dementia.

That is exactly what is required in Clifden hospital. It is the ICPOP team we should be looking for at the moment while the new build is going on. That is the ask, and I would support the Minister of State and all the Deputies from the west because I take on board exactly what they are saying. The five-and-a-half-hour round trip to Merlin Park is not satisfactory to the people of Clifden, not least on bad, frosty nights. We talk about catering to people as close to their home as possible and we need to support that concept. We did it previously with the ambulance base, when we got everyone sitting around the table, and I will continue to advocate for this given where Clifden is and where Merlin Park is, meaning people have to travel across the city and so on. Moving people with frailty from their natural habitat to Merlin Park is not good enough; in fact, it reduces their life expectancy. The HSE needs to look at itself in regard to what measures it needs to put in place to ensure people will get the care as close to home as possible and in a timely manner.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I too wish the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, a speedy recovery. She is a hardworking, multifunctional Minister of State, like Deputy Rabbitte.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I understand that the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, has never been to the Warren Beach in Rosscarbery, so I will tell her about it. It is paradise, with golden sands, and you can look out at Galley Head and the stag rocks off Toe Head. There is nowhere like it. It is very peaceful, and anyone who has discovered this gem of a beach will know how nice it is.

Unfortunately, on 15 August of this year, the beach was closed to the public because of a bathing ban. Usually when there is a bathing ban at a beach, it is because the water is tested and perhaps some harmful bacteria are found, but not so in this case. In this case, the ban was brought about following a report of a visible issue, when the lifeguards on duty reported raw sewage coming towards the beach. We can imagine the scenes. At this piece of heaven in an idyllic west Cork location, children were being called out of the water because there was a sighting of excrement and a large plume of sewage. There was significant disappointment among the locals who live in Rosscarbery and the tourists who were visiting this really upcoming tourism town at the peak of tourism season.

After that, we had a public meeting because locals, businesses, residents and visitors had said enough was enough and that we needed to get to the bottom of the matter. Previous bathing bans in the lagoon in Rosscarbery had been brought about following similar issues. We have asked Irish Water to look into what is causing the issue. Anyone who knows the area knows it is very simple: the wastewater treatment plant is not functioning. It is old, it does not have the capacity required and an overflow of sewage is clearly seeping into the water. Irish Water will deny there is any issue; in fact, it will say tests have proved "inconclusive". To me, that is completely avoiding the reality of the matter. Any of the locals, or any of the Cork County Council staff who maintain the wastewater treatment plant, will agree the wastewater treatment plant is not functioning and sewage is seeping over the overflow and into the water.

This is a very important issue. Rosscarbery relies on the warren and Warren Beach is one of its major attractions. Rosscarbery is an up and coming tourism village and a fantastic place for anybody lucky enough to have discovered it. However, this cannot go on. The village has a reputation to keep. The beach is stunning and safe. It has lifeguards during the summer. It is a safe place to bring a family but we need to sort out the sewage issue. Rosscarbery, the people who live in and visit it and local businesses need this wastewater treatment plant to be sorted as soon as possible.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to outline the position relating to Irish Water's responsibility for this matter, which I am answering on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Water Services Acts 2007 to 2017 set out the arrangements in place for the delivery of water and wastewater services by Irish Water and for the scrutiny and oversight provisions that apply in respect of these arrangements.

As the Deputy will understand, the wastewater infrastructure in Owenahincha is a matter for Irish Water in the first instance. Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Irish Water takes a strategic nationwide approach to asset planning and investment and meeting customer requirements. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects and programmes are a matter for determination by Irish Water. I would like to see exactly what approach it will take to planning investment and meeting consumers' requirements in the Deputy's area because when he talks about that little piece of heaven, I would like to think it is not a desktop exercise. There is a need for an upgrade of wastewater.

Irish Water's capital investment plan runs until 2024 and is prepared within the regulatory framework, which is set out in legislation. Under this framework, Irish Water submits its investment plans in advance to its economic regulator, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities in Ireland, CRU. The investment plan follows an extensive CRU-led stakeholder consultation process and is based on a clearly defined set of priorities. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has made inquiries with Irish Water on the issue of wastewater treatment infrastructure at Owenahincha, as raised by the Deputy. I am informed Rosscarbery-Owenahincha is licensed by the EPA and is a single agglomeration with a primary discharge. There are separate networks but the treatment takes place at the same location. I am also informed that delivery timelines for the Rosscarbery and Owenahincha sewerage scheme cannot yet be confirmed. It is disappointing that there is no timeline when it is a time-sensitive matter. If we even knew the scheme was in a planning timeline and was on the books, that would be good. However, it is not included in the current capital investment plan. The project will be considered again as part of the development of the next revenue control period from 2025 to 2029. In

the meantime, a water quality assessment is planned for 2023 to determine any impacts of the discharge on the receiving water. The wastewater network will also be surveyed to assess any works required to reduce the impact on infiltration.

The Government is aware that significant and sustained investment is needed to ensure the continued operation, upgrade and repair of the country's water and wastewater infrastructure and to support economic growth in the years to come. In this regard, as part of budget 2023, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has secured funding of over €1.69 billion to support water services. This includes €1.57 billion in respect of domestic water service provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland and deliver improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine areas.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I know the Minister of State read that statement out on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Irish Water. The people of Rosscarbery and Owenahincha, which has another beautiful beach close to Warren Beach, cannot wait until 2025 or 2029. That is much too far out. Warren Beach is a gem, not just for Rosscarbery but the whole Clonakilty-Rosscarbery-Skibbereen area and attracts so many people to the region. They cannot wait until after 2025 and maybe 2029 for the scheme to be included in a capital programme. As a Deputy who represents west Cork, including Rosscarbery, Warren Beach and Owenahincha, I am pleading for the upgrade of the Rosscarbery-Owenahincha wastewater treatment plant to be included in this capital investment programme.

The Minister does not have a say in the day-to-day running of Irish Water but he does control the purse strings. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to sit down and discuss how we can get the Rosscarbery-Owenahincha wastewater treatment plant included in this capital investment programme. Rosscarbery needs it. Warren Beach - this piece of heaven I described - needs it. The residents who live there need it. People who visit this area time and again and year after year need reassurance that this issue will be dealt with and that they will not have deal with excrement in the water because it is a stunning place. The Minister of State should visit some time.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I again thank the Deputy for raising this issue regarding wastewater treatment and infrastructure. He will understand that the progression of individual wastewater plants and infrastructure is a matter for Irish Water, as he rightly noted when he said the Minister was not involved in the day-to-day operation of the organisation. At the same time, there must be direction for Irish Water. In the programme for Government, we commit funding for the water capital investment plan for water and wastewater infrastructure. I do not have all the answers but perhaps the Deputy, the Minister and I could meet to discuss this Topical Issue so that the people of Rosscarbery do not feel their voice has not been heard by the person who is responsible for funding Irish Water.

Citizens Information Services

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I wish to raise the issue of the Citizens Information Board and paid employees and volunteers in an office setting, a matter I have tried to get on the agenda for quite a while. As people are aware, the Citizens Information Board adopted a policy whereby full-time office staff must be fully paid employees and volunteers were given what they described as menial jobs in the offices. Traditionally, Citizens Information Board offices are located in

community centres or local authority buildings so, in essence, they are very much part of the local community. It is a valuable and essential service that has been serviced by a team of local people who are dedicated to their community. Many of them are experts in their field. Where this service deals with legal and confidential issues, a level of professionalism must be maintained but to cast aside volunteer staff, some of whom have been working with the Citizens Information Board for decades, is simply wrong. Reducing them to filing and shredding documents is an insult to their years of service. We constantly hear about the community and voluntary sector and how it must be cherished, valued and applauded, particularly during the Covid period. This move obviously means volunteers are less cherished and valued.

According to an email I received in recent weeks from an individual, their input is to be reduced to 35 staff hours per fortnight and the choice for existing volunteers is to provide a limited supporting role, as outlined, or leave. The email spoke about advisers with long experience in their earlier work environment, many of whom would have been professional people working in areas like taxation and social protection. The email went on to state that the existing 20 volunteers were not consulted in advance but were simply informed of the board's decision and that, as a group, they feel strongly that the proposed change is a retrograde step that will lead to a significant reduction in the level of support for the many disadvantaged people and others who need a range of help and assistance, particularly older people, who lack computer skills or access to computers. For people with disabilities, the community centre is their hub. Reducing the number of staff and volunteers will create a lack of access. The feedback the individual in question received was that face-to-face contact with advisers with wide experience in the public or private sectors who are willing to spend time teasing out their issues is greatly appreciated by many who seek advice. Most of our offices are directing people to the places where those services are provided. We know quite a lot of them. Unfortunately, if we reduce that service, it will not be there for people in those centres in the community because there is not funding to cover the number of volunteers and hours they are going to lose. It is really disappointing that when they tried to engage with the board, they were met with a brick wall. Is there any update on this? Have there been discussions between the Government and the board as funders? It is important that the board recognises that it takes money from the taxpayer and the State and that it has a responsibility to the people who work for it, the people who volunteer with it and the people who engage with the service.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: The Citizens Information Board, CIB, is a statutory body tasked with providing information, advocacy and advice to citizens. It must be noted that the staff of the CIB are public servants and that the CIB itself does not have volunteers. The vital services for which the CIB is responsible for are delivered by eight independent regional Citizen Information Service, CIS, companies. The CIB provides funding to the eight CIS companies, which in turn operate a national network of citizens information centres. It is important to note the independent nature of the CIB, which operates under the Comhairle Act 2000, as amended, and is overseen by its own board. Similarly, each CIS company is an independent limited company governed by a voluntary board of directors. The eight CIS companies make decisions independently on the delivery of services in their own regions.

Decisions on the engagement of volunteers are made by the regional CIS companies. I understand that the CIS volunteer strategy was developed by the independent regional CIS companies acting jointly and then implemented by each company in its respective area. I am informed that the strategy was to support the effort to re-engage volunteers in the service after the pandemic years. Significant changes occurred very rapidly during the pandemic. During

that time, centres were often unable to offer a drop-in service because of public health restrictions and volunteers were no longer able to be involved. As the pandemic progressed, employees in the centres quickly adapted to the use of digital services, phone services and offering limited appointments to keep the service operating for the public. The updates and changes to information, advice and advocacy that have taken place during the past two years have been unprecedented.

The development of the volunteer strategy is an operational matter for the CIS companies. The Minister for Social Protection cannot direct either the CIB or the CIS companies in such operational issues. Notwithstanding this, in light of concerns raised by Deputies on this matter, the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, recently met with the chairperson and CEO of the CIB seeking further information on the issue of volunteers in CIS companies. The Minister absolutely recognises the good work carried out by volunteers. She has made it very clear to the CIB that people who have given up their time down through the years deserve to be treated with respect. I understand the CIB assured the Minister that the contribution of volunteers continues to be highly valued in this regard. The role of volunteers is still seen as central to the delivery of the service. Indeed, volunteers have been returning on a phased basis since mid-2022. To date, the CIB reports that 120 volunteers have returned to support delivery in citizens information centres across the country. The CIB is now urgently engaging with the regional companies in relation to the continued return of volunteers. In addition, following the meeting with the Minister, the CIB has confirmed that it has agreed terms of reference for an independent review of the volunteer programme, which has now commenced. This independent review will engage with internal and external stakeholders, including current and past volunteers, and will make recommendations on the reintegration of volunteers to the service.

Both CIS staff and volunteers are vitally important and both of these roles are focused on the customer. From the moment a person contacts a citizens information centre, her or she is treated with respect and empathy by both volunteers and staff. There is no policy within the CIB or CIS companies of removing volunteers from the CIS. There are currently 89 citizens information centres open to offer information, advice and advocacy to the public.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I note a couple of things in the Minister of State's statement, particularly with regard to the decision-making process. It is stated very clearly that this is a group of independent bodies that acted jointly and came out with exactly the same strategy at exactly the same time. There was obviously very significant co-ordination on this matter between the board and those independent bodies. It is extremely unfortunate that all of this was done without the input of the volunteers.

There is no doubt that Covid has changed much of the way we operate but, as a volunteer and someone who works in the community, I am noticing that people want to engage with people face to face. That is really important. While we support the new digital way of working, it is really important that we retain that face-to-face contact.

I welcome that there is going to be a review and that it is to include external and internal stakeholders, including current and past volunteers. I hope it is an acknowledgement that a mistake was made in the first instance and that, if such a massive change is to be embarked upon, it is critically important that the people who matter, the staff, volunteers and people who use the service, are all engaged with before any major decisions are made.

I welcome the fact that the board of the CIB is talking about the highest quality of service,

whether provided in person or by phone, but I hope that is not meant to imply that the service being provided previously was not up to professional standards because all of the people who have engaged with the service over the years have found it extremely professional and well run.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I will start where the Deputy finished. Citizens information centres are a trusted source of information, advice and advocacy with a long tradition of volunteering. The Minister fully supports the continued valuing of the role of volunteers in CIS companies. The strong view of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, which I share, is that the important service provided by citizens information centres should continue to be available to the public when they need it. This is particularly true given the current cost-of-living crisis and the challenges facing people across the country. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister recently met with the CEO and chairperson of the CIB and sought further information on the issue of volunteers in CIS companies. The board is fully engaged with these companies to support the continued return of volunteers. The CIB has commissioned an independent review of the volunteer programme in the service and has indicated that citizens information companies will not make any decisions on office locations before the findings of the independent review are considered. This is very much welcomed.

If the Acting Chair will indulge me for 30 seconds, I will leave the script. I come in here often to read answers on Topical Issue matters. To be very fair to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, and her Department, this is one of the most comprehensive answers I have ever had to give to a Deputy across the House. There is action from the Minister and from within the Department. The answer includes a plan and it addresses every one of the issues the Deputy and the people who have come to him have highlighted. I can see a pathway towards all of this being resolved.

Bus Services

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister of State very much for being here. I know this is not her area and I appreciate her taking the time to be here. I raise the absolute shambles of a public transport service in north Wicklow and particularly the services provided by Go-Ahead Ireland. This has been an issue for a number of years now. I am speaking here about route 184 to Newtownmountkennedy, route 185 to Enniskerry and route 44A to Bray. People are inundating my office with messages about the poor service that is being provided by Go-Ahead Ireland. There are more no-shows than shows. We have situations where people are at bus stops and half-full buses are driving past them and not picking them up. I have constituents who have missed work because of it. I have constituents whose children have missed school and, therefore, they have missed work because they have had to take their children to school. I have constituents whose young daughters who take the bus have been left stranded at night, because the bus does not show up at 11 o'clock, or whatever time it is that they are going home. It is completely unacceptable.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has fined Go-Ahead Ireland for not meeting its contractual obligations. My understanding is that it has been fined every year since 2019. It is clear at this stage that Go-Ahead Ireland is incapable of providing that service to people. While the NTA is fining people, the fines have not improved the service. Therefore, Go-Ahead Ireland is obviously just absorbing the fines, but it is not providing a better service. A fine is not going to help someone who waited 18 months to get a hospital appointment only to miss it because

they could not get to St. Vincent's University Hospital. Fines are not the solution to this.

At this stage, people in north Wicklow are completely losing confidence in public transport. The Minister can talk about great visions of a country where we have fantastic public services, where everyone can get out of their car and get onto a bus to commute to Dublin city or get to their school by public transport. However, the Minister and the NTA must get the basics right. If a bus is scheduled and you leave your house, you should expect to be able to get that bus - not for it to be a no-show and not turn up at all. Not only that, but people are not being informed that the bus will not turn up, so it is being cancelled without notice. It is completely unacceptable.

At what stage will the NTA hold Go-Ahead Ireland accountable for this poor service? We have heard excuses about Covid. We have heard excuses about the recruitment of bus drivers, and I know that is an issue, but at some stage Go-Ahead Ireland will have to start providing the service it is paid to provide and has been contracted to provide. At what point in time will the Minister have discussions with the NTA about providing a fast, efficient and, most importantly, reliable service to all the people in north Wicklow who rely on Go-Ahead Ireland to get about their daily business?

I thank the Minister of State. I hope that the reply she reads will be as comprehensive as the one she read on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: Would the Deputy believe that this is my second time to take a Topical Issue debate on transport? I think the last debate was when Deputy Lahart raised issues with route 174. Deputy Whitmore has referred to routes 184 and 44A. I am sad to say that it is the same operator. I will keep to the script, which is from the Minister for Transport. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I understand the Deputy's question about the issues with Go-Ahead Ireland bus service provision in north Wicklow. I further understand that the issue of service reliability with Go-Ahead Ireland routes has been raised by Deputies Devlin and McAuliffe and, as I said, by Deputy Lahart in recent weeks.

I note that the Department of Transport has a responsibility for policy and for overall funding in relation to public transport. However, the Department is not involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services nationally, including the public service obligation, PSO, routes that are currently operated by Go-Ahead Ireland. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally by way of public transport service contracts and for the allocation of associated funding to the relevant transport operators. PSO services are socially necessary but financially unviable services. The PSO programme represents a significant expenditure of taxpayers' money. Funding support has increased in recent years.

For anybody who is listening in, it is not as though the Government and the Department are not paying Go-Ahead Ireland to provide a service. That is an important piece. While there is a lot of language here, they are being paid to provide a service at designated times that is reliable and can be trusted. That is the point. While it might not be viable to run all of these services, we are paying Go-Ahead Ireland to provide them. We acknowledge that as a State.

Currently, the vast majority of PSO bus services are provided by Dublin Bus or Bus Éireann through what are known as direct award contracts. The remaining routes are operated by

Go-Ahead Ireland, which entered the market in September 2018 as part of the Government's commitment to open up the bus market through a programme of tendering known as bus market opening.

A key Government objective is to provide all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective in budget 2022, the Department of Transport secured €538 million of funding for PSO and Local Link services provided by State operators under contract by the NTA. The Department recently secured €563 million in budget 2023 for the continuation of these essential services and for the continuation of both the 20% average fare discount and the young adult card.

As the Deputy is aware, the Covid-19 emergency had a profound impact on the public transport sector due to the fall in passenger numbers and the associated drop in fare revenues. I will skip through the next part of the script, because Covid-19 has moved on and because people are dependent on the delivery of services.

I have further been advised that Go-Ahead Ireland is not alone in experiencing issues and that many operators in the transport sector are facing challenges with staffing as a result of Covid absences and issues with recruiting new drivers. While these staffing issues are being experienced by both commercial and PSO operators, it is also true that Go-Ahead Ireland is experiencing higher than normal levels of Covid-related staff absences at present. These absences are having a knock-on effect on service delivery with some services not operating as scheduled. I understand that the NTA is working with Go-Ahead Ireland to try to mitigate the impacts through driver recruitment campaigns.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister of State. It is time that the Minister for Transport, the NTA and Go-Ahead Ireland put the Covid baby down and start taking responsibility for not providing the service that, as the Minister of State says, it is paid to do. It is incredible that a Green Party Minister, the Minister for Transport, is saying that it is not his responsibility to provide these services and make sure buses turn up on time. That is absolutely incredible because when I see press releases and photo opportunities in relation to buses, the Minister is there with them. I would like him to take responsibility for the non-provision of public transport services within Wicklow.

That so many Deputies from different parts of the country and different parties have raised the issue of Go-Ahead Ireland and have identified problems with it is a clear indication that the Minister needs to intervene now and needs to take this under control. The Minister needs to ensure that whoever the State is paying to provide this service is doing what they are paid to do so that people can expect to get a bus when the bus is scheduled to be there.

I thank the Minister of State for her response. I also want to quickly mention another transport issue. I ask the Minister of State to bring it to the Minister for his attention. In July 2021, a bus service provider in west Wicklow, Premier Coaches, applied to operate a direct route from Dublin to Blessington. It took a year of work with the NTA to get that route - route 863 - officially accepted. That was done in August 2022. Many people in the Blessington and west Wicklow community are relying on this route to get them into Dublin. They are still awaiting a start date for this route. I ask the Minister of State to pass that on to the Minister and to ask him to come back to me with an update on it because this is an important route as well.

Deputy Anne Rabbitte: I thank the Deputy. I will certainly bring back the issue of Premier Coaches in west Wicklow to the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

The Minister has instructed the NTA to meet with Go-Ahead Ireland on a weekly basis to get an update on what exactly is happening. They are managing it now at a micro level, as opposed to a macro level, which is unfortunate. The Deputy is right. Go-Ahead Ireland is absorbing the fines as opposed to seeking a solution about delivery times. I will bring this issue back to the Minister but, as I have said, he has instructed the NTA to meet with Go-Ahead Ireland on a weekly basis to ensure the fines are delivered. However, I will bring it back to him that there are three more routes on the cards.

10 o'clock

Public Transport: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— the increased cost of fuel is having a huge financial impact on people across the country;

— people living in rural Ireland are in a unique position, whereby they require more flexible and accessible public transport links;

— 55 per cent of commuters into Dublin are relying on public transport;

— Ireland now ranks amongst the highest globally for urban traffic congestion;

— public transport services in Ireland are unreliable and inaccessible, forcing people to use alternative transport;

— there is an urgent requirement for vastly improved accessibility on all public transport; and

— the need for readily accessible public transport is even greater for the disabled community, particularly those living in rural Ireland;

notes that:

— private cars are the transport mode with the largest energy use and account for 43 per cent of all transport energy demand;

— energy demand by private cars is 67 per cent greater than the combined demand of both heavy goods and light goods commercial vehicles on Irish roads;

— Dublin Bus can only accommodate one wheelchair user per bus;

— if a wheelchair user wishes to use the train service, they must provide 24 hours' notice to rail staff, greatly hindering their right to freedom of movement, general quality of life, safe passage and transport in cases of emergency;

— Luxembourg currently works off a free transport system; and

— Germany has agreed to extend a trial period of heavily subsidised public transport to tackle serious issues with carbon emissions, accessibility, and the cost of living; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide free public transport;

— invest in rural transport addressing frequency, flexibility, reliability, and accessibility;

— invest in upgrading buses and trains;

— ensure that all buses are accessible to people with disabilities beyond the current capacity of one wheelchair at any given time;

— implement appropriate planning and design changes to rail services to ensure that wheelchair users and disabled people are able to travel without notice;

— provide more suitable transport infrastructure such as bus shelters;

— extend Iarnród Éireann to include services in County Donegal;

— extend Local Link services to include more rural areas;

— extend Local Link timetables to ensure that peak hours are better serviced in order to allow people to rely on the service to commute to school and work;

— extend Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann timetables to ensure that peak hours are better serviced in order to allow people to rely on the service to commute to school and work;

— extend Local Link night-time services, with a view to supporting and generating business to the rural hospitality sector;

— implement strategic planning to upgrade Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus to ensure a more reliable service;

— create permanent contracts for bus drivers and transport workers;

— invest in a recruitment drive for drivers;

— invest in upgrading buses and trains so that they are fully accessible; and

— invest in fully electric buses.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce my motion regarding the provision of free and accessible public transport to the Chamber. It has become a running joke that not having a train service is a personality trait for Donegal people. There seems to be a general consensus that we cannot introduce ourselves, or talk about where we are from, without first confirming the fact that our part of the world is so neglected that we do not even have access to a train. We are the forgotten county after all and we have worn this title for so long that it seems to have crept into our psyche and made itself a significant part of our identity.

The provision of free and accessible transport is a sensible proposal which would address many of the issues that people across the country are faced with today. It would address the increased cost of fuel, the significant rise of carbon emissions in recent years, the reliability and accessibility issues we are currently experiencing with our public transport services and the lack of services we are seeing in our rural communities in general. The provision of free and accessible transport would positively affect every single person and community in this country. However, there is no doubt that Donegal is at the heart of this motion. My constituents have had to deal with the lack of public transport for a long time. I take this opportunity to recognise and pay tribute to my constituents, who have been calling for such provisions for years and who I hope to give a voice to with this motion.

Fare-free public transport is far from a novel idea. To date, more than 100 cities have already made public transport free, with more taking the leap every month. Fare-free public transport brings an array of environmental, economic and social benefits, including cleaner air, reduced emissions, reduced costs for users and improved social inclusion among society's most disadvantaged. Public services such as schools, libraries, roads and parks are free to use for everyone. Applying the same principle to public transport implies that, as a measure of mobility and universal accessibility, it should be free as well.

I will begin by addressing the cost-of-living crisis, which is hitting our citizens from all angles. People are struggling to make ends meet and yet are still met with continuously rising bills and fuel costs. Households are struggling to pay their bills and fill their tanks and families are having to make hard decisions on whether they can afford to make the same journeys that they were making before. This particularly affects families from rural communities, who often have to travel long distances to gain access to schools, work, sports clubs, dance classes or even a swimming pool or cinema. In my own town of Killybegs, the nearest swimming pool is 30 km away and the nearest cinema is 58 km away. They are even farther for those living in Carrick or Glencolumbkille. Parents want their children to have the same opportunities as every other child. I have had many parents tell me they have had to start making compromises at the expense of their children's sports, interests and social lives. We should not be forcing parents to make such unfair compromises. It is not fair and it is not good enough.

Free public transport is a social justice policy. It helps to lift people out of poverty through greater equality of opportunity and accessibility. For people on low wages, transport expenses matter. As we know, a car is an expensive item to keep on the road. Unfortunately it is the only viable option for many. For those who rely on public transport, the current fares and fees are also deterrents. When bills, heating and food costs rise, every euro counts. Offering meaningful savings would help lower-income families. Strasbourg provides a useful demonstration of the benefit free transport can have for the cost of living. It was reported that families in Strasbourg with two children could save €550 per year on the cost of their travel passes. The city of Tallinn in Estonia reported that the decision to make public transport free greatly benefited lower income households in and around the city. After the policy was introduced, public transport use increased by 29%.

According to the European Commission, continuous growth of transport demand, along with the increased traffic congestion, has negative consequences on the environment and on the economic competitiveness of member states. Providing an attractive and reliable public transport service is considered to be an important element in creating sustainable mobility. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, transport has had the greatest increase of greenhouse gas emissions, with a 112.2% increase between 1990 and 2021. Passenger cars

were responsible for approximately 54% of road transport emissions in 2020. The same report from the EPA notes that there is an undeniable correlation in the data between the increase in emissions, private cars and economic activity. That is to say, commuting to work is a prime source of our national greenhouse gas emissions.

This requires targeted action that will remove more cars from our roads. Fewer cars means fewer emissions. However, in order for this to be successful, we must incentivise citizens to use high-capacity, responsive, frequent, electrified public transport. Providing free, frequent public transport would encourage commuters to stop relying on their car, which would reduce emissions and congestion. For example, in Vienna, a low yearly fee gives people unlimited access to public transport. This has been taken up by half of Vienna's population, where 38% of all journeys are made by public transport, with walking now being more popular than using cars.

The issue of accessibility to all has been raised from a human rights perspective. The European accessibility act, EAA, will introduce new requirements regarding accessibility for products and services, including transport, and will apply from 28 June 2025. The EAA ensures that disabled people and the elderly community will benefit from fewer barriers when accessing transport. Section 13 of the EEA states that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires "that people with disabilities have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, transportation". Accessibility is essential for participation in society. As an example of a current issue, Dublin Bus can only accommodate one wheelchair user per bus. If wheelchair users wish to use train services, they must provide 24 hours' notice to the rail staff, greatly hindering their right to freedom of movement, general quality of life, safe passage and transport in cases of emergency. I know of instances where people have provided the notice to Iarnród Éireann, but when they arrived at the station, there was nobody to take them off the train. That is wrong.

Ireland has an opportunity to join the other leading member states in making our national public transport infrastructure accessible to our disabled and elderly communities. We must recognise the importance of social inclusion and of logistical freedom. We must acknowledge the incredible worth of the contributions that disabled and elderly people make to our communities. This can only happen if the means of inclusion is properly facilitated. This requires not only making public transport free but also ensuring that it is flexible, efficient and well planned to create a genuinely reliable service. This motion calls for investment in transport, addressing frequency, flexibility, reliability and accessibility. How are we going to encourage people to use public transport when it is completely unreliable? I am sure everyone here has taken Dublin Bus before and I am sure many have had complaints from constituents in recent months about the service. People are often left standing for long periods while multiple buses pass them by, completely full, causing people to be late for work and school. We have heard many cases of people trying to get the bus, then having to give up and hop in the car instead when this is not an option. We are forcing people into using personal vehicles when our transport services are unreliable, then we are penalising them for it. The reality is that their social and economic lives are hemmed into the limits of the public transport that is available to them.

In rural Ireland, there is a complete lack of reliable and responsive public transport. It is almost laughable. It means that anyone without a car is excluded from social and economic inclusion. Shops, work and education are all held to ransom by a limited transport service. Not only does Donegal not have a train service, but the idea that the Government would even consider reinstating one is no longer taken seriously. The Local Link service in Donegal is probably the one of the best-developed Local Link services in the country, but it is still not good enough and

it means very little when dealing with a large county with no rail access. The Local Link service has greatly benefited our communities and it is the first step in providing decent transport, but it badly needs to be extended to include all areas.

There is no point in having an extended service without also extending the timetables. If someone living in Clondalkin got offered a job in Portobello, the 25-minute commute would not be an issue. The bus would provide a simple transport solution. If people in Killybegs were offered a job in Donegal town, 25 minutes away, the only way they would be able to accept that job in the current situation would be if they had access to their own car, as the current timetables do not provide a sufficient service at peak hours. This is a significant obstacle for disabled people, especially in rural communities, and for everybody else. It goes without saying that if people live in rural Ireland, they need to own a car. However, no concessions are made for our rural population in this regard.

Free and accessible public transport is necessary to tackle the issue of accessibility and inclusion. It is clear that free public transport is a practical and effective way to reap climate, social, health and economic benefits. It is a single solution that solves multiple problems. It will be a wasted opportunity if the Government does not recognise that.

People throughout rural Ireland are regularly left waiting for buses that do not arrive, even in the case of buses that are a part of the Expressway link. Perhaps two or three of those buses do not arrive. Those days must become a thing of the past. We can make that happen by providing real jobs and ensuring drivers have work. We must provide a service that is reliable and free at the point of the use. We must also ensure a service for everybody.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Deputy Pringle and his office for bringing forward this motion for the provision of free and accessible public transport. This is an important motion and I fully support its emphasis on rural areas and greater access for those with disabilities. I also want to approach this issue from the point of view of meeting the targets for CO2 emissions, and the transformation to a green economy. Public transport has a key role to play in that transformation. Due to a criminal lack of planning and investment in public transport, we have been forced into a situation where we are the most car dependent society in Europe. Cars make up 75% of vehicle use. We have the highest mileage per household in Europe and we also have the highest transport costs, 25% above the EU average.

In 2021, buses and coaches, both public and private, accounted for only 3% of journeys, with rail at less than 1%. The transport sector, internationally the fastest growing economic sector, relies on oil for 92% of its energy use in Ireland. In 2021, private cars represented the largest fossil fuel demand, with 42% of total transport energy demand. In 2019, 74% of journeys were made by private cars. One of the side effects of this is the effect on air quality. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has reported numerous breaches of safety levels due to increased emissions of NO2. The presence of fine dust particles has meant an increase in asthma of 1,700 cases per year, particularly affecting children and those with other respiratory issues.

We need to make the transformation now to a low-carbon public transport country, in the process transforming access and affordability. We need to put in place an integrated public transport system to include buses, light rail, cycling and walking, and for that to be a key part of the planning process. We need to connect rural areas to the main towns and cities, and *vice versa*. Transport poverty in rural areas prevents people from accessing essential services, jobs

and schools. Housing needs to be centred in and around villages for public transport to service more people.

Accessing services and getting to work can also be a problem in suburban areas. However, the so-called BusConnects reorganisation of the bus routes in Dublin has gone in the opposite direction to what is required in many areas. In general, the reorganisation means reduced services in many working-class areas. An example is the replacement of the No. 79 bus route in my constituency. It is a long-established route serving Ballyfermot and goes right through the working-class community in the south inner city. That route has been replaced by a new service, the No. 60, which will no longer go through lower Ballyfermot or the Liberties. It will bypass those working-class communities. This is typical of BusConnects across the city. It would be more correctly called "BusDisconnects" in many communities in Dublin.

I catch a bus from the Oblate Church of Mary Immaculate in Inchicore. It is served by the Nos. 68, 69 and 13 buses, which come from Greenoge, Grange Castle and Rathcoole, and serve the city. Those routes are all due to be stopped and redirected down Crumlin Road in Dublin 12. People in my area of Inchicore will be left with one bus per hour. We have access to the Luas at the Blackhorse stop but the tram is jam-packed by the time it gets there I would not get on the Luas during rush hour, although I do use it. All this means that people must walk to Inchicore village, approximately a ten-minute walk. Such a walk is grand for people who are fit and healthy, and have no kids to drag behind them. That is the reality. There needs to be genuine dialogue and consultation with local communities about how to best improve public transport services. We need serious State investment not just to expand our public transport network but also to eliminate its dependence on fossil fuels. It would be easier to do this with bus and coach transport than with the heavy rail network. CIÉ estimates that 1,500 electric buses will be required. Some 800 such EVs have been ordered, along with three green hydrogen buses. Green hydrogen technology is still at an early stage and is key to the greening of heavy rail. The electrification of existing railway lines would be expensive and time-consuming. The light rail system, such as the Luas and the DART, should be extended in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, etc. The MetroLink service to Dublin Airport should go ahead.

There is also the issue of making transport free. This is crucial as a key incentive to get people out of private cars by providing a serious option for getting to work, shopping and availing of essential services.

Deputy Michael McNamara: I support the motion and thank my colleague, Deputy Pringle, for putting it before the House. The Green Party is heavily shaping Government policy. The mantra, of course, is that we should move to public transport. There has been a lot of discussion about penalising the use of cars through congestion charges, etc. Uniquely, we are talking about penalising people before alternatives are in place. I do not have a problem with trying to reduce congestion in Dublin, nor have I a problem with trying to get people to use public transport and more energy efficient methods of transport, thereby reducing carbon emissions. I have no problem with any of that. However, we have never invested in public transport in this State. That is not the fault of the Green Party.

I have previously raised the issue of what was once the direct Limerick to Dublin line, via Castleconnell, Ballybrophy, Nenagh, Cloughjordan and Roscrea. Passengers change at Ballybrophy to get to Dublin. The Minister told me there has been considerable investment in the line, which I welcome. As a result of that investment, the travel time on the line is 15 minutes shorter than it used to be. However, if someone wants to travel by rail from Birdhill to Dublin

in the middle of November, after the investment, there will be a train at 6.58 a.m., which arrives at 9.57 a.m., and a train at 7.52 a.m., which arrives at 11 a.m. Both of those trains take in excess of three hours. When I was a child, some 40 years ago - I am 48 now - that journey took a shorter time. Time matters. People who wish to take a train to Dublin will ask how long it will take. It is a very pleasant journey. There are calves running alongside the carriage, etc. It is a relaxing journey for those who have the time. However, I can drive from Birdhill to Leinster House in the middle of Dublin, let alone Heuston Station, in two hours and 15 minutes. Trains need to be invested in if we want people to use them. The problem is the lack of investment and I blame successive Governments for that. There has been a considerable lack of investment in public infrastructure throughout the country.

The motion refers to the lack of wheelchair accessibility on our trains and buses. That is a problem. The lifts across the DART service are regularly out of order. That issue affects the Minister of State's constituency. There has been a lack of investment and funding to deal with those issues. That most severely impacts disabled people, as the motion points out, and I am happy to support that because it curtails their right to freedom of movement. However, the lack of accessibility also curtails the ability of anybody who has a pram, which is a large cohort of the population. I am not saying that cohort is more important than wheelchair users merely because it is a slightly larger cohort. The impingement on the rights of those with prams is less serious than the impingement on the rights of wheelchair users. However, we are left in a position where a large cohort of the population cannot use the DART if the lifts are not working.

Some of the Minister of State's colleagues have criticised people with sports utility vehicles, SUVs, driving around south County Dublin. If someone has two children and two prams, it must be tempting to buy a high car to get them in and out of, particularly when he or she cannot get them in and out of DART stations because the lifts are not working. Instead of criticising people for the choices they are making, the Government must give them choices. I expect that is something the Minister of State supports and I am disappointed in the Government. There is a movement in that direction by this Government but it is not enough, particularly given the climate crisis we are facing and the amount of criticism we are levying at people for using cars, be it to drive from Clare, Birdhill or Cloughjordan to Dublin, or to drive around Dublin. Until alternatives are provided, it is not reasonable to criticise people and that remains my view. I do not have a problem with trying to move people onto more sustainable forms of transport but we have to provide the alternatives and provide those forms of transport first. I am happy to support the motion.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this motion, which, as they can imagine, is close to my heart. I thank Deputies Pringle, Joan Collins and McNamara for their clear statements, which I listened to and which I will address in detail later on. The 50% cut in the price of public transport for young people and the 20% cut are the most dramatic interventions in the fare system for public transport since Charlie Haughey's free travel scheme for elderly people. A 66 year-old person is not an elderly person anymore; I will be one myself in a few years so that is something to look forward to. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about the importance of continued investment in our public transport. I am doing this on behalf of the Minister for Transport and I have no doubt that we will all agree on the Government's commitment to delivering an integrated, accessible and sustainable public transport network throughout the country. The Government will not oppose the motion but there are some minor details that we have an issue with, which we will discuss this morning.

The Minister for Transport is conscious of the need to connect our people and places across Ireland. It is important to provide opportunities for all citizens to access their employment, education, healthcare or go shopping. He is strongly committed to improving public transport services in rural areas and to piloting new transport initiatives for people of all ages and abilities living there. Whether it is reduced car dependency or a more integrated transport network, our vision for rural Ireland is ambitious and one that is a key motivator at his Department as it prepares its work programme for 2023. I was in County Donegal a few weeks ago and I met the former Tánaiste, Mary Coughlan, who is on the board of Transport for Ireland, TFI, Local Link Donegal Sligo Leitrim. We discussed what her issues were with the service there, which has been reinvested in and improved but is by no means perfect. However, there have been huge improvements in the Local Link service, which we can talk about later. The Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority, NTA, are supporting this by providing increased funding for enhanced TFI Local Link services for regular, timetabled, door-to-door and demand-responsive services, where more than 90% of those journeys are fully accessible. The Department and the NTA are looking to explore alternative options to boost coverage, including non-conventional options such as demand-responsive transport, community cars and local area hackneys. Government is committed to reviewing the extensive learnings from the pilot study in County Leitrim, which positively integrated non-emergency health transport with public transport offerings. One of the key plans for enhancing the existing transport network throughout Ireland falls under the connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, which entails the enhancement of regional networks connecting cities and regional centres nationwide through expanding TFI's Local Link services and by prioritising public transport projects that enhance connectivity.

As well as playing a key social role within our communities, encouraging greater use of public transport is also critical to tackling our climate change challenge, as Deputy Collins said. The Department of Transport's sustainable mobility policy sets out our vision for the future of sustainable mobility in Ireland and it aims to support a transition to more sustainable daily travel method. We have targets to deliver 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys and a 10% reduction in the number of kilometres driven by fossil fuel cars by 2030. This policy is underpinned by a robust action plan set out to 2025 alongside capital funding allocated in the revised national development plan, which is to ensure delivery. In the more urban parts of Ireland, projects such as BusConnects will provide more sustainable, accessible and reliable transport options to everyone, resulting in higher quality services. By revitalising public transport and providing safe and active travel routes, the project represents a necessary modal shift away from private transport. The fleet renewal will save the equivalent of 85,000 tonnes of CO2 per year, in line with targets set in the climate action plan, while improving capacity. It is vital that BusConnects continues to engage in real dialogue with the communities it is serving. I have seen many examples where BusConnects put forward a project for a particular area, such as a village or town, and then went back and completely revised it to make sure it was in line with what people in the area wanted. Better projects resulted from that.

On our rail network, the Department of Transport, in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, is preparing a strategy for the development of the railway sector on the island of Ireland from 2040. The all-island strategic rail review will examine the role of rail with regard to: improving sustainable connectivity between the major cities; enhancing regional accessibility; supporting balanced regional development; and providing improved connectivity to the north west of the island. This review will also consider the potential scope for improved rail services along the various existing or future potential corridors of the net-

work. That scope will include the potential afforded by disused and closed lines. It will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail network on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead. The review is expected to complete in the fourth quarter of 2022.

Additionally, the new DART+ fleet contract award is an exciting marker of progress in the delivery of the overall DART+ programme, which is the largest ever investment in our rail network. DART+ will modernise and improve existing rail services in the greater Dublin area, increasing the network from 50 km to 150 km of railway corridor and doubling capacity for 26,000 passengers per hour to up to 52,000 per hour during peak hours. In addition, it will allow for frequent, modern and electrified services to Drogheda on the northern line, Hazelhatch and Celbridge on the Kildare line, and Maynooth and M3 Parkway on the Maynooth line, while improving DART services on the south-east line as far south as Greystones. We look forward to the first order of 95 new carriages entering into service in 2025, allowing the current fleet to be used elsewhere and creating additional capacity across the system.

To further champion the ethos of public transport for all, the Minister for Transport is fully committed to strengthening our public transport offerings and to progressively making them accessible for all, especially for persons with disabilities or reduced mobility and for older persons. The Department of Transport and its agencies are progressively making public transport accessible for disabled people, including in rural areas, by ensuring that new infrastructure and services are accessible from the start and by retrofitting older legacy infrastructure and facilities. Accessibility features such as wheelchair accessibility and audiovisual aids are built into new public transport infrastructure projects and vehicles from the design stage. Additionally, the Department is committed to further reducing the 24 hours of notice for travel on rail services, which has been brought down to four hours in major train stations. However, work remains to be done on the retrofitting of older legacy infrastructure such as the Victorian era train stations. To support these works, the Department continues to provide funding into a multi-annual accessibility retrofit programme, which includes programmes to: install accessible bus stops in rural and regional areas; upgrade bus bays at regional bus and train stations; upgrade train stations to make them accessible to wheelchair users; and provide grant support to increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis. A key Government objective is to provide all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and public transport plays a key role in delivering this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2022 the Department of Transport secured about €538 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, and Local Link services provided by State operators and under contract by the NTA this year.

The Government is strongly committed to helping combat the rising cost of living being experienced throughout the country and, in this context, a suite of new measures was introduced to help with this issue, including the 20% average fare cut on public service obligations, PSO, services, which was brought in during April. In recognition of the importance of incentivising young people to use public transport, the Minister secured €25 million in funding to provide for the introduction of a young adult card, which allows any person nationwide aged between 19 and 23 to avail of a 50% discount across all services, including city, Intercity and rural services. Mature students in full-time third level education are also included in the scheme, as are eligible visitors to Ireland within the young adult age cohort. Further, the NTA is widening the age rules of the scheme to allow 16-, 17- and 18-year-old students in third level education to apply for the student Leap card so they can also get that 50% discount. The Department recently secured €563 million in budget 2023 for the continuation of these essential PSO services and for the

continuation of the 20% average fare cut and the 50% fare cut on the young adult card.

It is important to point out that while we are not opposing the motion there are specific calls within it that are not in line with Government policy and these relate to the provision of universal free public transport and Government intervention in employment matters. On free public transport, the Government has invested significantly this year and will continue to invest in 2023 in reduced public transport fares generally by cutting PSO fares by an average of 20% and by introducing the youth adult card. As part of the roll-out of BusConnects Dublin, the TFI 90-minute fare has been introduced, which provides for competitive fares and removes any actual or perceived penalty associated with interchanging between different public transport services within a 90-minute window. A significant body of international research demonstrates that beyond a certain level of intervention in the fares area, there is a much greater benefit associated with improving and expanding the public transport services themselves. Indeed, in one region, Tallinn in Estonia, which has been mentioned, the OECD recently recommended that fares be reintroduced. A key concern is that the funding required to support free services comes at the expense of investment in supporting public transport services at the levels necessary for optimal existing levels of service and for expanding and improving those services. There is no point in making a service completely free when people cannot board the service in the first place. The service has to be improved. I have visited Tallinn and have seen it working, or not working, at first-hand. I have also seen what they have done in Luxembourg. The approach adopted by Government to date in this area is considered appropriate and the focus at the moment is retaining the reductions introduced, expanding them until end 2023 and supporting new and improved services for next year.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am pleased to support the motion to make public transport free and accessible. It is certainly ambitious but I believe its time has come. The Minister of State said we cannot afford it and suggested it does not work as well as they thought it might elsewhere. The argument of not being able to afford something is not a good argument if the objective is positive. I will come back to that later. We are in a crisis at the moment and sometimes a crisis is an opportunity to do things differently and look at things differently. We are not just in one crisis; we are in two. We have the cost-of-living crisis and the climate change crisis. These two crises coming together favour many of the proposals in the motion. While the programme for Government might not have been in favour of free universal public transport, now is the time to consider it. I will come back to that later.

The motion is ambitious but surely its time has come. The Government is not opposing it, which is itself a recognition that what is contained and asked for in it is largely reasonable, doable and a good policy proposal. I thank Deputy Pringle for giving us an opportunity to debate and tease out some of his ideas. There are a lot of really good ideas in it . Some, perhaps, will take longer to put in place than others. However, all of them are good proposals in their own right. We have an opportunity this morning to discuss some of them. It is ambitious but it gets many of these policy proposals right, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, the need to cut our CO2 and other emissions and, crucially, the need to ensure all public transport is accessible.

When most people hear the word "accessibility", they think about somebody in a wheelchair, somebody who has very poor mobility or somebody who suffers from sight loss or whatever. They think of a person with a disability. In truth, access is so much more than this. Access is about universal design. It is not about people with disabilities. Access is for everyone. Sometimes there is the idea that there is them and us - there are the people who have disabilities

and, God, we need to do something about it, and then there is us, and we can get on with our daily lives. The reality of life is that many of us will become "them" as we age, as our mobility may be compromised. Universal design deals with that issue for all of us from birth to death. There should not be any question about this. It should be the way we do our business. Whether it is our buildings or our transport infrastructure, we must now and for the future ensure universal design. That is what this motion is asking for in broad terms. It is going in the right direction, and I know the Minister of State will agree with me. We have signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. That requires us to take the universal design approach. Whether it is our buildings or transport infrastructure, this is a whole-of-population approach and it needs to be embedded in all our designs. Accessibility should be a given. We often speak of independent living. All of us have independent living. It is crucial to the lives of persons with a disability. We think in terms of access to buildings or services. However, it is also about freedom of movement, the kind of movement that, for now at least, the Minister of State and I and most people in the Chamber take for granted. The motion is asking us to put that policy at the centre of where we move from here on public transport. The current situation whereby sometimes 24 hours' notice needs to be given has to change. I am not saying it will be changed by tomorrow because that takes time. The change should be as immediate as possible for all public transport. Private transport may take a little longer. I am not letting those providers off the hook or excusing them. Everybody has a business to run and has to look at costs. The sooner it becomes embedded as the way we do and think about things, the better.

I want to briefly comment on the issue of rural transport. Sometimes the sentiment is that rural people are wedded to their cars. That is not true. The practical issue for many people who live in rural areas is that if they do not have a car, they cannot move about. Rural people want public transport just as much as anybody who lives in an urban area. It has to be affordable. Reduction in our use of CO2 is key. It needs to be frequent, accessible and cheap. My colleague, Deputy Pringle, is looking for it to be free and I support him fully. However, there are steps along that way that we can take. I recognise that Government has decreased fares for certain sectors and so on. That decrease needs to be across the board for everybody.

It is not enough for transport to be frequent, accessible and cheap; it needs to be integrated. Online ticketing can be a nightmare. Someone who decides to book the night before to get a better price can only activate that 90 minutes before the bus arrives in rural Ireland and, I presume, elsewhere. They might have no Internet coverage when they get to the bus stop. The whole system is not working well enough as a system for people to be confident in using it to deal with their transport issues. There is also an issue about it being integrated. I have received numerous emails from people who travel from small, rural parishes or villages into their local town. There might be a bus service twice a day that brings them to their local town but when they arrive they find that the main bus services to elsewhere have left five or ten minutes earlier. There needs to be integrated thinking about the provision of rural transport.

The Minister of State mentioned a rail review and improving train services in the north west. Deputy Pringle and I are well aware that the rail review does not include the word "Donegal", unless there is a new one that I am not aware of. The county needs to be included if anybody is seriously thinking about ensuring we have a rail service. Deputy Pringle will confirm I am right in saying Donegal is one of the few counties in the country, perhaps the only one, that does not have a train service. Perhaps there is one other. There needs to be a commitment to that. The current rail review will not do it.

Free public transport would be a boost to everybody, especially in the current cost-of-living crisis. The Government's proposals for young people are not enough. This needs to be universal.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am sharing time with colleagues. If it was only Donegal that did not have rail, we might be in a far better starting position. Unfortunately, there are many other counties in the same boat as Donegal. Many people will be familiar with the map that compares the rail network today with the rail network 100 years ago. It is an incredible shame that we are where we are now and have lost that fantastic infrastructure that would serve us so well.

The OECD will release a report today or in the coming days that will reflect on Ireland's approach to transport and the Government's approach to transport policy. It will be critical of the Government's decision to place so many eggs in the basket of electric vehicles. It is well known at this stage that the target of 1 million EVs is a fantasy target and meaningless. If Government had sense, it would just walk away from that, for many reasons.

The many reasons for expanding the public transport network have already been articulated in terms of climate, social benefits, inclusivity, health and economics. A public transport network is like a good education system; it is a great social equaliser.

Sinn Féin produced a set of proposals. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this and I thank Deputy Pringle for tabling the motion. We need the Government to be aggressive and ambitious in the roll-out of public transport. It needs to involve more than reports and targets. Communities need to see delivery to ensure they have a public transport system that is accessible, affordable, available, meets their needs and works for them. That is the standard. It needs to make sense for people. If the public transport option does not make sense for people, they will not use it. In many cases, they will not use it because they cannot use it; it is not affordable, accessible and available to them.

Sinn Féin set out a suite of proposals. I understand from the budget discussions that the Government is considering many options. We want to set out what we want the Government to do and what we would do if we were in government. We would make the 20% public transport fare reductions permanent, not just extend them to the end of next year. We would make them permanent and expand them to private bus operators. Whether it is Suirway in the south east, Buggy Coaches in Kilkenny or, in my area, Ashbourne Connect, these are services that are either dropping or reducing their services because they cannot compete. We would cut public transport fares by 50% for those under 18 to encourage positive habit formation. We would make public transport more accessible for people with disabilities by investing €12.6 million in the public transport accessibility retrofit programme. We would do that every year for a term in government bringing the total in that fund to €137 million. That would, in a five-year term, make all public transport fully accessible.

The Minister of State has heard the stories of people having to wait 24 hours or having to send a notification and about lifts not working and public transport services not being accessible. That needs to be addressed. We would accelerate the roll-out of rural bus services. There is a good plan in Connecting Ireland and there is a real demand for it. However, the funding is not there. It is a five-year €56 million programme, with €5 million invested in the first year, and we do not know what will come in subsequent years. Sinn Féin would put €25 million into that programme this year. The Government should do the same. In 2023, we need communities to

see new services they can access at an affordable rate.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons Disabilities, CRPD, general comment on Article 9, accessibility, sets out that it is a precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully and equally in society. Without access to transport, among other facilities and services, persons with disabilities do not have equal opportunities to participate in society. The UN committee also notes that the physical inaccessibility of public transport and other facilities is a major factor in the marginalisation and exclusion of children with disabilities and it markedly compromises their access to services, including health and education.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for promoting the development of an integrated, accessible public transport system. As we said, on all new public infrastructure there are accessibility features, such as wheelchair access and audiovisual aids, built in from the design stage. I very much welcome this. However, there are serious issues with older infrastructure and facilities, with progress being much too slow. For the State to align with the CRPD in the transport sector, there is a need to develop a sustainable and universally accessible national public transport system, including 100% of Local Link bus services being wheelchair accessible. There is also a need for annual targets to be developed for the retrofitting of older public transport infrastructure, with a report measuring progress against these targets.

Transport is highlighted in the comprehensive employment strategy, the national disability inclusion strategy and in the CRPD as one of the key services that helps people with disabilities participate in everyday life and obtain employment. It is estimated that by 2026, persons with disabilities will account for roughly 16% of the population. It is crucial that this cohort of Irish society can access public transport and we ensure the needs of an ageing population are met. The report, Accessibility of Public Transport for People with Disabilities, produced by the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport in November 2018 emphasised the necessity of having integrated, universally designed public transport services that are accessible to everyone, especially persons with disabilities. The Joint Committee on Disability Matters also highlighted this in our contribution to the draft initial state report under the CRPD.

The accessibility consultative committee set up under the national disability inclusion strategy to monitor progress in making public transport more accessible highlighted that there is little consideration given to the needs of people with disabilities when designing mainstream programmes. It further noted that such programmes can therefore be a missed opportunity at best or, at worst, can further marginalise people with disabilities and increase inequalities.

The National Disability Authority, NDA, made submissions to both the MetroLink and BusConnects public consultations, which highlighted a significant lack of consultation and consideration for persons with disabilities at each step of the proposed project to ensure the final service is universally designed. The NDA also noted in its BusConnects submission concern that the revised BusConnects proposal did not include a number of key points that the NDA had previously advised regarding the different elements of the proposed project. There is no purpose in having consultation with disability groups if their recommendations are not taken on board.

Rural Ireland is particularly badly served in terms of access to public transport in general, but especially for people with disabilities. Disabled people living in rural areas are often highly dependent on family members or taxis for travel, which incurs higher costs. Local Link buses

serving smaller towns and villages need to be 100% wheelchair accessible and shuttle services to transport hubs such as existing rail stations need to be extended. There are still towns and villages where those in a wheelchair cannot get onto public transport. Bus Éireann has done considerable work to upgrade its coaches and main stations but there are major questions about bus stops outside the main stations and the slow progress being made in that regard. It must be dramatically accelerated. I welcome the fact that all new public transport infrastructure has accessibility features such as wheelchair access and audiovisual aids built in from the design stage but significant investment is required in respect of older infrastructure and facilities. The progress that has been made in that regard is far too slow.

Deputy Pringle raised the issue of a rail service being extended to Donegal. I would like to include counties Cavan and Monaghan in that because they do not have a rail service. I do not think Fermanagh or Tyrone have one either. That whole area could be linked up very well. There was a rail service to the area at one time and we need one again.

Deputy John Brady: Public transport needs to be accessible, affordable, frequent and reliable but that is certainly not the case at the moment. That is due to many issues but I wish to focus on the issue of privatisation. The policy of this Government and the previous Government to privatise particular routes has been a disaster in recent years. Go-Ahead now operates 30 routes that were previously operated by Dublin Bus. Since it took over the routes three years ago, it has been an unmitigated disaster. In my constituency of Wicklow, three routes were privatised, namely, the 184, 185 and 45A routes. I could list off case after case of people having been left abandoned at bus stops, waiting on buses that are running late or cancelled or simply do not show up. The result is that people are late for school, work or hospital appointments. It has been an unmitigated disaster right across those areas.

There is a solution to this, however, which is to take that contract off Go-Ahead. The NTA has a responsibility here. For the first six months of this year, fines of €850,000 have been issued to Go-Ahead for the Dublin routes alone. For all its routes, more than €1.15 million in fines have been issued to Go-Ahead. This month, the NTA has a decision to make as it can extend the contract by a further year. It is due to extend to October 2023. The NTA can extend that by another year, bringing it up to October 2024. A decision should be taken now not to extend the contract. However, the NTA and the Government need to go further and cancel that contract with Go-Ahead immediately and give it back to Dublin Bus, which can and will provide a reliable bus service for areas such as Enniskerry, Kilcoole, Kilmacanogue, Greystones, Bray and all the other areas in Wicklow and right across the 30 routes that are currently being let down by Go-Ahead, which has made an absolute disaster of the service it operates. As my party and I have stated repeatedly, privatisation has not worked. This is a prime example of how privatisation has failed. The onus is on the Government and the NTA to revoke the licence and reinstate a service that is fit for purpose.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. Tá sé ciallmhar ó thaobh na todhchaí, na timpeallachta, tráchta agus costas teaghlaigh agus oibre. This is a significant time for public transport. My home city of Cork is one of the areas in which there will be a big focus on trying to shift people from relying on their cars to using public transport more. We are currently in the middle of consultations on BusConnects. I believe BusConnects is a good idea and it can work but, for that to happen, it is important that the NTA engages with communities, listens to them, takes on board their feedback and operates in a flexible way. My discussions with the NTA thus far have led me to believe there is a willingness to work with communities and to adjust in order to take local concerns into account, and I welcome that.

However, it is possible that some of the confusion, issues or design defects could have been avoided if there was a permanent NTA presence in Cork. If we are looking at BusConnects, light rail and everything else connected to the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy, CMATS, the proposal put forward by me and the Cork Chamber of Commerce through many years, of a delivery office for the NTA in Cork, is a logical one.

Another point that arises in the context of BusConnects is that although the potential is undoubtedly significant, bus drivers in Bus Éireann have told me it does not have anywhere near enough staff to deliver the kind of frequency that is envisaged. It is vital that we avoid situations such as those highlighted by Deputy Brady, where we end up relying on private contractors, some of which are not reliable enough. It is vital that we ensure Bus Éireann has enough drivers to ensure this is delivered.

CMATS has several good elements but it is inadequately ambitious in terms of suburban rail. The outer suburbs are well served under it, as is east-west. The north-south connection, however, is a missed opportunity. A significant amount of traffic crosses the city every day. Under CMATS, large commuter populations in places such as Douglas, Carrigaline, Ballyphehane and Togher will not be served but they could have been.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Public transport is still very much non-existent in many parts of rural Ireland. We are still seeing the loss of services. Last summer, the Dublin-Galway X20 bus service was taken away, which particularly impacted the likes of Aughrim and Ballinasloe in east Galway. That services are still being lost very much flies in the face of the green agenda and encouraging people to get out of their cars and take public transport. The roll-out of Connecting Ireland has been welcomed by Sinn Féin. However, only slightly more than €5 million has been spent on it this year. We need that funding to be front-loaded so that services are put in place and then built on. Likewise, there have recently been long-awaited changes to Local Link, including in County Roscommon. Those changes are welcome but we need Local Link to be promoted far better and we need it to continue to be built on going forward.

In many cases, the rail services that are currently in place are totally inadequate. There are rarely enough carriages to meet demand. If we are encouraging people to get out of their cars and take a train, particularly to commute, the lack of seats is a significant problem. Timetables also need to be considered. Irish Rail will repeatedly say that increased capacity needs to be considered. We need to ensure we meet demand. There is a particular issue with capacity on the Westport-Dublin line. There are never enough carriages and people are left standing or sitting in doorways. That should not happen. It is incredible that wheelchair users still have to give 24 hours' notice to get on a train. That is wrong and should not happen. It shows how far we have to go in respect of disability services when it comes to transport in the State.

I refer to the west and north west. The inclusion of the western rail corridor in the Trans-European Transport Network, TEN-T, to guarantee that funding is critical for the region. In 2019, the west and north west was downgraded from a developed region to a region in transition. It has now been downgraded again, to a lagging region. This is a serious situation that the Government is ignoring. That is why the region has been downgraded again. Critical infrastructure is key, and that includes transport.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Ar dtús ba mhaith liom an bus oíche a ardú leis an Aire Stáit agus seo ceist atá luaite go sách minic agam sa Seomra seo. Tá dhá líne nua curtha le bus 24 uaire i mBaile Átha Cliath agus cuirim fáilte roimhe sin ach tá gá le bus oíche i nGaillimh freisin agus

ar fud an iarthair. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an bus 424 ag taisteal níos déanaí anois agus gur féidir le daoine, mar gheall air sin, dul i gcomhair béile agus dul ar ais abhaile ach teastaíonn tuilleadh busanna cosúil leis seo agus teastaíonn a leithéid in iarthar an chontae freisin. There are several matters I wish to raise with the Minister.

11 o'clock

One issue I have raised a number of times in the Chamber is that of a night bus in Galway. While the 424 service is now running later, there is a need for increased night buses, specifically in the eastern part of the county. There are two new lines for 24-hour bus services in Dublin, which is very welcome, but we need to see the same level of support in more rural areas, for example, for students who cannot find accommodation in the city and have to travel out further, as well as for people who are working late at night.

We know people will use public transport if they have the option. I see that on the Galway-Dublin bus, which is packed. Speaking of the Galway-Dublin bus service, it is an outrage that the 20-X20 service was cancelled. It provided a vital service for people in rural areas to travel to Dublin.

Another issue I want to raise is the western rail corridor, on which there has been a long campaign. It was a fantastic rail service for the west. My great grandad was a train driver on the western rail corridor, so my family is acutely aware of the importance of the service. Again, when there is a rail service available people will use it. If we are serious about people using public transport, we need to make it affordable but we also need to make it accessible. Unfortunately, it is not accessible for the vast majority of people in rural Ireland.

For students living outside Galway city, making it to college by 9 a.m. using the bus service is not realistic in many cases. That needs to be addressed.

Deputy Duncan Smith: On behalf of the Labour Party, I welcome the motion. The conversation on free and accessible transport is the only one we should be having on transport in this country. This motion is another opportunity for us to discuss the issue in some detail and, hopefully, move the conversation forward.

In the most recent budget, the Labour Party proposed a €9 climate card, which would be a monthly charge for unlimited travel modelled on a pilot scheme used successfully in Germany through the summer of 2022. Unfortunately, we did not see any great furthering of progressive green transport policies in the budget we have just had, satisfied as the Government was with its initial moves on fare reduction and the provision of active travel measures which, in fairness, we can see in some areas of the country. There was no great step forward in the provision of more affordability or free transport in the budget.

One of the reasons the Labour Party did not propose a free transport scheme in this budget is that there are still concerns about how poor our transport network is. The motion speaks to that in great detail, particularly in rural areas. Free transport was introduced in Tallinn in Estonia in 2013 as a cost-of-living measure but the infrastructure was not in place and it has not led to a reduction in car usage or an improvement in transport infrastructure. That case should serve as a warning to us until we get our transport network correct and to where we need it to be. We need to ensure we have a funding model in place that will provide that. It is a balancing act of continuing to reduce fares, making them more affordable, encouraging people to use public transport where they have it and where they can, but also of ensuring that there is an ambitious

plan to improve our network across rail, bus and other active travel measures.

I welcome the submission last week to An Bord Pleanála of the planning application and railway order for MetroLink. This morning, while coming into town on the bus, I saw on Twitter that a councillor for the Louth region had sent a photo of the type we all see of the Google traffic heat maps of the city. The M1, from just north of Balbriggan right down to Whitehall, was an angry dark red colour. That is not just this morning but every morning. The councillor in question said that incentives should be increased for people to use the northern commuter rail line. That line, however, is at capacity use and we will not get the increased carriages we need for the service for some years. The answer to ease the congestion on the M1 corridor is the delivery of MetroLink. People on the north side of Dublin know how important that is. This is not just a Fingal or Swords issue but it is the entire central spine of north County Dublin.

While improved links to the airport would benefit the entire city and people coming into the country, we on our side of the city want to see fast and efficient progression of this railway order and planning permission. Any frivolous objections from people in areas that are not on the line or are not impacted by the M1 corridor and the traffic nightmare on it every single day of the week should be given short shrift because the north side of Dublin needs this. The south side of Dublin has Luas lines, a DART link and bus services, and will get BusConnects. The north side of Dublin needs the MetroLink and that should be made crystal clear to those in government.

We expected a change in the short hop zones in the budget. Unfortunately, the kite was flown in advance of the budget but the measure did not make it into it. Along the N7, for example, we have areas such as Newbridge where the rail fare is €12 to get into the city, whereas from Naas it is €4. My colleague, Senator Mark Wall, has been raising this issue for a number of years. We have people getting into their cars in places like Monasterevin and Newbridge who should be getting the train but do not do so because it is unaffordable. A modification of the short hop zone would help.

These are things that can be done. There are still anomalies in the 90-minute fare. We need to see stations such as Skerries and Balbriggan on the northern commuter rail line brought into that. They are well within the 90-minute commute time but because they are marked on how long it takes for a bus to get from Balbriggan to Skerries, they are outside that scheme. Again, these are other measures and low-hanging fruit that could be delivered now to get people to use the public transport services that are in place.

Accessibility is a major issue that should go hand in hand with the delivery of clean transport. While we are seeing movement towards electric and hybrid fleets in our bus services, we are not moving at the same pace on increasing disabled accessibility. A Dublin Bus can only accommodate one wheelchair user at a time. That is just not good enough. I have been dealing with a number of activists and representatives of the Irish Wheelchair Association. Users of some of the more modern wheelchairs, which are very large in size, find it difficult to board a bus, even if there is no other wheelchair user already using the service. While we need to move towards clean fleets, we also need to move towards more accessible fleets. The ongoing problem of broken lifts in our railway stations is another disgrace and one which continually inhibits wheelchair users and people with mobility issues from using a service they may have in their locality. Again, we did not see anything in the budget on that.

I will conclude on the issue of Go-Ahead Ireland services. This is an absolute disgrace. We have been raising for months the fact that people are being left at bus stops every morning in

Donabate, Portrane, Portmarnock and Sutton, and other services in Kildare and north Wicklow were mentioned earlier. The routes may be different but the story is the same. We have people missing hospital appointments, arriving late for work or having to get a taxi. Instead of being able to avail of the discounted fares the Government has brought in, they are having to pay higher fares for taxis just to get into work and avoid being penalised by their employers for being absent or late. This is a public transport service that is failing the public. When the contract for Go-Ahead Ireland services comes to an end, these services need to revert to Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann, the previous holders of those contracts and the proper public transport providers.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What we need in a public transport system is that it is reliable, efficient, accessible and cost-effective. The reliability issue is the one I want to deal with first and I want to pick up on the point in regard to Go-Ahead Ireland. Kildare was the first area where the buses transferred across from Bus Éireann and we were told at the time it would be a seamless service. Last week, the fines for Go-Ahead Ireland in regard to Kildare were €450,000 for the first six months because it did not provide that reliable service. We were told it would be on the hour, every hour, but the bus routinely does not turn up. It is not as if there is a ten-minute gap between one and the next. People are left waiting and when the next bus arrives, it is full.

These are real examples, not hypothetical situations. Employees are at risk of losing their jobs because of persistent lateness. College students have missed exams and they routinely miss classes. Primary school pupils are left stranded by the bus service for upwards of 80 minutes. There is no other public transport option on most of these routes. In Clane, for example, there is no train and no alternative service. Last night, for the bus service that comes out of town on the half-hour, every hour, the 7.30 p.m. bus did not turn up, the 8.30 p.m. bus did not turn up and people then got on the 9.30 p.m. bus. Why would anyone use public transport when that is their experience? The unfortunate thing is that this is not unusual.

This is the commuter belt. It is an area with a very large population. If we do not provide public transport that is reliable, people will get in their cars. I do not know if the Minister has noticed, but the M4 and M7 feature every single solitary day on AA Roadwatch and, in fact, the difficulties are local as well as national.

BusConnects is not just a rural issue. The C spine, which was the second spine delivered for BusConnects, is a very mixed bag. There are not enough drivers, there are the same problems with buses not turning up and there are fewer peak services than there were before the C spine. Peak-time services would leave at different departure points and they are very often full at some locations. Not a day goes by when I do not get complaints, and this is a year after it was introduced. In some parts of that C spine, it is working fine but where it is not working, it is a disaster.

The Social Democrats did a survey in north Kildare which had 1,200 respondents. We sent it to BusConnects, which pretty much said "Thanks very much for the survey but all we are going to do is scale back on one of the services." I think that is what it did to begin with: it put in a service that was likely to fail so it could take it off. Who is this service for, if it is not for the NTA and not for the people using it? People are saying that there are loads of buses but they have no service. If we cannot go back and look at that, what is the point?

The key issue is that people are getting back in their cars and once they do that, it is very difficult to get them back onto public transport when they have had a very poor experience. If

we look at land use and all of the city apartments that are being built, what is happening is that families are moving further out into Fingal, Meath and Kildare, and it is increasing the demand when the service is not reliable. One could not say that Go-Ahead Ireland is providing a service. Nobody wants the fines. What they want is the service but it seems incapable of delivering a service that meets the needs or is reliable. A contract is a two-way thing. If Go-Ahead Ireland is not meeting the contract, then the contract has to be revoked. It is just not good enough. It is every single solitary day, and this is not an unusual thing that is happening. As I said, land use is exacerbating the situation in that there is increased demand but less service.

We absolutely need an accessible service but reliability is equally important to people with disabilities as it is to people who do not have disabilities. This should be a universal system that is reliable but that is not what we are getting at the moment.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Independent Group for enabling this very important discussion. There is no good argument against free and accessible public transport. It helps to improve employment and social connections, it reduces dependence on cars and it frees up the roads for people who must use them. Despite the many benefits, many people who need public transport have to fight for this service or are simply denied it. Over the past few months, I have been helping families to access school transport, and a situation in Goleen was just resolved this week, over a month into the school year. To have disgracefully few services in rural Ireland means many disabled people cannot work, despite their capacity to do so, and they cannot participate in community and social life.

Over the summer, a group of young adults in Castletownbere, who needed a bus service for day services and training, could not access this. Local Link and other organisations had to work tirelessly to resolve the issue but, ultimately, it is a funding matter and a basic planning matter. No one should have to fight for a basic service that they are entitled to. The future of public transport access to Castletownbere is under doubt under the Connecting Ireland plan, which classifies it as a local route rather than a regional one, which would downgrade the connectivity of the entire Beara Peninsula. Castletownbere must be recognised as a hub for the area.

The Cork-Kinsale bus route goes via the airport, which means regular commuters are delayed due to the extra time taken in accommodating tourists. There needs to be a separate service for regular users to ensure they can get to work and appointments on time.

I was contacted about a case where an individual with free travel was charged €2 each way to book tickets, with no guarantee of getting a space on the bus. This highlights the many contradictions in the system.

Bus stops are an important part of public transport. We have a shocking lack of sheltered bus stops, given our climate. Villages like Riverstick, Belgooly and Drimoleague are screaming out for proper, basic bus stops. Bandon is very poorly served, meaning many older people cannot access buses. There is a pressing need for bus stops on the western side of the town, another issue I have raised with the Minister.

Public transport should be an easy win for the Government, if the will was there. However, the Government seems to see little economic value in public transport. It is a service that is primarily used by the less well-off and more vulnerable in society, people with disabilities, older people and lone parent families. It is clear that after another budget designed to benefit the better-off, there is no hope of a genuinely accessible public transport system from this Govern-

ment and that approach needs to change.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I wish to share time with Deputies Boyd Barrett and Barry.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Gino Kenny: I welcome this very important motion on free transport. I think there is a very valid argument in regard to public transport being free, accessible and of top quality. All the evidence suggests that where we have such a system, people will use it. I always remember going to Europe for the very first time and being amazed by the system of public transport. It was the thing that stood out most to me when I went to parts of Europe, in particular the accessibility and the fact it was relatively cheap. It got even better when I went east to the ex-communist countries and although they had their faults, their transport was pretty unbelievable for countries like that.

There are many valid reasons we should have free public transport and one of the main reasons is around environmental issues. Capitalism has relied on the car culture. We only have to look at the M50 and many other places in Ireland where there is complete dominance of cars. That is not environmentally sustainable. If we build and give people an option or an alternative to cars, they will use it. As I said, all the evidence points that way.

The privatisation of certain services in Dublin has been an unmitigated disaster. With Go-Ahead Ireland, a company that runs certain services in Dublin mid-west, buses are not even showing up for two or three hours. Imagine how frustrating it is if you are waiting for a bus to go to work but it never comes, so you have to pay €25 for a taxi to get to work, and when you are coming back from work, there is no bus again. These services need to be taken back into public hands.

A model of free transport with connectivity and accessibility is important. It has been put in place around Europe so that getting a bus, train or any other form of public transport, except taxis of course, is free. Where free transport is accessible, people will use it. Once people start doing that, there will be fewer cars on the road, which would be a very good thing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Independent Group for tabling this important motion. People Before Profit strongly agrees with the introduction of free and frequent public transport and has campaigned for it for a number of years. We have budgeted for it in all of our budget submissions in recent years. Despite the Government's claim that it is committed to trying to address the climate crisis and reduce car use, it is resisting introducing what is an obvious measure, that being, making public transport free and frequent. Public transport has to be both. The lack of decent public transport blights rural Ireland to a great extent, leaving many people isolated and without services, but it is also something that affects us here in Dublin and elsewhere in urban Ireland.

Besides an immediate move to free public transport, I will make two suggestions. First, we have a great deal of windfall money from our corporate tax receipts. Some of that should be invested in purchasing social and affordable housing, but another large chunk of it should be used as a one-off capital investment to expand the national bus fleet considerably. This is obvious. Our fleet lacks capacity. We can see that where schoolchildren and rural Ireland are concerned. Expanding our public transport fleet would be money well spent. I urge the Government to do this and to buy electric buses, not only as part of the climate transition, but also to provide services for people.

Second, we need to abandon the stealth privatisation of public transport. One of the reasons for buses not turning up is that, as part of the competitive tendering out of routes and privatisation of public transport, these companies - Go-Ahead Ireland in particular - cannot recruit and retain enough bus drivers. The only thing that private operators can do to try to get in on a route is to drive down labour costs and labour conditions. It is a race to the bottom in terms of the treatment of bus drivers and other bus workers. This flows directly from the competitive tendering out of routes and means that people do not want to work as bus drivers any more. If we want to build the public transport capacity that we need, we must abandon the competitive privatisation of routes, renationalise the entire public transport system and treat our transport workers properly instead of constantly putting pressure on them in terms of wages and conditions.

Deputy Mick Barry: The case for free public transport is overwhelming and unanswerable. In Germany this summer, the €9 monthly rail fare scheme was availed of by 52 million people, equivalent to 60% of the population. The scheme reduced CO2 emissions by 1.8 million tonnes. Free public transport was implemented in Spain last month. That scheme will run to the end of the year. In Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, free public transport for residents has been in place since 2013 and results in a reduction of 742 tonnes of CO2 annually. In Kansas City, the incidence of antisocial behaviour and aggression towards drivers fell by 17% after the introduction of free fares. Obviously, disputes over fares plummeted, which was a key factor in that.

From the point of view of the cost-of-living crisis for ordinary people, combating the climate emergency and ensuring the health and safety of drivers, which is no small matter, free public transport makes excellent sense. It should be introduced throughout the entirety of the EU, not just for periods of three or four months, but from one end of the year to the next. The Minister should set out a figure for what that would cost in this State. We know that €580 million in fares was collected in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic. The other major cost would be increasing the size of the bus and train fleets and hiring extra staff to meet demand. Let us see that number. It will be paid for 100% by wealth taxes. That is a discussion that we will have another day.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I thank the Independent Group for tabling this motion. It allows me the opportunity to highlight some public transport difficulties that people in County Wexford are facing.

I had occasion during the summer to write to Bus Éireann regarding the high number of cancellations on Wexford bus services. A good example of this serious disruption occurred in the period from 9 to 25 July when a total of 38 services to or from Wexford were cancelled, often at short notice. These cancellations caused significant disruption for many passengers, in particular those who made Bus Éireann a central part of their plans to get to and from Dublin Airport during the holiday season. I understand that the 6 a.m. departure from Dublin Airport to Wexford on 23 July was cancelled and that a tweet to inform customers of this cancellation was not posted until six hours later at 12 midday. This practice was repeated many other times, with a public announcement not being made until after the scheduled departure times had passed. The sheer volume of cancellations and the provision of late notice of same shows blatant disregard for customers by Bus Éireann and brings into question the effectiveness of contingency planning at Bus Éireann. People need an explanation of why so many services in Wexford were cancelled. They also need to know how Bus Éireann intends to prevent this problem from recurring so that County Wexford commuters and holidaymakers can have confidence in the

service that is supposed to be provided.

Government policy has been aimed towards moving people away from cars and onto public transport, and both the carrot and stick are being used. The carrot is the reduction in fares and the stick is the increase in the carbon tax, making travelling by private car more expensive. In many parts of rural Ireland, the public transport system is not a viable alternative to the private car. Random and short-notice cancellations do nothing to promote public transport as a feasible alternative in County Wexford.

Another area of public transport that is wholly inadequate in County Wexford is the rail service. Journey times by rail from Wexford to Dublin are no better from Wicklow onwards than they were in the late 1800s, with the Wexford service often crawling from Greystones to Connolly Station due to the timetable dispatching slow-running DART trains in the way of the Wexford service. If you are in Wexford, the only way you have to get to any part of the country by rail is to go via Dublin. We have a rail line from Wexford to Waterford that has been lying idle since 2010. Irish Rail ran that line into the ground until it had driven so many passengers away that it closed the line in 2010, when the Green Party was in government.

Turning back to the Rosslare line, the earliest train to arrive in Wexford town from Dublin on a weekday gets in at 12.07 p.m. There are no morning arrivals. On a weekday, there are five and a half hours between trains. There is a departure from Rosslare at 7.20 a.m. but no further departures until 12.55 p.m.

I welcome attempts to incentivise people to use public transport through low fares, but in addition to those, the housing crisis and people's inability to find accommodation in our cities means that, now more than ever, we need to consider a high-speed rail network, starting with the Wexford to Dublin line. Approximately 10,000 commuters leave Wexford daily to head to work, mostly by car. Providing an incentive to use rail would mean we could get people out of their cars, and this could include the provision of reliable services and faster journey times. We also need high-speed services with better connectivity around the country.

Deputy Seán Canney: The school bus service has been decimated and thrown around the place in recent months. It is a thundering disgrace. Transport services for people with disabilities in the context of schools have been cast into disarray. Parents have been all over the place trying to get their children, including those with special needs, to school, and this is an ongoing problem. Further announcements that additional money will be forthcoming to take care of previous concessionary ticket holders are not washing because there is no way that Bus Éireann has the capacity to take this task on. The company does not know how to do it.

I will let the Minister of State know what is going on with public transport in Galway East. We have, for example, reduced services between Gort and Galway city and services being taken away in Kilreekil. Since 2007, there has been talk of a bus lane that would run from Claregalway into Galway city. There has been report after feasibility study after report after initiative after design and whatever else, but nothing is happening. This can be done and no land needs to be taken. It is just a matter of someone deciding to do this to ensure we can remove from the road the 30,000 cars now going through Claregalway because there is no bypass. We also have no park-and-ride facilities to service Galway city. Many people are travelling from the east of the county into the city and they are undertaking those daily journeys by car. Those people are spending, and wasting, up to 15 hours of their lives sitting in their cars weekly and putting more carbon into the atmosphere. This is not the way things should be.

Of course, there are solutions. One of the main ones is the extension of the western rail corridor to run north from Athenry to Tuam and then on to Claremorris. This would give us a rail line that would service the route from Westport to Galway and from Westport to Limerick. Ballina and Castlebar would also be connected by rail. In the Minister of State's own neck of the woods, a rail connection would run from Limerick city to Foynes Port and this would create the capacity to deal with freight in an efficient way. This endeavour has support right across this House. A feasibility study was undertaken by the eminent Professor Bradley, and it showed this project can be done. No planning permission or consents are required. If the Government decided to proceed with this proposal, it would be up and running within two and a half years.

This is the type of project we must undertake. It is shovel-ready. An example of how well it would work is that the present line running between the cities of Galway and Limerick, which was restored in 2011, is the fastest growing rail line for passenger traffic in the country. This is happening against the tide as well, in the absence of the timing and frequency of services that it had been proposed would have been put on that line. Four services are now running on that line when there should be seven. We must also ensure that we create the passing loop at Oranmore to allow more passengers to get into the heart of Galway city from the east of the county. Bus operators are doing their best, but it is very difficult when it is not possible to get a bus lane. The buses then have to sit in traffic and compete with cars, and this is a problem.

If we are fair to the private bus operators trying to do their work, and to the people in Galway East, north Mayo and further on, we will end up with a good public service that will be fit for everybody to use. Additionally, we will be able to connect the towns and cities of Ballina, Westport, Castlebar, Tuam, Athenry, Ennis, Galway and Limerick. We will also be able to have the access we require to ports in the context of the development of our offshore energy resources. If we do not do this, we are wasting our time.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Transport for Ireland, TFI, has set up Local Link services as a link to national bus services. Lack of housing and student accommodation is forcing many of our young people to stay at home rather than renting, and this is resulting in a huge demand for bus links among those going to work and universities and colleges. I was delighted that Bus Éireann this morning announced six new routes for Limerick. These will run from Galbally, Hospital, Knocklong, Herbertstown and Caherconlish to Limerick city. I am currently seeking the provision of an extra bus service for Bruff, as we have a centre for Ukrainians there. The bus services are being put under great pressure in the mornings as people are travelling to work, education institutes and social appointments. The knock-on impact is that the bus is full when it leaves Bruff and this means people waiting at other stops, such as at Grange and Ballyneety, cannot use the service. The Local Link service running from Glin to Athea, Carrigkerry and Ballingarry is also welcome, as is the link with the national bus service in Croom.

Many parents of third level students are commuting up to 150 km daily to get their children to classes. The colleges must also address the issue here because they should put on a park-and-ride service to ensure these students can get to their institutions and get there on time. I refer as well to public transport in the context of outreach clinics set up around the country, such as by the HSE and Headway Ireland. Service users, including the blind and the elderly, need to get to their appointments in clinics, but many cannot because they have no alternative transport. Equally, the current rental market also means that bus services are extremely important. We can see how Local Link servicers and the private bus providers have been carrying this burden for many years. Now, I ask that the bus services be put in place.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Independent Group for bringing forward this motion. It has been proven in the past that providing free public transport works. In the case of the elderly, it is good to get people out of their homes and to take them on a journey. It is good for the economy. It is good for the people themselves and their health to be out among people. It is good for finances because they spend money. In this context, let us look at the diversity and size of County Kerry. People are dispersed across areas the size of Brosna, Knocknagashel and Lyracrumpane. In south Kerry, we have places like Valentia Island and Portmagee. I am trying to get additional services provided there. We already needed more services. Now we have Ukrainian people, who are very welcome, but they need transport. We did not have the transport originally for the local people. Now, we have more people living in those locations and we need additional services. I ask the Minister of State to take on board, in particular, these types of situations. West of Dingle, in mid-Kerry and, indeed, all over the county, we have an inadequacy of bus transport. Providing more transport and making it free would give us the advantage that people living in urban areas have now.

I also wish to highlight and thank the people involved in providing Local Link services and buses. I refer to the private operators and the people working in keeping the wheels rolling. It is not easy to be in business today. Therefore, I thank the private operators for their work in providing buses. The rail connectivity we have in County Kerry is extremely important in ensuring we have as much accessibility and as many times as possible to allow people to work. I thank the people who operate the airport at Farranfore. I thank them for the service and for ensuring we have as much connectivity as possible. I refer to flights arriving early and late to ensure people can work and do everything from our county and have the advantage of living in a rural location as well.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Independent Group for bringing this motion forward. On the matter of free and accessible public transport, we are told and we see that Dublin city has eight times more public transport than the rest of Ireland. I ask the Minister of State to think about this fact. I reiterate that Dublin city alone has eight times more public transport than the rest of Ireland.

While I appreciate there is a need for free public transport, in very rural places, such as we have in Kerry and Donegal, we must realise that it would be impossible to provide free public transport for everyone unless we have all the money there is in the Central Bank. The Government must realise there is still a need for cars, whether those are powered by petrol, diesel or electricity, as long as those sources provide a viable and reliable option. We still need cars and people need assistance. There is no alternative for those people who need to go to work, school and elsewhere.

I, too, thank the Local Link services for the great work they do in getting elderly people out a couple of times a week to their local town or village, such as Curragh, Scartaglin, Brosna, Kenmare and Lauragh. They do great work.

On this notion the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, had that one car would do 30 people in one village and to place the car in the village, that man is for the fairies. The more we go on, the more I realise that this Government has no idea what is happening in rural Ireland.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Independent Group for an excellent discussion this morning, and for the motion.

A few months ago, the Minister continuously announced a decrease in the cost of transport services, mainly in and around Dublin. That suits his constituents, but we have to drag him here tooth and nail through the Dáil to give that 20% decrease that he gave to the people of rural Ireland using the private bus operators that are out there trying to deliver a service to rural Ireland. Now the Minister has announced that he will do that, but the divil is in the detail. We have not found out when that is to happen. Is there an exact date? An announcement is beautiful and the Government is plentiful with announcements, but when things are happening on the ground is what we do not know about. That has not happened, as far as we are concerned. That is a fight for us. If there is any decrease, it will happen in the cities but not for the rural operators.

I questioned the Minister here recently about what kind of extra services has he given to west Cork since he came into office and there have been none. He is talking about two down the road. One of them is already in operation and I do not know why he is offering that.

We have a great Cork Local Link but that can only provide as much services as it is afforded to do so by funds. Bus Éireann is often critical, but nobody in Bus Éireann has ever sat down with me and told me about the company's plans. However, West Cork Connect has plans. I accuse the NTA of disconnecting rural Ireland. West Cork Connect wants an every-hour on-the-hour bus service from Skibbereen, Clonakilty, Bandon, Inishannon to Cork and it has been refused that service. They took 1,000 people last Friday to and from west Cork and left loads of people at the bus stop. This is the NTA's decision that it will only allow a service every two hours instead of a every hour that they can deliver, and will deliver. They will bring people to west Cork and take people to the city where they want to use public transport. We are being continuously disconnected totally. They wanted to provide a service from Goleen into Skibbereen several times a day and the NTA refused them. Now we will hopefully succeed in getting a route - Kinsale, Belgooly, Riverstick and Ballinhassig.

The NTA continues to disconnect west Cork and I, for one, will not take this continuously. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, needs to listen, not look away, when we are talking.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the debate.

In both the motion and the contributions from individual Deputies, we can see the range of challenges and opportunities and the progress which has been made to date. I believe that we are all in agreement about wanting a public transport system that serves all members of society, regardless of where they live.

As outlined earlier by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, the Government is dedicated to developing an integrated, accessible and sustainable network of public transport offering across Ireland in both urban and rural areas.

The House will be aware that the Government has an ambitious vision to transform transport services and infrastructure nationwide. I will briefly give some examples of the transformative developments that are on the way. Under Project Ireland 2040, spatial planning and capital investment are being linked together in a meaningful way, while significant investment being made in new public and sustainable transport initiatives, as well as major new road projects. Furthermore, capacity on the Kildare, Maynooth and northern rail lines is being increased by more than 30% compared to today. In fact, the new railcars to achieve this increase have started

to arrive and will enter service next year.

To help us to meet our climate targets, we have decided that from 2019, no new diesel buses would be purchased for urban PSO bus fleets. Deputies will be aware that a fully electric town bus service is operating in Athlone. Similarly, as part of BusConnects, the current fleet of buses in Dublin will be increased and converted to a zero-emission fleet by 2035, meeting increasing demand and saving the equivalent of circa 85,000 tonnes of CO2 a year in line with our climate action targets. Buses and shelters will be modernised, increasing accessibility and ensuring safe and enjoyable trips for passengers.

The Department of Transport's sustainable mobility policy, published earlier this year, recognises that transport needs are not uniform across the country and that tailored solutions are needed for both urban and rural areas. The policy aims to deliver 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys as well as a 10% reduction in kilometres driven by fossil-fuelled cars by 2030. The policy is underpinned by a robust action plan out to 2025 alongside capital funding allocations in the revised national development plan to ensure delivery.

Increased investment in the inter-urban and regional network will improve journey times, enhance reliability and maintain safety across the network.

Public transport in rural areas is vital. Turning to rural areas specifically, whether it is reduced car dependency or a more integrated and accessible transport network, the Government's vision is ambitious, and one that is a key motivator as the Department of Transport prepares its work programme for 2023. Of course, the connecting Ireland rural mobility plan is a key component of that vision. I reiterate that it will significantly increase both the number of routes and the frequency of existing services throughout the country. I see that in my own county of Limerick, where we have lobbied for and received an increased frequency on many routes and, more recently, we see the TFI Local Link creating an imaginative new bus route, all the way from Tarbert across west and south Limerick to the town of Croom, servicing Tarbert, Glin, Atteagh, Carrigkerry, Ardagh, Newcastle West, Ballingarry and Croom.

I am also in the process of lobbying for an increased frequency on the bus routes serving Bruff and Kilmallock and other locations in Limerick and I am also lobbying the NTA for increased bus shelters where we have a deficiency of infrastructure.

Under connecting Ireland, the NTA is proposing an overall increase of approximately 25% in rural bus services as part of the five-year connecting Ireland plan. Hundreds of rural villages and areas will for the first time be served by a viable public transport link. Service improvements are being rolled out under connecting Ireland with more planned before the end of this year.

The Minister for Transport is fully committed to strengthening our public transport offerings and progressively making them accessible for all. This requires a whole-of-journey approach, which refers to all elements that constitute a journey from the starting point to destination. It also means applying the principles of universal design.

In addition to the sustainable mobility policy, some of the other key guiding policies include the UNCRPD, the national disability inclusion strategy and the comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities. The public transport accessibility actions across these and other national strategies have been combined into the Department of Transport's accessibility

work programme, which provides the framework for prioritising projects and programmes to progressively make public transport accessible. The Department will continue to engage with all stakeholders, including disabled people, as we improve our systems for everyone.

I reiterate that the strategic rail review will examine the role of rail in supporting relevant policy objectives in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, with particular emphasis on achieving climate change objectives. The House will be pleased to know that this review will also consider the potential scope for improved rail services along the various existing or future potential corridors of the network, and that scope will include an analysis of the potential afforded by disused and closed rail lines. It will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail network on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead. The Department of Transport expects the review to be completed by the end of this year.

I assure the House that the Minister for Transport emphasises the important role transport plays in all our lives and is acutely aware of the concerns raised as regards making public transport fully integrated, accessible and sustainable for all. The planned investment in the public transport sector will improve people's quality of life and allow urban and rural areas nationwide to grow and to develop into the future. I am confident that, with these plans, which all contributors today agree are necessary, we will leave a legacy of a much more efficient framework for the provision of public transport in Ireland.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank my colleague, Deputy Pringle, for his work and the work of the staff in his office. He is putting the spotlight on transport and asking us to look at it in a new way as an essential part of the solution to climate change. I welcome that the Government is not opposing the motion. The question, however, is what the Government will do as a result of it. Of course, we have asked that repeatedly. It is not reassuring that there is no Minister, either junior or senior, with responsibility for transport here. Such a presence would be helpful.

We are having this debate in the context of a climate emergency that was declared more than three and a half years ago. The Dáil declared a climate and biodiversity emergency on 9 May 2019. Ireland's emissions have continued to rise, despite the fact that the world is burning. Those words were used by the Minister for Finance at the time of the budget last year. The words were forgotten this year but the planet continues to burn. I may be reading the Minister of State's body language wrong - I am not sure - but the words the Minister used were "the world is burning".

Ireland's emissions continue to rise. There was a 4.7% rise in 2021 compared with 2020. That is according to the EPA, not the radical Deputies on this side of the Dáil coming up with figures out of the sky. Transport emissions accounted for 17.7% of total national greenhouse gas emissions, and road transport accounted for 94% of all transport emissions. We have cited all these figures over and over again. What we want is a complete transformation. I hear the Minister of State's good news and the good news in Galway about BusConnects and so on. What is missing is the realisation that we need urgent transformative action. We cannot continue with the model of consumption we have and the model of trading in the free market we have had. That is carried into aviation and into emissions coming from aeroplanes, in respect of which we have the emissions trading scheme, which allows airlines and countries to barter emissions. Can you imagine? The very system that caused climate change in the first place, the very unregulated market that allowed for endless consumption, is now put into the airlines

as part of the solution. It just beggars belief.

Deputy Pringle has given the example of Luxembourg, which works from a free transport system. Has anyone in this Government looked at Luxembourg to see what the good and the bad are in that regard? Has anyone looked at Germany, which has introduced a €9 per month public transport ticket for a limited time? I believe that public transport was overwhelmed with people wanting to use the ticket. Has anyone examined that? Has anybody gone over there on a delegation to see and to learn? What about Malta, which introduced free transport, I understand, on 1 October? Does the Government think we could learn from that? The reason the Government is not doing that is that it wants to continue tinkering with the system as opposed to recognising that this is it and that we have only a tiny window to make the changes. Of all the changes needed, transport is not the easiest, but it is the most tangible area where we can make a difference. Free public transport has to be an aim and a target of the Government. If the Government cannot do it overnight, it has to recognise that it is what we need. The fact that the Government has introduced reduced fares is very welcome, but we see that the people are way ahead of us. They want to use public transport.

I will finish by going back to Galway. I appeal to the Minister of State to take Galway on as a pilot project. It is a beautiful city, with the Corrib river and the sea, and in between we have allowed terrible planning and transport decisions that see our city congested and that are threatening the viability of our industry there. Park-and-ride was put into the city development plan in 2005 but never rolled out. We now have the NTA telling us it is looking at one side of the city. We have children who cannot get on school buses. We are constantly told the figures for children who use school buses but we fail to realise that school buses should be used to their maximum potential to get as many people as possible on them. We have a university in Galway and the residents in Connemara are begging the university to put on a bus in order that the students can get from Cois Fharraige isteach go dtí an ollscoil, agus níl aon duine ag éisteacht leo. This is a positive motion. This is something we can work on together.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I will sum up the debate. I suppose I could be forgiven for thinking a reshuffle we knew nothing about has taken place and that the Minister for Transport has changed to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, or the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, because nobody from the Department of Transport seems to have bothered to turn up to this debate, which is telling in itself. If there is a genuine reason a Minister cannot be here for a debate, normally he or she informs you beforehand that something has happened. That has not happened, so it seems the relevant Ministers just did not bother their arses turning up. That shows, maybe, what the Government thinks about transport across the country and about these issues. It probably shows what it thinks about the Opposition. Maybe it shows what it thinks about the Independents as well, but that is a debate for another day. It is disappointing. I know a missive from the Minister for Transport was read out, but it would have been nice if he had actually bothered his arse to turn up.

I have long been raising the issue of rural transport with the Minister and would have liked for him to have heard today's contributions and the support for the motion in the Chamber. It would be nice to get a reply to the emails and correspondence we send him too, but that is probably a bit of a stretch as well at this stage. Although I am glad the motion is not being opposed, it is not good enough for the Government merely not to oppose it. It is imperative that it do all it can to support it, implement it or, at the very least, look into and consider the many benefits of free and accessible public transport. As I said at the beginning of the debate, free and accessible public transport is a single solution to multiple problems. It is a wasted opportunity for

the Government not to recognise that.

I understand that most of the concerns on the side of the Government have to do with cost so I will address that. The Government, in focusing on the fear of initial short-term investment, is completely overlooking the long-term financial benefit that free public transport can provide. High transport costs have become a great barrier in our labour market. Commutes take time and money, be they in a car or on fare-based transport. Pursuing free mobility could be a route to generating employment while also ramping up efforts to achieve climate and environmental targets. From a global perspective, the benefits of free public transport are notable. In purely economic terms, the World Bank estimates that a total investment of $4 trillion today in public buses, trains and rail networks would yield annual benefits of $1 trillion all the way up to 2030, totalling a net value of $19.6 trillion. By 2050, scaling up mass transport options would create nearly 12 million decent green jobs. While that example is on a global scale, the same principles hold true and apply at national level. I have received many questions asking, "Why free transport? Why not just ask to extend the services?" The first reason is that this is aimed to be a cost-of-living measure that is permanent and works to improve our citizens' lives in the long run, rather than a once-off payment that does very little to create any change or provide any proper relief for people. The second reason is that we spend little of our budget on public transport. It would cost the State very little to provide a free and extended public transport service. While it would cost little, the benefits would be huge. In the case that the benefits outweigh the cost, we should always act in the interests of our constituents.

The Government very often likes to follow in the footsteps of Europe. This motion gives it the opportunity to do just that. We would not be the first European country to introduce free transport and we certainly would not be the last. Many European cities have implemented fare-free public transport schemes over the past 20 years. A comparison of these schemes shows that there are many differences in their implementation. This reflects the way in which the various municipal authorities have tailored fare-free public transport to the characteristics of each locale, recognising the unique needs of the communities therein. We have the opportunity to evaluate and to consider each of these systems and we should jump at the chance to do so.

12 o'clock

The example of Tallinn was mentioned by the Minister of State and others. Tallinn is the 2023 European green capital because it has learned from its teething problems and is currently introducing a systems overhaul to its free transport system, doubling down on its commitment not only to its citizens but to the climate as well. There are lessons we can learn from that.

I want to emphasise that Donegal is at the heart of this motion. I cannot count the number of times I have been contacted by constituents who have been let down and abandoned by public transport in the county. Bus Éireann services are completely unreliable and it worries me deeply to hear of constituents left stranded, with no way home. My community relies heavily on bus services because with no train service at all, we have very little in the way of public transport. The Government's priority should be to ensure a functioning bus service at the very least. Ongoing issues include the constant breakdown of buses with no replacement coaches available and a lack of drivers to run the services. These issues have a huge impact. They can put people's lives in disarray but are easily fixed. I have been contacted by constituents who have missed college, work, matches, concerts, flights and hospital appointments. This is unacceptable and cannot go on.

The motion calls for the provision of more buses, investment in the upgrade of trains and buses and a recruitment campaign for drivers, as well as the creation of permanent contracts for drivers and transport workers. These simple measures would go a long way towards making our transport service reliable. We have so little in the way of facilities and services in County Donegal and the least the Government should do is make sure we have the necessary transport links to access facilities and services elsewhere. We have had enough of being forgotten about and we will not accept it anymore. Perhaps the Minister of State could print off a transcript of the debate and send it to the Minister for Transport.

Question put and agreed to

Visit of British Delegation

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as ucht a dtacaíochta. Leanfaimid ar aghaidh agus i dtús báire ba mhaith liom céad míle fáilte a chur roimh ár gcuairteoirí sa Gallery. Before proceeding with business, I wish on my own behalf and on behalf of the Members of Dáil Éireann to offer a céad míle fáilte, a most sincere welcome to the Lord Speaker, the Right Honourable Lord John McFall of Alcluith, Scotland who is accompanied by the deputy head of mission at the British Embassy in Dublin, Ms Catherine Page and staff members from Westminster and the British Embassy. You are all very welcome to Dáil Éireann. I know you will find your visit useful and to our mutual benefit. Céad míle fáilte.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Speaking on radio last Sunday, the Taoiseach gave an assurance that nobody would be disconnected from electricity supply this winter. He said:

> In an energy crisis of this kind we cannot have disconnections. We are very clear about that.

This is very welcome news, as people are now under severe pressure. The energy credits announced in the budget are already being gobbled up. From this week, Electric Ireland customers face a price hike of 38% for electricity, while Bord Gáis customers have been hit with a massive increase of 45% and other energy companies will also hike their prices this month. The Government's refusal to cap electricity bills at pre-crisis levels has left people wide open to further hikes. In reality, and despite the Taoiseach's assurance at the weekend, households struggling to pay their bills remain in danger of disconnection. This is a very real and present fear. We know that 712 households were disconnected in the first half of this year and that was before the impact of the huge increases in bills this winter.

Workers and families need more than words. They need a real plan from the Government that gives them the certainty that they will not be disconnected. The Government's intention is to introduce a ban on disconnections for all customers from 1 December until the end of February. That it not good enough. It leaves people waiting far too long for protection and the time span is too short. We are now starting the run-up to Christmas, which is a most expensive time of the year. People are coming under huge financial strain today and are struggling to pay their bills today. The Government must start the ban on disconnections now. It should kick in im-

mediately and should run until at least the end of March.

The Taoiseach also said that the Government would protect pay-as-you-go meter users from disconnection. However, other than directing people to their local social welfare office, he does not have a plan to back up that commitment, or does he? Once a person's €10 arrears allowance runs out, pay-as-you-go meters gets disconnected. Many households on prepaid meters are already rationing their electricity for fear of being cut off and that is a horrible situation for any family. Ní cheart go mbeadh aon teaghlach ag tabhairt aghaidh ar dícheangal fuinnimh an geimhreadh seo. Caithfidh an Rialtas cosc ar dícheangail a thabhairt isteach anois go dtí deireadh mí an Mhárta agus caithfidh an Rialtas plean a chur i bhfeidhm a chosnóidh custaiméirí ó a bheith dícheangailte.

The Taoiseach needs to back up his promise that nobody will be disconnected with real action. Will the Government start the ban on disconnections for all customers now and extend it until the end of March? Will it take measures to ensure that pay-as-you-go electricity customers will not be disconnected this winter? Can the Taoiseach outline how this will work and, most important, how quickly it might be implemented?

The Taoiseach: Géarchéim uafásach atá againn maidir le praghsanna. Níl aon amhras ach go bhfuil an Rialtas ag déanamh a dhícheall cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do gach éinne: teaghlaigh éagsúla ar fud na tíre; gnóthaí; agus eagrais éagsúla atá ag obair ar son muintir na tíre san áireamh. Táimid ag tabhairt an-chuid tacaíochta do dhaoine agus bhí sé sin soiléir sa cháinaisnéis a bhí againn an tseachtain seo caite.

We are facing the worst global energy crisis since the 1970s, caused by Russia's immoral and unprovoked war on the people of Ukraine. We import approximately three quarters of the natural gas we use from the United Kingdom. Approximately half of our electricity is generated using gas and, therefore, spiralling gas prices feed through into higher electricity bills. The price today for UK gas on wholesale markets is 263 pence per therm. This day two years ago the price was 38 pence per therm and future markets are pointing to even higher prices in the coming months, with a therm of gas to be delivered in January costing 450 pence and March deliveries priced at 440 pence per therm. That is the background. We are in a war-time situation, which has brought about these extraordinary increases.

I agree with the Deputy that the response to a crisis of this scale needs more than words and that is why we announced unprecedented measures in the budget to support and help people to get through this winter, including electricity credits for all households totalling €600; a lump sum payment of €400 for fuel allowance recipients; a double-week payment to all qualifying social protection recipients in October and the normal Christmas bonus will also be paid; an extra €500 for working family payment and career support grant recipients in November; double child benefit of €140 per child in November; and a once-off payment before Christmas of €200 to recipients of the living alone allowance and €500 to those on disability allowance, invalidity pension and the blind pension. Significant additional funds will be provided to schools, which will see huge increases in their energy costs, and parents will be spared €650 through the provision of free school transport. The fees for third level institutions have been reduced by €1,000. Not-for-profit and voluntary organisations, local authorities, nursing homes and hospices will all get additional supports, as will third level institutions. We have also extended the reduction in excise duties and VAT on electricity and gas until the end of February. To protect jobs, we have introduced the temporary business energy support scheme, at a cost of €1.2 billion. We have also brought in tax cuts amounting to approximately €1.1 billion for middle-income earn-

ers and the social protection package of measures is worth more than €1 billion. These are not just words; they are actions that the Government has taken in respect of the cost-of-living package and the budget itself. We did not agree with putting in place a cap with no detailed costing attached to it. We feel the better approach is to allocate funding to households, as well as trying to get downward pressure on energy consumption. One of the difficulties with the kind of cap the Deputy has proposed is that there is no acknowledgement of the crisis we are in, and the need to have greater energy efficiencies across the board in the workplace and reduce costs and consumption. Fundamentally, we are here to help. That is why we have not gone with the cap model, as proposed by the Deputy. We have been elsewhere there are different proposals. Where there is a proposal that is not costed and could involve a blank cheque for energy companies for two years or longer, that is something we have to be extremely careful about.

In respect of pay-as-you-go metres, as part of its statutory role, the CRU has very clear functions regarding consumer protection, including around disconnections and protections for those using prepaid meters. As part of responses 6 and 7 under the national energy security framework, the CRU announced enhanced consumer protection measures for implementation this winter, in particular for customers using prepaid meters. It has strengthened the protection. We are determined to give support to those people and others.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I think the Taoiseach has benefited from a malfunctioning clock.

The Taoiseach: Blessed be the malfunctioning clock.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: These times are very reminiscent of a decade ago when the troika was in town and people used to ration everything, including food. I remember families having cornflake days; that was dinner for them. I am hearing from families that they are rationing their electricity. The reality for many, and fear for many more, is that they will be left in a position whereby they have to take a decision to turn on a light or put breakfast in front of their children.

The Taoiseach gave a commitment at the weekend that disconnections would not happen. I want him to set out in detail what that means for pay-as-you-go meter users. Some 200,000 households across the State have such meters. The Taoiseach has made a commitment. When will it kick in? How will it work? I put it to the Taoiseach that the ban on disconnections needs to start now and run until the end of March. Rather than rehashing all of the global factors, could the Taoiseach kindly answer my questions and reassure families who are afraid and struggling?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The clock is functioning.

The Taoiseach: I am not rehashing any global generalities. Rather, I am bringing the hard reality of a wartime situation in Europe to the floor of the House. I will never make an apology for that. The Deputy is trying to create the delusion or illusion that everything is normal and we can go back to pre-crisis levels. That is the Deputy's line. She believes we can all make it go away magically.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Things are clearly not normal.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy cannot make it go away magically. She simply cannot do that and it is dishonest to people-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Do not call me dishonest. Answer the question and do your job.

The Taoiseach: It is dishonest, in the middle of a terrible crisis, to pretend there is no war or the war does not have an impact. We are doing people a disservice when we do that. We need to be honest with people. We know the war is having a terrible impact.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: The total number of prepay electricity meters is around 340,000. Some 90,000 of those meters have been provided to people who have experienced electricity debt in order to help them budget these costs. Gas Networks Ireland has confirmed that there are about 117,000 pay-as-you-go meters. Through the social protection systems and the work of the CRU, which is a statutory body, we will protect people. Our entire purpose is to protect people. We have no interest in not protecting people.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Make a commitment. You are an absolute disgrace. Insulting me is not an answer.

The Taoiseach: I did not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You consistently do it. You come in here and insult me and call me untruthful, and you do not answer your questions. Do your job.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, if you consistently ignore the Chair, I will abandon the session. I ask for co-operation so that I do not need to keep interrupting. We are eating into the time.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome an esteemed visitor to the Gallery, Finola Cassidy, who is here representing the Irish Thalidomide Association. She is a constituent of mine and somebody the Taoiseach has also met. I pay tribute to Finola for her campaigning and advocacy work over many years. She was, as the Taoiseach knows, a central contributor to last night's powerful "Scannal" documentary which aired on RTÉ 1 about the thalidomide scandal.

The airing of that documentary came at a timely moment because next month marks the 61st anniversary of the international withdrawal of the drug thalidomide. It was removed from the market internationally in 1961 due to the number of babies who were being born with catastrophic or very serious disabilities to women who had been prescribed the drug while pregnant to treat symptoms. In this State, even after international withdrawal, the drug continued to be prescribed for some time, causing severe harm to many children who are now adults. Even children whose mothers only took the drug for one or two days suffered severe harm as a consequence.

We know from the powerful documentary and other sources that Government documents at the time show that authorities had considered making a public announcement earlier on the risks associated with the drug and did not do so. It remained in circulation for far too long in Ireland after international withdrawal. The reason can only be assumed or surmised. Clearly, the State bears responsibility for what happened to those children at the time and their mothers and families.

The mothers and children, in particular, who were harmed by a negligent Government are still waiting for an acknowledgement of the wrong done to them and a formal State apology.

They were offered compensation by a Fianna Fáil Government in 2009 and I know there have been meetings since then. The Taoiseach has met survivors and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, met Finola Cassidy this morning. However, there has been no official attempt to address the stalemate in the situation. Over decades, the money and packages offered by Governments have not come near enough to meet the real cost of the harm caused and the life-changing disabilities experienced by so many survivors. I pay tribute to those survivors who continue to campaign on this.

Last year, the Minister for Health told the Dáil that work was under way to bring forward a Bill to provide health and personal supports to thalidomide survivors, but we have heard nothing since then. We know the State has been dragging out a defence in High Court proceedings ongoing on this issue. Earlier this year, I sought the support of Government parties for a cross-party motion on support for thalidomide survivors. I renew my appeal because I did not get support from Government parties.

I ask the Taoiseach to take the lead, in the last few months of his role at Taoiseach, fix the stalemate, ensure the State acknowledges the wrong done to thalidomide survivors and parents, issue an apology and ensure an adequate compensation and healthcare package is offered to those survivors who are now at an age where they desperately need supports.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I met Finola Cassidy and the Irish Thalidomide Association representatives, along with their legal representatives, in my office a couple of weeks ago. It was a good meeting. I listened very carefully to the concerns expressed. There has been a long history of interventions by Governments in respect of this issue and the people involved. Supports have been provided by previous Governments, and continue to be provided, in terms of monthly payments, eligibility for health services and so on. As the Deputy knows, the company, the Contergan Foundation, provides payments. There is an issue there that we need to work out. Anything additional done by the State should not result in liability on the foundation being taken back, in other words, it should not result in there being no net gain to thalidomide survivors.

During the meeting we teased out a number of approaches that we could take to try to resolve these issues. The Government is not dragging anything out. There are contested issues around liability on this. *Ex gratia* payments and so on were made and additional financial assistance was provided in 2010, but arguments have been put forward that they were not of a sufficient scale or the circumstances or context of how those payments were made were not optimal or appropriate. Those arguments have been made to me and to the Minister for Health. We discussed a number of broad areas. First, there should be a very comprehensive health package. That is one area we said we would discuss. There seems to be some uncertainty around what is available and what, potentially, could be available. We also discussed independent support as people go on in life and broader issues.

The idea emerged from the meeting that we may develop a mediation approach, in the first instance, to tease out a number of issues. I have reverted to the Minister and had discussions with him and the Attorney General on this. I will be back to the Irish Thalidomide Association in response to a proposal that was put on the table as to how we could engage in a meaningful process to try to resolve this issue once and for all.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for his response but he might clarify when he will get back to the Irish Thalidomide Association. It has been waiting for a long time. It is

very anxious, in particular, about the few mothers who are still left alive. They are owed an apology by the State and an acknowledgement of the wrong done to them because many mothers and women who had babies who were born with disabilities as a result of thalidomide are themselves feeling guilty. That is utterly unacceptable.

It is very clear, from the programme last night and what we know, that the State bears responsibility. The State bore a particular responsibility after the international withdrawal of the drug. That has never been formally acknowledged. We need to see an acknowledgement and apology and a decent, suitable and specific healthcare package and compensation offered. That has never been forthcoming from Government.

I ask that the Taoiseach, in the last few months in his role, seek to resolve this damage. Only a small number of survivors are involved in this. Finola Cassidy is such a powerful spokesperson for those individuals who have been done such wrong by the State and others. They were undoubtedly done wrong by the German manufacturer as well, but let us do what we can to put things right. I will renew my appeal for cross-party support for a motion and for the Government to step up and offer a decent package to thalidomide survivors.

The Taoiseach: I fully accept the Deputy's right to put forward a cross-party motion but, in my experience, where one has a legal process and a political process, someone has to represent the broad issue as well. The optimal way to resolve this is to get into a meaningful process and tease through all of the issues. The ultimate liability, never forget, is with the company involved. Legislation was passed, as the Deputy is aware, in Germany which allows for the Contergan Foundation to make payments to thalidomide survivors. We want to make absolutely sure that whatever we do does not in any way result - legislation was passed more recently - in any contributions we make simply being subtracted from the contributions that foundation makes. Legal clarity is being sought on that and it is something that is important and cannot be dismissed. Payments continue to be made. I am open to getting this resolved as quickly as we can. I would like to do so but previous experience shows that we should get into a process to get it resolved. I am willing to do that and I will be back to the representatives on this within the next two weeks.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will read some headlines for the Taoiseach. One from RTÉ states, "Prepay energy customers will not be cut off, says Taoiseach", while another from the *Irish Independent* states, "Pay-as-you-go energy customers will not be disconnected over winter – Taoiseach", and *thejournal.ie* states, "Taoiseach confirms pay-as-you-go utility customers will not be disconnected if unable to top up". This is very clear and reassuring for the 340,000 electricity customers and the 120,000 or so gas customers on meter. The headlines are based on comments that the Taoiseach made on RTÉ's "This Week" programme. It would cause people to breathe a sigh of relief and think it was okay, in that, if they do not have money to put in the machine to top up the meter this winter, their lights will not go off or their heat go out.

The only problem is that those comments are not accurate, are they? They are spin such as that the Taoiseach tried to give earlier to Deputy McDonald. He is just playing with words because the truth, and I ask for a clear answer on this, is that as things stand, these people will be cut off electricity or gas when their meters run out of money and they run through the €20 overdraft known as emergency credit. These are among the people on the lowest incomes in the country and include 90,000 households that have previously experienced electricity debt. They are not being protected from disconnection this winter. Instead what the Government is actually saying is that these people can go to the community welfare officer and look for support.

There is no guarantee that they will not be disconnected.

The Taoiseach needs to act now to guarantee that nobody will be left without heat or electricity this winter because they cannot afford to pay. He can do that very simply by extending the emergency credit, as was done during Covid.

This scandal is just the latest abuse by the prepay companies of their customers. They are highly profitable companies engaged in predatory practices. PrepayPower is the biggest prepay operator. It is owned by two of the richest men in Ireland. It increased its profits by 27% last year. It increased its prices three times this year and two times last year. If people want to leave PrepayPower, they are faced with a blizzard of potential charges amounting to well over €100 to dissuade them. The companies are effectively holding people hostage. Those exit charges should be banned entirely.

This is only one section of households subject to extra abuse. There is another. I have received multiple communications from people in apartment complexes on district heating systems. One here is from Lansdowne Gate, where gas prices have increased by 300%, unit rates have increased from 7 cent per kilowatt hour to 27 cent per kilowatt hour. Tens of thousands of people are in a similar situation. Even if they do not use the bills, they are still faced with extraordinary increases because of the network service charge which goes on top of the standing charge. The Taoiseach tells them to shop around but they cannot do so. These people have no choices. It is an entirely unregulated sector.

This is clear. It proves the madness of a privatised, liberalised system. The energy system should be renationalised and run in the public interest. At the very least, will the Taoiseach intervene to ensure that nobody will have their lights go out or heat cut off this winter because they do not have money to put in the meter?

The Taoiseach: The Government has intervened.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It has not.

The Taoiseach: We have intervened. I reject Deputy Murphy's presentation of this. The measures we have taken of putting cash into people's accounts and reducing the bills are unprecedented. I read out the list. The measures we have taken have an impact. The impact they should demonstrably have is that people should not be cut off, by definition, given the scale of the energy credits, free fuel allowance and double payments, right across the board. Very substantial provision has been made right to the end of this year and into the two bill periods in early spring.

In addition, social protection is there to protect people from being disconnected in the event of their making a presentation to say that if they do not get "X", their electricity will be cut off. The CRU has also provided strong protections with regard to this. People should not have their heating or electricity cut off in the middle of winter.

The Government will work with providers and the CRU, the statutory body regulating this area. The Deputy is too dismissive of the extraordinary measures that have been included in the budget in respect of supports given to people on the lowest incomes in terms of the variety of payments that I outlined earlier. That was not spin. It is reality. The Deputy tends to do a lot of spin, when it suits, on a whole range of issues.

These are facts that have been outlined with regard to the budget 2023 measures we have taken. There are now €600 in energy credits. There is a lump-sum payment of €400 to fuel allowance recipients, a double-week payment to all qualifying social protection recipients in October and the normal Christmas bonus will be paid. There is an extra €500 for recipients of working family payments and carer support grants and a double child benefit payment in November. There is a once-off payment before Christmas of €200 to recipients of the living alone allowance and €500 to those on disability allowance, invalidity pension and the blind pension and additional funding across the board for a range of not-for-profit and voluntary organisations to help with energy costs and so forth. These measures will have an impact.

If we did not have all of those measures, I accept the point that there could be disconnections and so on. However, these measures will have impact and we will keep monitoring how this works in reality. We have an idea from the future pricing as to where the costs or price rises could go in early spring in particular and towards the end of the year. We will continue to work with all concerned to ensure people are not cut off.

I do not agree at this stage with the idea of nationalising the entire energy system. That would have enormous cost implications that would have to be worked out and I do not think the Deputy has made any presentation in respect of that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On Sunday the Taoiseach said prepay energy customers will not be cut off. Today he says prepay customers should not be cut off. Which one is it? You are the Taoiseach and you have the power to prevent the disconnections. What you are actually saying today is that these people have got enough money and sure it will be their own fault if they run out and are not able to put money in their meter. However, the Government has not given them enough money. These are some of the most vulnerable people in our country and it is a simple technical question. The Government can extend the emergency credit so prepay customers will not be cut off. If you are on a bill, once the moratorium comes in you are protected and will not be cut off but as things stand prepay customers can be cut off. If they do not put money in their meter they will run through the €20 overdraft, which is the only real thing the CRU has done to protect people. That €20 is half a week's electricity and then those people can be cut off. I am looking, and I would say they are too, for a guarantee that no prepay customers will be cut off this winter.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The way to do it is very simple.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy but we are over time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government did it during Covid. It should extend the emergency credit to protect people.

The Taoiseach: To be fair, the CRU has done more than that. It has increased the emergency credit of no less than €20 but it has also provided a reduction in the debt repayment level on pay-as-you-go meters from 25% to a maximum of 10%. Consequently, €20 would have €2 deducted to pay debt. That came into operation on the first day of this month. There is also an obligation on suppliers to advise their prepayment customers who are in debt of other payment options available to them, such as billpay, and an obligation on suppliers to place their customers who are on financial hardship meters on the most economic tariff. Then we have the additional protection of emergency social welfare payments to ensure people can pay their bills.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is no guarantee.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I fear the budget will be a case of "A lot done. More to do". It is certain the supports for SMEs will not be enough to prevent a wave of insolvencies and redundancies in the coming months. I have brought the case of one manufacturing business to both the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. It employs 45 people in the south east. Its production processes use both gas and electricity in both heating and cooling procedures. Its energy bill has rocketed from €8,000 per month to €45,000 per month and the owner sees the writing on the wall. He has told me that the second-last thing he wishes is for his business to close. The last thing he wishes is for him and his family is to go broke. The supports on offer to him as they stand are not adequate for his business to remain operational, offering wide employment and viable. His situation is not unique. I ask that the Taoiseach convene a business task force to study this unfolding crisis in the SME sector. Will the Government examine an enduring temporary lay-off scheme in the mode of the Covid employment wage subsidy scheme or perhaps even a more aggressive and ambitious renewal or retrofit scheme for SMEs? Can we look to segment the energy supports to ensure agrifood producers that consume huge amounts of energy through production can be additionally supported? Something needs to be done.

I am conscious this might be one of my final exchanges with the Taoiseach before he leaves the position. I draw his attention to the inequity of the continued resourcing of the Western Development Commission, WDC, versus other regions. The west is now awake and is one of the strongest-performing regions of Ireland. The midlands, Border and the south east are the economic laggards. To thrive and deliver on the programme for Government's aspirations around balanced regional development, these regions need the strategic regional thinking and resourcing the WDC has delivered to the west for a generation. I look at the miserly outturn of capital spending as a case in point. As the State plans to spend €10.8 billion on capital projects next year, there is a paltry amount due to be spent on strategic projects in the south east, Border and midlands. These regions need a form of conceptual thinking, with strategy development based on the deep applied research and regional cohesion the WDC-type structure offers. It is indefensible to many that we see continuing funding of the WDC while we deprive other regions that need these resources so badly being ignored.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the twin issues of south-east economic and enterprise development and the issue around business supports in the current energy crisis. The Government is introducing a temporary business energy support scheme as announced by the Minister for Finance in the budget. That scheme will be open to businesses that carry on a case 1 trade, are tax-compliant and have experienced a significant increase in their natural gas and electricity costs. As the Deputy knows, it will be administered by the Revenue Commissioners and operate on a self-assessment basis. Businesses will be required to register for the scheme. It is proposed the scheme will operate by comparing the average unit price for the relevant bill period in 2022 with the average unit price in the corresponding reference period in 2021. Once eligibility criteria are met the support will be calculated on the basis of 40% of the amount of the increase in the bill amount. In addition to that a monthly cap of €10,000 per trade will apply and an overall cap will apply on the total amount a business can claim. The scheme is designed to be compliant with the EU state aid temporary crisis framework and will need approval by the Commission.

There is a range of other business supports. I do not know whether the company the Deputy referenced would come under the Enterprise Ireland scheme, namely, the €200 million targeted

Ukraine enterprise crisis scheme to assist viable but vulnerable manufacturers and exporters. There is a €1.2 billion State-backed Ukraine credit guarantee scheme for SMEs, primary producers and small mid-cap businesses with fewer than 500 employees. There is a new growth and sustainability investment loan scheme and then €4 million has gone to the Local Enterprise Office network, to include a new capital grant for microenterprise for energy efficiency and so forth.

On the comparison between the south east and the WDC, employment in the south east has grown by 8.6% in the last year. That is from quarter 2 of 2021 to quarter 2 of 2022 and covers counties Carlow, Kilkenny, Waterford and Wexford. There are now 79 IDA Ireland client companies in the south east employing about 15,000 people. In June the sod was turned on the Glanbia and Royal A-Ware €200 million continental cheese facility at Belview. That strategically-important national project will support the incomes of over 4,500 family farms, create 80 jobs and 400 construction jobs in the south east. Over 6,000 people are employed in around 100 Enterprise Ireland client-based companies in County Waterford and the Local Enterprise Office also supports 1,000 jobs. The Deputy knows there have been very significant investments announced in the last two years on the IDA Ireland front. Eirgen is investing €12 million in its manufacturing facilities in Waterford City. Bausch + Lomb announced investment of €90 million to expand its manufacturing operations in Waterford in July 2021. Infosys announced 250 jobs and a state-of-the-art delivery centre. PublicRelay, a US communications and analytics firm, is also establishing in Waterford. I will come back to the Deputy on the supplementary.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I gave a range of metrics at the enterprise committee this morning on the real performance of the south east. I have not got the time to go through them here but unfortunately they do not tally with what the Taoiseach has just described. The supports the Government is offering to the SME sector in particular are not enough. A lot has been done, as I said, but it will not be enough to hold back the wave of insolvencies and redundancies over what is essentially a geopolitical issue that is going to take out good competitive businesses. Their employees are going to be the victims also.

On the WDC, its job is largely done. I am not looking to see it scrapped but for something that has been really successful brought into play in other regions. Some of the problems that are outlined in relation to the Border have to do with regional issues around there but we must look at this. This morning I asked the Tánaiste if he would consider this and he has opened the door to doing so. This needs to be done. If we are to put regions on par, we must have similar bodies to support their economic and policy development into the future.

The Taoiseach: A regional enterprise plan for the south east has been put in place. We need to analyse more deeply the factors that give rise to the growth in given regions. The medtech cluster in the west probably has been one of the more significant developments. It is based largely on research and development in the University of Galway and it also connects down to the mid-west with the University of Limerick. The South East Technological University is key.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: The funding is key.

The Taoiseach: It has been key. I accept that historically there has been an issue with different regions progressing at different levels. What I have announced is very significant foreign direct investment in Waterford and the south east more generally. That will grow. Horizon Therapeutics has recently announced 350 jobs, as the Deputy knows. All of those matter and will have impact. As we expand the south east technological university, it will have a key role

to play on the enterprise side. There is infrastructure and it has been allocated through the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, and so forth. I know there have been issues on the private sector side, which was not the fault of the State. That funding is still in place for the local authority in Waterford and for the region generally. A regional steering committee has been formed to implement the regional enterprise plan. We need to be careful we do not just keep on creating more and more bodies rather than analysing factors that would give rise to continued growth and development in Waterford. I would be open to having that analysis. Different approaches work for different regions.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I will take up the Taoiseach on that.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to return to the issue of potential energy disconnections this winter. I will put the question that I put to the Taoiseach earlier and I would appreciate a straight answer to the question. Will he move to ensure the ban on disconnection starts now and runs to the end of March? I seek a "Yes" or "No" answer. Will he ensure those on pay-as-you-go meters are not open to disconnection? Will he give a cast-iron guarantee that will not happen? How will he achieve that?

The Taoiseach: I have already outlined to the Deputy measures we have taken that will prevent disconnections this winter. There are always exceptional situations for different reasons, but we are clear about what has brought about this energy crisis and the level of price increases. We want to keep the lights on and we want people to be able to have warm food and heat themselves over this winter. Government will do everything it can-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has not done anything.

The Taoiseach: -----as will the CRU.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has still not answered the question.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There are reports today that IBEC has raised concerns about the introduction of statutory domestic violence leave. Will the Government commit to moving forward swiftly with the adoption of such legislation? We believe most employers want to ensure supports are available to employees and workers experiencing domestic, sexual or gender-based violence. They want to offer them those supports. The legislation going through the House deserves cross-party support on that basis to ensure a compassionate workplace. Labour introduced a similar Bill in the Seanad to ensure reproductive health-related leave would be available to employees enduring early miscarriage. We believe amendments to the Organisation of Working Time Act could be brought forward to ensure statutory leave for those suffering domestic violence and for those who need time off for reproductive health-related reasons, including early miscarriage. Will the Taoiseach commit to ensuring speedy passage of that legislation for employees' rights?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. Since its formation, the Government has made it clear that tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a priority. The Government has approved the recommendations in the report prepared by the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, for the introduction of paid domestic violence leave. On

its introduction, Ireland will be one of the first countries in Europe to adopt domestic violence paid leave. The provisions will be introduced by means of Committee Stage amendments to the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill which is before the Houses at present.

I believe the Deputy is aware of the six recommendations from the domestic violence leave report. Work is under way to implement that. We will work with all the organisations to ensure there is buy-in for it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I was also absolutely appalled today to read that the business lobby group, IBEC, has objected to the Government's plan to bringing in legislation on paid leave for victims of domestic abuse. Asking people who have suffered domestic abuse to provide proof that they have actually suffered that abuse is retraumatising. This level of disbelief and distrust is exactly why victims do not come forward. I ask that the Government not only commit to the speedy implementation of this Bill, but also that it will never be the case that people will have to prove they have suffered domestic abuse to avail of that leave.

The Taoiseach: We need to be sensitive about this in the sense that it is a very difficult situation for people to find themselves in. It is not as if people are going to use this as some sort of excuse. That will not happen. It is very difficult for a person to have to come forward and say, "I need leave because of domestic abuse." The report recommends that we provide supports to employers so that they can develop their own domestic violence leave policy. This relates to policy and culture within an organisation. This will ensure that domestic violence victims will be dealt with appropriately in their workplaces and will ensure there is a pathway for domestic violence leave requests to be handled sensitively. A tender for the provision of these support services will issue in the coming days. That is one recommendation we are following up on. That domestic violence leave will be introduced-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are out of time.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It must be without the need for proof.

The Taoiseach: I think there needs to be a process. I am with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Gino Kenny: Over the weekend at the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, claimed that health service waiting lists have been stabilised. The reality is very different. The reality is that more than 900,000 people at present are on some form of public health or hospital waiting list, which is completely unacceptable. Can the Taoiseach justify what the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, said given the reality of people waiting for simple medical procedures?

The Taoiseach: I commend the widespread interest in the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis at the weekend from all sides of the House. It is very heartening indeed.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: We will have another one tomorrow so.

The Taoiseach: The outpatient waiting list has increased and the inpatient list has stabilised. There are different performances in different categories. Many good innovations have worked such as access to diagnostics. GP-led diagnostic services have been quite innovative and impactful in providing greater access, greater throughput and greater activity on waiting lists more generally. That will continue. The waiting list action plan was published last February. Some €350 million was allocated with additional staff. For 2023, €443 million has now

been allocated. It ahead of target on scopes, a little bit behind target on inpatient day cases and significantly behind target on outpatient cases. That is what the Minister is telling me.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The blight of illegal dumping continues to be a major problem across the country costing local authorities millions of euro to clean up each year. On many occasions I have raised the issue of illegal dumping in the Dáil, both with the Taoiseach and with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I have received assurances on every occasion that this issue will be addressed, but legislation has not been brought forward to deal with it yet. One of the biggest problems is that CCTV footage cannot be used in court to bring the culprits to justice. This ongoing illegal dumping is destroying our countryside, our towns, our villages and most importantly our environment. When will legislation be brought before the Dáil to enable the local authorities and An Garda Síochána to use CCTV footage to prosecute those caught in the act of illegal dumping?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has been a long-standing campaigner for this and has raised the matter before with me, I think in the bowels of the National Convention Centre. We still have recollections of the convention centre.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I have shown the Taoiseach pictures.

The Taoiseach: The Bill has been passed. The Circular Economy and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2022 has been passed and the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, tells me that measure has been included in it. There will need to be regulations to give effect to that. I will double-check that. They are being drawn up, allowing for the use of CCTV in respect of illegal dumping.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Last week I raised the issue of drug dealing and intimidation in Clonmel town centre. Clonmel is a fine town with fine people. There was an incident on Friday night when a young farmer who was going to his homeplace was confronted by a gang, beaten to the ground, kicked underneath his van and left. It could have been a fatality. Will the Taoiseach do something to support the Garda in Clonmel? The numbers are appalling. The ones who are there do their best but the management is leaving a lot to answer for. Gardaí are in danger as they go around in the squad car on their own in the middle of the night. I am glad the Minister for Justice is here. Will she set up a task force to deal with the problem in Clonmel and the outlying parishes? There are roving gangs intimidating farmers and all families under the auspices of lamping, which is illegal anyway, and hunting of rabbits and hares, which is illegal as well, unmuzzled. We do not hear anything about that. They are intimidating farmers and their wives and families. It is almost out of control and the Garda is going to lose control of it unless the Minister sends in resources immediately.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): On the resourcing of An Garda Síochána, it is a matter for the Commissioner as to where they go. My role is to make sure the Commissioner has as many gardaí as possible to be able to allocate into the different regions. We have about 460 that will either come into or leave Templemore this year. With the new recruitment campaign, the intention and the funding that was allocated in this year's budget is for 1,000 additional gardaí next year and we hope to continue that number. That would see 200 gardaí every three months being sent out to the various towns, villages and rural and urban communities. That will help to bolster gardaí on the ground as well as those working in specialised teams. On rural crime, Operation Thor and a number of other specific, targeted operations look at these rural gangs and that type of activity in rural areas. They are being rolled out and will be rolled

out right across the winter months.

Deputy Michael McNamara: Yesterday I asked the Taoiseach about the transfer of Shannon Heritage sites to Clare County Council. He said he had recently met the county manager. The Taoiseach continued:

> ... the manager basically identified that there was a funding gap from his perspective. I have spoken to the Minister about it and the Minister is working on this with all the stakeholders to try to get this resolved.

This morning Clare county councillors were told that on budget day last week, Clare County Council had been informed by a very senior official of the Minister that a decision had been arrived at on their funding application within the Department and that the funding was being refused. That is the end of the matter from Clare County Council's perspective. Does the Taoiseach want to take this opportunity to contradict that account given to Clare county councillors this morning, or does he want to correct the record of the Dáil?

The Taoiseach: I am not responsible for what officials may be saying to councillors. It is not the end of the matter.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: At the weekend, Jim Gavin, the chairman of the Dublin Citizens' Assembly, indicated that he might have his report ready earlier than expected. It appears he is as good in the chair as he is on the field, although I am not sure anybody would be up for five citizens' assemblies in a row. Does the early delivery of that report give us the opportunity to establish a citizens' assembly on the legal framework for drugs? Will the Taoiseach examine that? Will he also examine if it is possible for the terms of reference to include not just the headline issues on the legal framework for drugs but also the issues around recovery and addiction? Will the Taoiseach join with me in congratulating people in communities in Finglas and Ballymun who had a really successful recovery month in September? It is really a life-changing experience for people who are able to achieve recovery.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I know it has been an issue of concern for him for quite some time. I pay tribute to those in Ballymun. I met them with the Deputy on different occasions on the issue of drug addiction and recovery. I pay tribute to Jim Gavin and the citizens' assembly for its efficiency. There is no need to elaborate on Dublin's success on the football field to the rest of us. We note that super-efficiency. I would be very disposed to the idea of a citizens' assembly on drugs and many Members, the Deputy included, have proposed that as the next priority for a citizens' assembly.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: We would accept one in a row in Waterford if we could get it, never mind five. I was very encouraged to hear Paula Hilman, the assistant commissioner for roads policing with the Garda traffic bureau, telling the justice committee yesterday that she and her colleagues are fully supportive of introducing an online portal for members of the public to upload evidence of road traffic infringements such as illegal parking on footpaths and in cycle lanes, bus lanes and so forth, with the intention that the portal will go live in 2024. In my mind it is essential that this should include the capacity to record close passes. As anyone who cycles regularly will tell us, this is a frightening and off-putting experience that is all too common on our roads and deters many people from getting onto their bikes. The portal works elsewhere and I am convinced it can work here as well. What legislative underpinning will be required to make this happen? Will it be included in the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill and, if

so, when are we likely to see that Bill back on Second Stage?

The Taoiseach: I take on board what the Deputy is saying in respect of the comments that have been made. This would require legislative underpinning, it would seem to me, but I will certainly follow that up with the Minister and all stakeholders. I imagine the National Transport Authority and the Road Safety Authority would be involved as well.

Deputy Mark Ward: We have discussed the cost-of-living issue and the increase in the cost of living countless times in the Chamber. I want to bring to the Taoiseach's attention an unexpected new bill that workers in Liffey Valley shopping centre are facing. Later this month, the owners of Liffey Valley plan to introduce paid car parking for customers and staff. Staff will be expected to pay up to €650 a year to park their car. Retail, security and cleaning staff are often poorly paid. There are up to 2,500 staff working in Liffey Valley. The line is often thrown out to use public transport but there is no Luas or train that services Liffey Valley. The bus service is not on everyone's route and some of the staff work through the night when there is no bus service available. The €600 energy credit the Government announced last week will be wiped out for these staff. Does the Government have any measures to support workers in this situation?

The Taoiseach: The Government cannot intervene in every given situation in terms of car parking facilities and so forth. That is a matter for the employer. I do not think the employer should be charging staff for car parking.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The programme for Government makes reference to supporting our healthcare workers, which is only right. In January of this year the Government announced a bonus payment for the healthcare workers who did Trojan work during the pandemic. I want to know when the workers will receive this payment and if the Taoiseach will ensure all healthcare workers are included in it.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that the vast majority of those working in the HSE have received their payment. There are some groups that have not received it yet. The vast majority of those eligible who are employed by the HSE have now received a payment and this includes many section 38 staff. That amounts to approximately 123,000 staff who have received their payment. In terms of non-HSE healthcare workers, the HSE is working on getting capacity to assist with the payment process in respect of private sector nursing home staff, hospice staff, private voluntary staff, section 39 staff, eligible staff working on-site in section 39 long-term residential care facilities for people with disabilities, people in agency roles working in the HSE and healthcare support assistants contracted to the HSE. That work is under way now to get those sorted and we said to the HSE that we want this done as quickly as possible.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Would the Taoiseach give positive consideration to moving all matters relating to forestry applications to the realm of planning and development, thereby treating forestry as a land use? This would allow local authorities to deal with applications within an eight-week window no different from any other form of development or land use in Ireland. At the moment, the delays in forestry are injurious to the economy. They are slowing down development. Bringing it into land use would be a very streamlined way of dealing with this. It would also be far less contentious than data centres, wind turbines and all the other issues that come before planning authorities.

1 o'clock

They have the competency to deal with this. It could be transformative if we made that change.

The Taoiseach: We need to be careful about such a fundamental change. There are major issues with forestry licensing. We knew that when the Government came in. We made legislative changes and there has been a huge investment, for example, in resources in the Department. Ecologists are key to this. Therefore, we have more ecologists and forestry inspectors, in addition to administrative staff, assigned to licensing. There has been huge investment in resources in the Department with all of this. About 35 ecologists have now been recruited. You do not want to undo all of that. They have just been recruited to deal with licensing.

Licensing in 2021 was 56% higher than in 2020, with 4,050 licences issued compared to 2,592 in 2020. We have to do far higher numbers of licensing. Some 2,877 felling licences were issued. Crucially, the availability of this volume of timber has improved the timber situation and stabilised supply to the processing sector in 2021. I will discuss the matter with the Deputy again and follow through. I am not sure the local authorities would have the capacity to do what is needed for forestry generally.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I arranged for the Irish Foster Care Association to meet with Deputies from Donegal the week before the budget to allow them to explain in detail the reasoning and need for the funding asked in its pre-budget submission and to get a better idea of the service foster parents give to the State. I am sure those who attended will concur with the challenges laid out in very stark terms by board members, namely, Mr. Raymond Nolan, Dr. Helen Gogarty and CEO, Ms Catherine Bond. Primarily, they asked for an increase in the foster care allowance for the first time since 2009. In the context of that, these parents save the State money because residential care costs are 20 times higher. It is a minuscule ask.

However, to understand it fully, the Taoiseach needs to hear it first-hand. We are all very good in here at saying we understand issues that we only have a cursory knowledge of. I promise the Taoiseach that if he sits with these people for half an hour, he will gain true perspective. They would like to meet with him as well. Will he give a commitment to meet with representatives of the Irish Foster Care Association before the passage of the finance Bill?

The Taoiseach: I want to acknowledge that there are issues here that need to be addressed. The Minister and Tusla's CEO have met and discussed the issues of supports to foster carers. The Minister recognises that foster carers, like many others, are experiencing cost-of-living pressures now. Both the Minister and Tusla want to respond to this in a positive and meaningful way. There is interaction going on now. The Minister is committed to pursuing all options and will work with Tusla in the coming months to do everything possible to make some support available on this, as has been done for other groups in society.

Separately, the Tusla board has considered a major improvement plan for foster care, covering a wide range of issues. The Minister is committed to working with Tusla to give certainty to implementing the steps set out in that review. There are immediate things we can around access to child benefit, the back-to-school allowance and the once-off payments. I have discussed this with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform as well. We need to do something here. I would like perhaps for the Minister to meet with the group initially, but I will see what I can do.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am aware the Taoiseach addressed the business supports on a macro level earlier this morning. It is clear the Government is backing business and

helping companies to pay their energy bills this winter. An example of that in my own constituency is a retail food business that had a bill of €1,300 for two months last year and this year it is €6,932. It is an extraordinary increase for the same reference period.

Here is the point of difference. There is another business in Blackrock that is about to open a retail food business, an equivalent business, and because it does not have the equivalent reference period from last year, it looks like it will receive no support from the Government. The point of the whole scheme is took keep businesses open and keep employment going. They have made the investment and they are ready to rock and ready to open. However, it seems that because this administrative tag is missing, they will not get support under the business scheme. Is there a way of looking at either a differentiation within it or a separate sub-scheme for those businesses that are clearly in the process of opening? They have leases and they have made all of the investment. It is very clear that they are there already and are ready to rock, except for these sort of bills.

The Taoiseach: The Minister will no doubt add more details to the design of the scheme. This has to go through the commission as well. The commission has already created a temporary state aid crisis framework. As we work through this scheme, obviously issues like this will arise and we will respond. This scheme will be responsive, basically. We want to have some degree of flexibility to cover legitimate cases that will arise. It is about job preservation and job protection. I will talk to the Minister about that, but I think he is aware of those.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There are 16,000 security officers in this country. They were recognised during Covid as being essential workers. However, they remain very low-paid workers involved in stressful work, in many cases working up to 60 hours a week. They were due to get a very small pay increase to €12.50 an hour under an employment regulation order, ERO. However, three security companies, namely, Top Security, Las and Morbury, took a case to seek and were granted, scandalously, an *ex parte* injunction to stop the ERO coming into effect. Top Security is a company that receives public contracts. These three companies are happy for their workers to remain in poverty conditions while they continue to make profits. So far, the Government has not responded to this. We have a press statement acknowledging it. Why does the Government not go to court and challenge the injunction so that workers get what they are owed?

The Taoiseach: I apologise. What is the key point?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The ERO was stopped by an injunction, but the Government so far has not challenged the injunction.

The Taoiseach: That will work its way through the courts.

Deputy Paul Murphy: But-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are not having an interaction. We will just have the response.

The Taoiseach: I was just trying to get the point that the Deputy was asking about, to be fair. I appreciate the clarity.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Instead of waiting for the substantial case, which appears to be the Government approach, the Government can go and challenge it. It was an *ex parte* injunction,

so it can turn up and say that it is a party-----

The Taoiseach: We will take legal advice on all of that, as the Government ordinarily does.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Scoil Íosagáin in Buncrana is the largest school in County Donegal, with more than 750 pupils. For the past decade, it has been caught up in a myriad of bureaucratic issues. However, the most recent devastating news is that the planning permission has expired and it has to go back again and apply for it. That is another year lost. The school is not in good condition. It has black mould growing on classroom walls, leaking prefab roofs leaving puddles on floors, classroom walls being insulated with election posters, of all things, and sash windows in old classrooms that do not close. I could go on and on.

This is a fantastic school. It is a groundbreaker in terms of special needs. There is €20 million allocated for a brand new school. I cannot convey how desperately needed it is. Will the Taoiseach intervene with the Minister for Education to find out how this happened, why tenders were lost and why this continues to happen?

The Taoiseach: To be fair, if the money has already been allocated, there is a planning issue. I am not aware of the background detail in terms of the planning process, why the planning permission has expired or what bureaucratic issues gave rise to this.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Taoiseach will raise it with the Minister for Education.

The Taoiseach: I am sure the Minister is very well aware of it already. I will talk to her about it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Taoiseach will raise the matter. I thank him.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I want to raise an issue I have raised a couple of times already in this House over recent weeks, which is the increasing reliance in the family law courts on very subjective section 47 reports. This has resulted in the removal of children from the custody of their mother in appalling circumstances. The Garda was ordered by the court to enter to the classroom-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is referring to a specific case and making allegations about subjective reports. There is a division in relation to this House and the courts. I would ask the Deputy to reflect on what he is saying. He cannot proceed-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: If the Leas-Cheann Comhairle hears me out, she might understand why I am saying it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are tight for time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please stop.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: It resulted in the removal of the children, in that callous fashion, and placed them in the custody of their-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am not allowing this. The Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----other parent, who was previously-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of order.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I apologise. There is only move left for me now. I can only do one thing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, I am standing up now. That is the ultimate-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: All right. I will table a motion in the House-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please sit down.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----asking for the removal of the offending officer of the court-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: -----from the Bench.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat. I do so reluctantly. Resume your seat.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: A Leas-Cheann Comhairle-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am sorry. There is precedent for this matter to be raised in the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is running. The Deputy is out of time and out of order.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: No, I am forced to be out of time and out of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I want to resume my seat and I want to be in order. I ask that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle allow the Taoiseach to answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The issue is already in the public arena.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will have to abandon the session if the Deputy does not resume his seat.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to allow the Taoiseach to comment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is ignoring an order of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. It is a very serious-----

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but it is not out of order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Unfortunately for the Deputies waiting to come in, I am go-

ing to now put an end to Questions on Policy and Legislation. I am sorry. I am going to move on.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Taoiseach wants to answer.

The Taoiseach: No. Questions on Policy and Legislation are over.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I appeal to the Deputy to give way.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have made a ruling. I ask Deputy Durkan to resume his seat. This is a really serious matter. I will not go into it again. If the Deputy is refusing to resume his seat, I will put a stop to this session.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I have resumed my seat and I want to be in order.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you. That is not obvious to me. I am going to repeat generally that matters in the courts cannot be brought up in this manner. It is simply not on and it is not acceptable.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: But they have been brought up before.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When the Ceann Comhairle or the Leas-Cheann Comhairle makes a ruling, whether Deputies like it or not, that is it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: They have been brought up before.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have one minute and four seconds left and there are three speakers seeking to contribute. I will allow them 30 seconds each to put their questions and the Taoiseach, with his co-operation, will answer all three together.

Deputy Marc MacSharry: While I welcome the extra €67 million allocated to the Department of Defence in budget 2023, on the day that PDFORRA delegates are meeting throughout the country, and acknowledging that they have lost 300 staff this year alone, I ask the Taoiseach to provide a timeframe for tangible increases in the pay of soldiers, airmen and seamen.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have raised previously the matter of affordable housing. I want Part V to be in place as a condition of planning permission for all new estates from now on. It is currently the case that if land was bought before 31 July 2021 and planning permission for it granted before July 2021, there is no requirement to provide 10% affordable housing under Part V. I am not talking about luxury homes like the one in Cabra owned by the Sinn Féin leader, Deputy McDonald, about which Shane Ross has posed questions in his new book.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Ah stop.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I am talking about ordinary people who want to live in their communities.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. You had 30 seconds.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: There is a serious problem. Many new estates currently being built have no 10% affordable provision under Part V.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time. I am trying to facilitate all Deputies.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Taoiseach will be aware that the A5-N2 road artery has been raised on numerous occasions in all-Ireland discussions and has been included in several national development plans and other projects. This year, however, all funding for the section of the N2 from Clontibret to the Border was removed and works stalled. I ask the Taoiseach to assure the House that he will use his position to assure the people of the north west and central Border regions, including my county of Monaghan, that funding will be allocated to the project in 2023.

The Taoiseach: On the issue raised by Deputy MacSharry, the Building Momentum pay agreement will certainly be allocated to defence staff and the broader Commission on the Defence Forces report is about making sure that we both retain staff and attract new recruits in, over and above the number of people who may leave. That will be tangible. There have been changes to some of the allowances in respect of the Naval Service and so on that have improved the situation somewhat. It remains a work in progress but Building Momentum will certainly improve the situation. There is also the recruitment of a head of transformation and a head of strategic human resources at senior management level, which is crucial and a significant culture change. The budget also includes changes in respect of allocations to meet pay and allowance enhancements recommended by the commission. These will be tangible measures that will make a difference.

In terms of the point raised by Deputy O'Donnell, I will speak to the Minister regarding Part V.

As regards the issue raised by Deputy Carthy, the Government has allocated in the national development plan funding for the A5. I am repeatedly told it is-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: I asked about the section of the N2 from Clontibret to the Border.

The Taoiseach: I know that, but I am repeatedly told that the entire project is stuck in planning, more on the Northern side than in the Republic.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The road funding for the N2 from Clontibret to the Border was pulled this year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let the Taoiseach respond.

The Taoiseach: I will follow up on the matter.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [44624/22]

2. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [44844/22]

3. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on

health will next meet. [45435/22]

4. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [45730/22]

5. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48121/22]

6. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48122/22]

7. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48748/22]

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [48749/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on health oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments relating to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas and considers the implementation of health reforms, including Sláintecare. The Cabinet committee last met on Thursday, 9 June, and is expected to meet again shortly. In addition to the meetings of the full Cabinet and of Cabinet committees, I meet with Ministers on an individual basis to focus on different issues. I meet regularly with the Minister for Health to discuss priorities in the area of health, including Slåintecare.

A number of priority programmes and reforms under Sláintecare have continued to be advanced to provide people with the right care in the right place at the right time. Work is progressing on the establishment of six new regional health areas and on the elective care centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway. The enhanced community care programme also continues to develop healthcare at a more local level closer to where people live, reducing pressure on hospital services. I have seen the enhanced community care programme in operation and it is a significant advancement on what was there previously.

Last week, the Government announced investment of €23.4 billion in our health and social care services. This represents the highest allocation of funding to the sector in the history of the State. It is designed to facilitate better access to affordable and high-quality healthcare during the current cost-of-living crisis and further advance our ambition for universal health care for all. Specifically, €107 million is being allocated to ease cost-of-living pressures. As part of this, eligibility for GP access cards is being extended. By the end of 2022, it is intended the scheme will cover all children aged six and seven. From 1 April 2023, it will be extended to people who earn the median household income of €46,000 or less. This measure alone will positively impact 500,000 people. Following the recent abolition of overnight and day case public inpatient charges for children under 16 years of age in all public hospitals, all inpatient hospital charges will be abolished from 1 April 2023. Additional measures include: €10 million for access to IVF treatments; the expansion of the entitlement to free contraception to women aged 26 to 30, and to 16-year-olds, subject to legal advice and consultation; and €5 million to introduce free oral healthcare for children up to seven years of age.

Essential services and service providers will also be financially supported this winter. Sec-

tion 39 organisations, nursing homes and hospices will be eligible to receive additional support through a once-off health sector fund of €100 million. Access to care is being further prioritised with capacity commitments in the form of increasing staffing levels, delivering 250 new acute, critical care and community beds and a €443 million package to reduce waiting lists. Major increases in mental health services will be implemented, support for older people with a range of needs will be extended and nearly €30 million in new funding has been allocated for expanded disability services.

In the immediate term, the Department of Health and the HSE are at an advanced stage of planning for winter 2022-23. This includes rolling out the 2022-23 influenza campaign, which commenced this week, and making every effort to reduce any potential impact Covid-19 may have.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are several speakers to come in, so each of them will have one minute.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The sham review into the future of Navan hospital emergency department is now complete. I say it is a sham review for a number of reasons. First, the people carrying out the review were the people who made the original decision. That is never a good way to do a review in Irish democracy. Second, the Minister for Health promised there would be engagement with the local community but there was absolutely none. Third, the Minister of State, Deputy English, promised that a future for Navan emergency department would be included in the review but it simply was not. The review was rushed and there was no consultation whatsoever with the medical staff in Drogheda.

Right now, Navan hospital emergency department has never been as busy. It dealt with 105 patients in one day, 50 of whom would have had to go to Drogheda if the emergency department had closed last June as planned. There were 13 people on trolleys there last week. The hospital has had to reopen wards to fit people in. Is it not the case that the Taoiseach owes the Save Navan Hospital campaign a debt of gratitude for our work in keeping key capacity for the emergency department open during this time of crisis? Will the Taoiseach guarantee investment in Navan hospital's emergency department into the future?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Recent reports about the delivery of alcohol harm awareness programmes in schools by Drinkaware, an industry-funded organisation, are concerning. This, however, is not a new issue. The Irish Community Action on Alcohol Network, ICAAN, have been raising this issue for years. Research from the Health Research Board, HRB, has found that alcohol-related harm leads to an average of three deaths in the State per day. Why has the Government not fully implemented the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 on labelling and advertising? Industry-funded bodies like Drinkaware or, in the case of gambling, the Gambling Awareness Trust, which should never have a place in State education of our children. What actions are to be taken by the Cabinet committee on health to ensure that this does not happen again and that schools have access to education programmes?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for outlining how the expansion of free GP care is to proceed. Could he confirm if there are any plans by the Government to expand the rollout of free GP care to those children aged over seven and under 18? We in the Labour Party proposed in our alternative budget that there would be an expansion of free GP care to all those under 18, as originally envisaged. Now, it appears that this Government has abandoned that plan, so the Taoiseach might confirm that, please.

Second, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is publishing its annual report for 2021 this afternoon. The report will show constant increases in the need for help with more than 14,000 calls last year to the centre. Could the Taoiseach commit to certainty for organisations such as the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, and indeed other rape crisis centres around the country, by providing for multi-annual funding for these organisations that provide critical public services, yet are struggling to retain staff and must work year-to-year in relying on Government funding?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Has the Cabinet committee on health discussed the recruitment of people into the health service? There is a very serious situation with more than 20% of posts for care assistants, for example, in the Cork-Kerry region to be filled. Home helps are a vital service in supporting people who want to live at home and in their own communities, and to avoiding people having to go to hospital. The home help service is also a great support for their carers.

This issue has been constantly raised by people in my office. They have been approved home help hours but staff are not available to deliver the service. The HSE has confirmed that there are particular issues locally in Ballincollig, Dunmanway, Macroom and Millstreet where they have struggled to recruit home help workers. This is not exclusively an HSE issue because even private contractors who aim to deliver the service are also struggling. This is also impacting on disability services such as the Cope Foundation in Macroom. Has there been any discussion on this topic at this Cabinet committee?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As I raised with the Taoiseach last week, and I want to raise it again because I do not believe I received an accurate answer from him, keeping warm and having heating over the winter is a health issue. Anybody who is on illness benefit, enhanced illness benefit, occupational injuries benefit, maternity benefit or disabled benefit, however, does not receive the fuel allowance. Recipients will not, therefore, get the €400 payment, the double payment or the Christmas bonus. What is the Taoiseach going to do for those cohorts of people, many of whom are ill, have hurt themselves at work, are on maternity benefit, or are jobseekers, for that matter, on jobseeker's benefit? They are going to receive none of the one-off assistance payments to deal with the question of being able to heat their homes and pay for the energy price hikes over the winter. The Estimates Book is very clear about this that only people on long-term social welfare payments will receive these payments. Is the Taoiseach going to address that issue?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Tánaiste told a meeting of the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment this morning that the introduction of statutory sick pay has been delayed by 12 weeks to January 2023. The Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit of €350 was, however, abolished last Friday and is, therefore, back to a payment of €208 a week. Does the Taoiseach agree that the abolition of the Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit should have been delayed until statutory sick pay was ready to be introduced, especially as we are now facing into another wave of Covid-19 and there is a three-month gap between the end of the Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit and the introduction of statutory sick pay?

This will mean that many people will feel forced through economic necessity to go to work while infected with Covid-19 this winter, making the next wave and the impact on hospitals at the busiest time of year much worse than it would otherwise have been. It is the worst type of stupid penny-pinching that will end up creating greater costs for the health service and for people's health.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Tóibín as he was first to speak. In respect of the Navan hospital review, I have not seen it yet so I cannot confirm his perspectives on it as regards his view that it has many shortcomings. I will engage with the Minister for Health on the review. The issues are not simple either. Clinicians on all sides have different perspectives on this in County Meath and elsewhere. We have to ensure that whatever we do is in the best interests of patients in the first instance, and that the best outcomes are achieved in treatment in the right place and at the right time, bearing in mind the severity of a case or of an illness. There is no doubt that hospitals are under great deal of pressure at the moment because of Covid-19, its aftershocks, and what will be a difficult winter with an anticipated flu and waves of Covid-19. I appeal to people to get vaccinated and to get both the Covid-19 vaccine and the flu vaccine. This is vital in the prevention of getting sick yourself but also of reducing pressures. The Government and the Minister will examine the review that has been undertaken and will engage with the stakeholders on it.

Deputy Gould raised the issue of Drinkaware in our schools. It is not appropriate, as I have said, that resources or materials produced or funded by the drinks industry for education and awareness on alcohol are in use in our schools. The drinks industry should not be near our schools in respect of anything to do with addiction generally. The Departments of Education and Health and the HSE will work together to ensure that this message is communicated clearly to schools. Many of the schools were entering into this area in good faith and are anxious to try to help students and young people. I do not believe that there is any deliberate bad practice here in schools, where there trying to do the best they can by their students. Of course, the idea of the social, personal and health education, SPHE, programme when it was introduced was to deal with self-esteem, self-respect and to deal with addiction issues. There is a specific module within SPHE on the use and misuse of a range of substances. The SPHE specifications are currently being redeveloped by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. The updated curriculum will be developed for primary, junior and senior cycle. It was published for consultation on 18 July which will run until 18 October. Anyone with an interest in the area should contribute to the consultation before the deadline.

The HSE, with the support of the Department of Education and the NCCA, has produced a Healthy Choices resource for junior cycle SPHE, and unit 1 is currently available in the NCCA's online toolkit for SPHE to support teachers in addressing issues of alcohol, tobacco and drug use. The Department and the NCCA will continue to support the HSE in the development of units 2 and 3 of the programme, which are due to be published in 2023.

There are many supports there and materials from Drinkaware or from anywhere else are not needed as resources are already in place and available to schools, and that information will be communicated to them.

There is a Know the Score substance misuse programme published in 2019 for transition and fifth year pupils, which was jointly developed by the HSE, the Department of Education, and the drug and alcohol task forces. Reducing the high levels of harmful patterns of alcohol consumption among young people was one of the primary objectives of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act. We have brought in minimum unit pricing which I am sure the Deputy agrees with.

Deputy Thomas Gould: We support that.

The Taoiseach: That is good. There are also a number of other recommendations we are continuing to work on.

Deputy Bacik raised the issue of the expansion of GP care. This year, the Government took the decision to expand through income quite substantially thresholds the number of GP care medical cards for access to GPs. That will be quite substantial, with hundreds of thousands more. We are not abandoning the over-sevens but I believe we have to re-look at how we do it. Invariably, what happens is that an announcement is made in the budget in respect of children, and it then gets into negotiations with the organisations and it is about leveraging funding from the Government. That is not an ideal way of doing it. Income thresholds were an original view within the Department of Health for a long time, but we are not abandoning this. We provided for an extension in legislation for the over-sevens and the Minister will continue to pursue that in the time ahead. The focus and the allocation this year is in respect of the expansion of GP care to those on medium incomes.

The Deputy also raised the issue of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and its multi-annual funding. Again, there should be a base minimum and at least an understanding of a floor below which multi-annual funding does not drop in respect of organisations that are providing an on-going service, such as those at the rape crisis centres across the country.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan raised a fair point in respect of the recruitment process. The HSE is saying that over the past two years, certainly since the onset of Covid, approximately 15,000 people have been recruited, which is the largest ever number but there are issues. In homecare, we dramatically increased the number of hours up to 20 million and we now want to go to 24 million homecare hours, which is dramatic compared to where it was two years ago, and that has put a strain on the attempt to get people in. I also worry about therapists and the capacity, for example, to recruit therapists in paediatrics, which has been a big concern of mine. The HSE needs to focus on making sure it can attract therapists into working with children in specific areas, as well as in the areas of mental health, psychiatry and so on, where there are also difficulties with recruitment.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised the issue of statutory sick pay. It has not been delayed. It was always going to be 1 January and the Tánaiste made that clear from the outset. He was not in a position to bring it in before then because of a range of issues in notifying people and the processes that had to be gone through.

With regard to Deputy Boyd Barrett's point, again, the measures are designed to deal with those most in need. We have provided a vast range of supports.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why are they not getting the ones that others are getting?

The Taoiseach: The supports cover not just those areas the Deputy has identified. Much more support has been provided in the budget over and above the specific payments that the Deputy referenced.

Cross-Border Co-operation

9. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach if he plans to advance the shared island initiative in discussion with the newly elected British Prime Minister. [44711/22]

10. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach the status of developments under the shared island initiative. [44814/22]

11. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach his proposals to advance the shared island initiative with particular emphasis on the need to ensure ongoing dialogue at all levels to move all parties in the direction of peaceful equilibrium. [45711/22]

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to report on the work of his Department's shared island unit. [48259/22]

13. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Taoiseach the funding that has been allocated to the shared island unit of his Department in budget 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48332/22]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the shared island unit. [48333/22]

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the shared island unit. [48336/22]

16. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the shared island unit. [48471/22]

17. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on the work of his Department's shared island unit. [48635/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9 to 17, inclusive, together.

Through the Government's shared island initiative, we are engaging with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future and delivering tangible benefits for the whole island, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. In the budget last week, the Government confirmed an allocation of €100 million to our shared island fund for 2023, consistent with our commitment to the fund and to take forward our all-island investment priorities under the revised national development plan. We are working through all-island partnerships with the Executive, local authorities, education institutions and civil society.

I have been very clear throughout that we see scope for a strong east-west dimension to the shared island initiative and I see real potential for strategic investment by the Irish and British Governments for shared objectives and priorities, for instance, on all-island research hubs. I took the opportunity of my recent meeting with Prime Minister Truss to flag the shared island initiative to her.

On 4 July, the Government allocated €70.4 million from the shared island fund to take forward new cross-Border schemes on community climate action, electric vehicle, EV, charging infrastructure roll-out, arts investment projects and development of new local authority projects. We also made an enabling allocation from the fund for phase 3 of the Ulster Canal restoration. On 30 August, I laid the foundation stone for phase 2 of the Ulster Canal restoration, which is fully funded by the Government, including through the shared island fund, and on track to be completed next year. On 29 September, I and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage announced 25 awards totalling more than €4.3 million under the shared island local authority development funding scheme at an event in Cavan which brought together 23 different councils from across the island. Through the scheme, they are now working in cross-Border partnerships to progress feasibility work over the next year on new collaborative investment projects, with a view to accessing further funding in both jurisdictions for

delivery stage, including through the shared island fund. Projects address shared concerns for the island, including on biodiversity, sustainable tourism, circular economy, innovation, and cultural and creative industries.

The shared island research programme commissioned by my Department is continuing. Final reports from the ESRI will be published later this month on productivity levels on the island and, next month, on co-ordination of renewable energy policies and electricity infrastructure.

The Government's focus is on inclusive civic engagement with all communities and political traditions. The shared island dialogue series has so far directly involved some 2,000 citizens and civic representatives through 11 dialogue events. On 29 June, I addressed a dialogue with more than 150 young people in attendance in Derry on the theme of identities on a shared island. The next dialogue will be on arts and culture at Queen's University in Belfast on 13 October, with participation by the Minister, Deputy Catherine Martin, for the Government, and the Executive Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, MLA.

On 29 September, I participated in the launch of the first report of the All-Island Women's Forum, and on Monday, 3 October, I launched the report of the iCommunity hub led by The Wheel and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action. Both projects followed on from our shared island engagements and, supported by the Government, they are forging significant new civic connections and making recommendations on common concerns for communities across the island. The Government will positively consider their recommendations.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have nine speakers, who have one minute each. The Taoiseach will have two and a half minutes to respond. I call Deputy Durkan.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I thank the Taoiseach for his comprehensive reply and for pursuing this useful initiative in the way that he has done. I merely want to support that. I ask that he will ensure that all levels of community interaction that can be facilitated will be facilitated to establish trust between the communities there and, of course, between North and South in terms of what might be seen as a threat by some in some communities and might be seen as an admirable objective by others. I support his commitment to continue working at the project in such a way as to bring the people of this island together. The last point I want to make is that we also need to undertake a certain amount of education in this part of the island, with particular reference to the 62% of Irish people who said they were in favour of closer co-operation but were against paying for it.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I was very glad to attend the event in my hometown in Cavan last week where the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, launched the special funding to assist local authorities to prepare programmes. It was great to have people of all political views from 23 local authorities there representing their communities. There was an extremely warm welcome for the shared island funding. The only thing I heard of was people coming forward with more projects that need more funding, so it is widely welcomed. The Taoiseach and I previously discussed the opportunity to develop our further education sector on an all-Ireland, cross-Border basis. I had the opportunity to visit the new campus in South West College in Enniskillen some months ago, and it was warmly embracing the idea of the shared island and doing work together.

Similar to Deputy Durkan, I wish the mindset and thinking on progressing the shared island initiative would be shared throughout all our Departments and statutory agencies because it is

not acceptable that students attending colleges in Northern Ireland and Britain cannot get the once-off fees contribution announced in the budget.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask for an update on the Narrow Water Bridge project. When we spoke yesterday, I referenced the need for a citizens' assembly, in particular on the basis of the successful Ireland's Future event. The Taoiseach spoke about the shared island initiative. I would like to see how that conversation could be expanded to be all it would need to be. I ask that we look at research and modelling that could model Departments and systems for a united Ireland, and that we come up with a piece of work similar to what Scotland's Future did regarding what Irish unity could look like, and that we answer some of the questions that are in front of people at the moment.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful, as ever, to the Taoiseach for his comprehensive response. One of the many great sadnesses of the political stand-off on these islands is the fact that we do not have the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement up and running properly, for example, the North-South Ministerial Council, and that we do not have our trade and economic ministers meeting more often and pushing the agenda of closer North-South economic co-operation. North-South trade is rocketing at the moment, which is good. Will the Taoiseach outline how the shared island unit could fill the gap in terms of greater co-operation on North-South and east-west economic activity?

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is already an effective hard border on this island that stops people from moving freely for work, accessing healthcare and visiting friends on the island. That is because the common travel area excludes those without UK or Irish citizenship, including refugees, asylum seekers, partners of citizens and more, who are not permitted to move freely within the island of Ireland for leisure, tourism, work, connecting flights or any other reason. They cannot access jobs or education on the other side of the Border or participate in anything across the Border, even sports events, festivals, cultural events and so on.

The common travel area campaign by the North West Migrants Forum is fighting to change this. It has four requests: all lawful residents on the island should be able to cross the land Border as visitors without prior permission; racial profiling at the Border should be stopped; the pre-2004 birthright to Irish citizenship should be restored; and essential cross-Border services should be open to all. Will the Taoiseach agree with these policies and stop the perpetuation of a racist and discriminatory approach?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for the update on the shared island unit. On Saturday, I was glad to represent the Labour Party at the Ireland's Future event in the 3Arena, at which an impressive cross-party array of Deputies and Senators was present. The Taoiseach was not able to be present due to other commitments, but his party was represented. It was disappointing that there was no elected unionist or Alliance representative present. It was clear from the event that there are serious issues that need to be teased out and debated in order to make further progress on setting out a pathway towards achieving a united Ireland, to which so many of us aspire. Will the Taoiseach outline whether he believes his Department might seek at some point to commission a Green Paper and then a White Paper in order to make progress on these issues, which we in the Labour Party have suggested might be an appropriate pathway forward? The shared island unit has done valuable work and I paid tribute to it at the conference, but further steps need to be taken now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach mentioned shared island activity around

the issue of arts. Later today, the Committee on Budgetary Oversight will, at my request, meet representatives of actors and other performers - the Equity union - and representatives of film crews. Something they will point out is that the pay and conditions of performers and crew in this State are far worse than they are in the North and Britain because film producers here, who are in receipt of a great deal of public money, are essentially pursuing a race to the bottom and providing much reduced pay, conditions and access to residual or royalty payments for people's performances.

Deputy Mick Barry: I wish to express my solidarity with workers at Royal Mail and British Telecom's Openreach who are striking again for decent pay increases this week and next.

I will raise a scandalous case for the Taoiseach to comment on. Just six hours after receiving a €15 million windfall from the budget through the abolition of VAT on newspapers, the Belgian-owned Mediahuis group announced plans to shut down printing at its Newry plant at the end of January with the loss of 46 jobs. This company made a net profit of €117 million last year, double that of the previous year. Does the Taoiseach intend to stand idly by and watch this shark benefit to the tune of €15 million while throwing its workforce onto the dole?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Ireland's Future event on Saturday was wonderful. With 5,000 people and ten political parties gathered there, it was probably the most broadly based conference in this country so far on the united Ireland that is about to happen. It is obvious to me that we are at the precipice of great change because there is no unionist majority in politics any more. There is no majority in the Assembly or at Westminster for the Union. Political polls show that there is no majority for the Union. I would say that the conditions for a referendum exist now. The only way to find out what the view of the people is is to hold a referendum. Government by speculation is not good, nor is running away from democratic decisions.

The greatest threat at the moment is that there will be an election called by the end of October if the DUP does not sit in the Executive. That is a serious crisis. Worse still, the DUP is threatening not to allow devolution to happen at all in future if it does not get its way. Is reform of the institutions at Stormont not needed so as to ensure that one political party cannot hold them to ransom in such a way again?

The Taoiseach: Regarding Deputy Durkan's question, the whole idea of the shared island unit is to be without prejudice to the constitutional position. That is why I think it has gained such traction, so we need to be careful. That is all I would say to Deputies who, in good faith, have put forward various perspectives. The reason it has gained such traction among civil society in Northern Ireland is because people accept its bona fides. It is not a Trojan horse for anything. People accept that it is meant to deal with issues on the ground pragmatically in terms of engagement. Rhetoric is easy and words are easy, but it is hard work on the ground that matters. I have seen this throughout my political lifetime. It is about people engaging with one another and talking with one another, not shouting at one another or saying, "My way is a better way than your way". It is about trying to get more and more engagement.

On issues like biodiversity and climate, there is so much that we could do on the island to restore biodiversity loss, to have common approaches to energy efficiencies and so on, which we are doing through the shared island initiative. I would appeal to people to let the shared island unit continue with what it is doing. It is building real momentum. Community groups are coming up now for the long haul on an ongoing basis. People can have legitimate aspirations and pursue those in different forums, but the shared island unit should maintain that approach,

which is important in my view. The research that the shared island unit has done is also very significant. We are trying to get all communities involved. I have outlined that in terms of some of the bodies that have been set up already - the women's forum, the voluntary bodies, groups, the iCommunity hub and so on.

Deputy Brendan Smith is correct. If we could work on further education with the colleges of further education North and South, we would be interested in getting that done. Good work is already being done at third level. Ulster University Magee campus has made a proposal in respect of a technological university in the north west. We would be very much into that. All Government agencies and Departments have been communicated with about bringing forward proposals.

Deputy Ó Murchú spoke about the Narrow Water bridge. As he knows, we allocated €3 million to progress work on the Narrow Water bridge. Its delivery has been a priority for the Government. The project was proposed decades ago and this is the first time really that it has got moving because of the shared island funding and the commitment we have given to it. Louth County Council is acting as the lead project partner. There have been about eight meetings so far and we are hoping that the project will go to tender very shortly. We look forward to that. We will keep the Deputy updated in relation to developments on that.

Deputy Richmond is correct in terms of the need to restore the Executive.

I know my time is up, but regarding other points that have been made, I do not accept that there is a hard border. Migrant issues have been raised, certainly by the North West Migrants Forum, which I have met, but there is no hard border in terms of people being racially profiled at the Border. I have questions around that. Deeper analysis is required and we will undertake that.

The point I would make in respect of the issue around the election - I believe it was Deputy Tóibín who raised the issue of what would happen after the next election or if there was an election - is that the election we have just had has to be vindicated. It was held under the framework that is there now, so that should be vindicated. In the fullness of time, there is a case for reform before the election in five years' time because the politics have changed and the demographics have changed. I do not mean demographics specifically, but the political demographics have changed, if that makes sense.

Housing Policy

18. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on progress of Housing for All which is led by his Department. [44837/22]

19. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach if he is satisfied that sufficient progress is being made under the Housing for All plan to meet current and future demands. [45712/22]

20. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress of Housing for All which is led by his Department. [48636/22]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 18 to 20, inclusive, together.

Housing for All is the most ambitious housing plan in the history of our State and contains

actions to ensure over 300,000 new homes are built by 2030, along with delivering fundamental reform of our housing system. The target to 2030 includes 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost-rental homes. The plan is backed by the highest ever State investment in housing and it is beginning to have a significant impact.

Despite the sustained inflationary pressures as a result of the war in Ukraine and other external factors, there are still strong signs of momentum in housing delivery. The second quarter of this year saw the highest level of home completions in over a decade and we are confident that the target for delivery of 24,600 homes in 2022 will be met. Between April and June this year, planning permission was granted for 11,374 new homes. In the 12 months to the end of June, more than 54,000 new homes had been either built or commenced. Last year, 9,183 social homes were provided.

This Government's commitment to delivering increased housing supply was further evidenced last week in budget 2023. We have committed a record €4.5 billion in public funding next year for the provision of more social, affordable and cost-rental homes. A sum of €1.3 billion will be invested in supporting an overall package of measures to deliver more affordable housing, including 5,550 households supported to buy or rent at an affordable price. Housing for All has brought certainty for the many stakeholders involved in the delivery of housing in our country, despite the impact of the invasion of Ukraine. Since its launch over a year ago, we have introduced a wide range of initiatives including the First Home scheme, Project Tosaigh and Croí Cónaithe.

Budget 2023 extended the help-to-buy scheme to the end of 2024 to further support first-time buyers of new homes. It also introduced a rent tax credit to support taxpayers who are paying rent on their principal private residence, and a vacant homes tax. A wide range of other initiatives are under way, including a major overhaul of the planning process, a new land value sharing mechanism, promotion of innovation and productivity in housing construction and increased apprenticeships and overseas recruitment. All these reforms and measures will assist with the supply of housing and fundamentally reform the housing system in the country.

When the plan was published, it included a provision to review and update the actions annually to respond to any changes or emerging challenges. This review is now almost complete. It does not seek to change the fundamental policy direction, but allows us to respond to the significant challenges which have emerged since the plan was published, most notably the ongoing inflationary pressures. The review is focused on measures to activate and accelerate supply and will be considered by the Cabinet committee on housing at its next meeting on 10 October. The updated action plan will be published alongside the third quarter progress report in the coming weeks.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have little time left and five speakers. There will be less than one minute for each of them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government's refusal to raise the income thresholds for social housing or social housing supports means that thousands of people affected by the housing crisis are being denied any assistance. Here is an example communicated to me yesterday. Leaving out the name, the message stated the woman concerned, her husband and her two children were homeless in Nenagh. It went on to say the family had been told by the council that the woman earned too much to receive any help, with the result that these people are now staying in a tent. As winter approaches, she said she was very worried for two children, both of

whom are autistic, and how they will be able to manage.

In another communication the person spoke of already being stressed about returning on Saturday to emergency accommodation where the person concerned had been for four years. The person was back to sharing a room with their 14-year-old son. They said they were being left to rot in emergency accommodation with no way out and feels trapped. The person said they hate living in this country because the Government is doing nothing. This person is working but cannot afford to rent or buy a home. They are also affected by the income threshold . What are the Taoiseach and his Government going to do about this scandal where people in the situations I have described are even being denied the housing assistance payment, never mind social housing?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I fully support the Housing for All proposals. Unfortunately, they are not achieving results fast enough. In this context, might it be possible to accelerate a programme of modular housing or system-built houses for quick delivery, given that we continue to export such houses?

Deputy Mick Barry: Students nationwide will be walking out of their classes next Thursday, 13 October, at 11.11 a.m. They will be protesting at the lack of student accommodation and the Government's inaction in tackling the financial pressures bearing down on them. This State is expected to have a shortage of 20,000 student beds by 2024. The Government has failed to cap student rents. Meanwhile, the student contribution charge still stands at a whopping €2,000 and the reduction in the budget is only a once-off measure. Is the Taoiseach embarrassed that the nation's students feel the need to walk out of their classes in protest at the lack of sufficient action and support from his Government?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The number of people in homelessness in this State continues to rise. It is now approaching 11,000 people, which is a shocking figure. Will the Government please consider introducing a winter eviction ban as an emergency measure so that, in particular, children and families at risk of losing their homes will at least have some security over the winter and through Christmas? We have seen this being done in France and we are asking the Government to do it here.

Does the Taoiseach have any response regarding the report published by the Irish Refugee Council that raises concerns about the crisis in the Irish protection system, including the lack of appropriate accommodation for those coming here to seek international protection?

Deputy Paul Murphy: We know eviction bans work. They worked here during Covid. The number of homeless people came down consistently when the eviction ban was in place. We also know that an eviction ban is being introduced in Scotland this winter. When the Taoiseach was asked about this yesterday, he implied it could not be done because of the Constitution. I do not agree with that interpretation, but the response to that would be to have a referendum on having a right to housing and to insert such a provision in the Constitution. The Government promised a referendum on housing in the programme for Government. When will the referendum be held and when will the wording be announced? Will a referendum on the right to water be held alongside the referendum on housing?

The Taoiseach: Regarding the increase in income thresholds, the Minister is examining that with his Department. I hope to receive a update on progress at some stage.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have been hearing that for five years.

The Taoiseach: Did the Deputy say the person he referred to was not on the social housing list?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The person's income was over the threshold. No social housing support whatsoever-----

The Taoiseach: I have spoken to the Minister on this and work is under way on increasing the income thresholds.

I agree with Deputy Durkan. We should accelerate the use of modular homes and system-built housing. We need different types of housing, including increased use of timber-framed housing. Only 20% of housing here uses timber-frame construction, while it is 80% in Scotland. We need faster and more innovative approaches. We must also stop all the opposition to different housing types. It seems the first response, as opposed to the last response, is to oppose housing developments because of the mix in them or whatever. I find it incredible that we are in the middle of a crisis of this scale and that we have the number of people in need of housing that we do, and yet people are saying: "Delay, delay, delay".

On students, again there has been a reduction of €1,000 in the fees this year and it will be €500 in the next academic year. It is not a once-off measure. This has already been put into the budgetary figures. There is also a double payment for those receiving Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grants. Significant supports are being made available to students this year. There is an issue with student accommodation. I said this, and in recent days, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, has been working with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the universities in respect of building on the land the universities have to try to reduce the viability gap they say exists between what the they could build accommodation for and what they could reasonably expect students to pay for it.

Again, the Government has to intervene, just as it has right across the board in housing. The Government is the biggest actor in the area of housing right now, including in social housing, cost-rental housing, affordable housing and the Croí Cónaithe fund. No matter what scheme we look at, the Government is coming in to try to bridge viability gaps in the marketplace. We need to get more student accommodation built and we are committed to doing that.

Regarding the issue identified concerning a winter eviction ban, I made it clear that Covid gave us the context to do this legally. There are legal issues involved and that was all I raised yesterday. What I am saying is that these issues cannot be ignored. I hear what the Deputy is saying and I know the Minister keeps this under constant review. We did put in place a ban during Covid and we had a strong legal basis to do so. We are going to do everything we possibly can. The Minister has acted to make it clear that where tenants receiving HAP or RAS are in danger of being evicted, the local authorities can and should buy the house to prevent the eviction from taking place.

On the Irish Refugee Council, the figures on the Irish response this year are extraordinary. We are in a war-time situation and we must acknowledge that. That is why there is a huge challenge in respect of the numbers of people coming into the country. Even the figures for the normal international protection accommodation services, IPAS, route are significant, with about 15,000 people expected this year. This compares with the norm of 3,500. We also have 50,000 Ukrainians who have fled the war. That is the context we are in and it is causing great pressures.

I pay tribute to the civil servants, the local authorities and everybody who has responded to this incredibly difficult and challenging situation.

I will respond to the Deputy later regarding homelessness. There are other issues with homelessness in terms of presentations from within the European Economic Area, EEA, on a continuing basis and these are also impacting our emergency housing situation. Some of those arriving have large families, and that is ongoing. Not everything is as it seems either, but this is something we are determined to try to reduce.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.02 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.02 p.m. and resumed at 3.02 p.m.

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

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

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): First, I welcome Wendy and all from Bluestack, Donegal. Well done to all. I wish you all well. When I am up visiting, I hope I get into your new café. I heard you have a beautiful new café. I hope you have a lovely day here in Leinster House. It is fabulous. Take care, and welcome.

The Rural Independent Group was in possession. There are four speakers who have 12 and a half minutes, if Deputy O'Donoghue would like to start.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Acting Chairman and welcome the people in the Gallery.

Public protection can only happen when correct standards and education are put in place. I understand the main purpose of this Bill is to apply statutory regulation to 18 health groups so as to protect the public.

The Bill will provide a structure for the assessment and approval of training courses, examinations and qualifications which will put in place a proper development of education and training for certain health professions. At present, only five professions are subject to statutory registration: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, opticians and dentists.

The new legislation will provide for statutory registration of 18 other health professional groups. This will strengthen the existing legislation regarding registration of certain professions such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists. In addition, new legislation will be introduced for the registration of health and social care professions, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers and child workers.

Ultimately, the public can be confident that the professional treating them is qualified and competent. When all the registration boards are in place, it will be responsible for the regulation of approximately 25,000 professionals.

I welcome anything that we can do for training for professionals in the health professions as long as it coincides with accountability, which it will, for all the health professionals. We have seen incidents within healthcare, from minor to major. The people who did not register those incidents were not made accountable. Legal funding was put in place to protect the people who did not report these incidents, as well as for the confidential agreements that were put in place to protect those people, but not to protect the people to whom the incidents happened. I welcome anything that will regulate and bring accountability to people in the health sector and all sectors as long as the protections are put in place for the betterment and the future.

On numerous occasions I have brought up heavy-heartedly the situation in University Hospital Limerick, UHL. For many years, it has been a problem. I had a meeting again during the week. The people I met told me that the next time, they want to meet me with their legal representatives. I will not be frightened by that. I am here to protect the people. I am here to protect the staff and the doctors, etc., in the hospital. We also need to make sure the management system is protected. I hope that the Bill goes some of the way towards doing that. I hope there will be accountability within the health sector that gives confidence to carers, workers, doctors and nurses and ensures they are not afraid of a management structure that is there to try to stop them from doing their job and improving the system.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Deputy Michael Collins and I are sharing time.

Obviously, the Government is committed to strengthening the existing legislation regarding the registration of certain professions such as doctors, nurses and pharmacists. In addition, new legislation is being introduced for the registration of health and social care professionals, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers and childcare workers. Of course, we all realise the importance of people working with the elderly or with children in all the different agencies of the State or elsewhere.

We have seen a horrendous case where children under the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, were put in danger and in harm's way. Their parents took their children to HSE representatives who were supposed to nurture and bring on those children in the best way possible, but that did not happen. The exact opposite happened. Those children were harmed while under the care of a designated person appointed by the State. That would be every parent's nightmare. It happened on all of our watch.

I dealt with parents who came to me and said that they were worried about their child. The child was regressing - the child was under care but there was something wrong. We were all hammering away at it. I am so grateful to the whistleblowers and those involved in journalism and other avenues of life who helped to bring this to light.

I am grateful to the HSE. I previously named Mr. Michael Fitzgerald, who did excellent work in County Kerry in dealing with the situation there. I want the same care and consideration to be given to the parents and children from north Kerry. This situation has been at hand in south Kerry, but it is a big worry. It is a big problem but it highlights how something can go wrong.

I know in my heart and soul that nobody in the Government, in the Department of Health or in the HSE set out to harm a child, but it happened. That is frightening. We have to do everything we can to ensure it will not happen again.

The primary purpose of the statutory registration is to protect and guide members of the

public so that they can be confident that the professional treating them is fully qualified and competent. Registration also provides the facility for legal action against the very small number of professionals who may harm patients or clients and bring their profession into disrepute through professional misconduct or serious illness.

The legislation for professionals already registered and for the health and social care professionals being registered for the first time will provide for consumer representation on the relevant statutory bodies. I suppose it is about building confidence. The CAMHS issue is one of the issues that would highlight why this legislation is necessary.

There is another thing that I could not let go while I have the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte. It comes under the broad umbrella of what we are discussing, which is the delivery of services. I am sure the Minister of State is aware of the crisis we have with home help at the moment. I have my ordinary little filing system here. It might seem rough, held together as it is with a rubber band, but, between this book and my head, I do not do too badly. A great many people in my constituency have been allocated so many hours of home help in their homes, but that home help is not being delivered to them. The reason it is not is that we do not have the people to hand to provide the service. I am in no way coming in here and saying to the Minister of State that this is her fault; she knows I am not. What I am saying is that it is a problem that I have, that she has, that Deputy Michael Collins has and that everyone else has. It is horrendous to think we have older people and vulnerable people at home, in their houses, without this service. Their ordinary houses are their castles. If I were sick, God knows I would rather be in my own little bothán than in a hospital. Nursing homes and community hospitals are great, but what people want at the end of their time is to be in their own bed, alongside their own fire, if the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, would leave them keep lighting it. They need care and services, and we are failing to provide those services. I just wanted to use this opportunity to bring that to the Minister of State's attention.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022 was published on 16 August on the Houses of the Oireachtas website. The Bill seeks to amend existing legislation in respect of registration-related issues which affect certain cohorts of registrants with the Medical Council and the health and social care professionals council, CORU.

I know that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is not here but I thank him. I talked last week in my budget speech about getting neurologist nurses, especially in respect of Parkinson's disease. The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, was very much involved in that also, and I acknowledge that 100% because this is a fight that has been going on for many years by those who suffer Parkinson's in particular and who had no nurse. I assure the Minister of State that it is money well spent. It will save money in the long run in respect of people who had no help and no one to talk to. Now, it is to be hoped that Parkinson's sufferers will have one-to-one, direct contact with specialist nurses. I thank Tony Wilkinson from west Cork. The Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, have probably met him on many occasions. He has been outside the gates of the Dáil with me over recent years and inside in the audiovisual room on several occasions fighting for the cause. He is after being nominated for the Cork volunteer of the year award. I think he has won it, rather than being nominated, so I congratulate him. He fully deserves that because, while he is a Parkinson's sufferer himself, he has given his time freely down through the years to others. He has been their nurse, even though he is not a professional nurse. He has been the person they go to, talk to and seek advice from.

While we are talking about professional healthcare workers who take care of us, I am still getting emails and phone calls from people who are supposed to receive the €1,000 recognition payment, which is a fair bit of a mess. The payment went to many of the workers directly employed by the HSE in hospitals but has not gone to those working in nursing homes and many more sectors. They have not got that €1,000. I heard the Minister for Health say a couple of weeks ago that this needs to be resolved but, sadly, it has not been. In some cases, in some hospitals, many improvements still need to be made. Maybe it is not fair to pick a case, but I got a call this morning from a friend or family member of a constituent, a young person, who is in Cork University Hospital, CUH, after major bowel surgery last week. Her treatment there, I am told, has been appalling. She has no call bell, they have forgotten to give her pain relief and they put her in a room with a Covid patient. She had breathing difficulties all weekend, and now there is a clot in her lung. Would you believe that her husband had to ring the hospital over the weekend to get a nurse to her room, and her bedclothes were not changed for three days? I would suggest that all is not well in the system. I think many staff in hospitals are massively overworked and under pressure. When you are sick, you are sick, and that is the only time you call on the system, and it fails.

While the Minister of State is here, I will ask her the same question I asked the Taoiseach more than once last week, when I did not get a very clear answer. I asked him for a cast-iron guarantee that the seven beds in the mental health unit in Bantry General Hospital would not be lost. The HSE has appealed the decision the Mental Health Commission made. That will go to some district court. At the same time, there will be some improvements, or so the HSE has told us, but the question is, when the improvements are finished, will there be 18 beds in the mental health unit in Bantry General Hospital? I am disappointed that the Taoiseach and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, were in Bantry General Hospital and went to the medical side of the hospital, which is fabulous and top-class, but both of them walked past the mental health unit. They will say that we have to give people respect and their privacy, but we cannot afford to lose one bed there. I am looking for a cast-iron guarantee. I looked for it from the Taoiseach last week and did not get it.

We talk about pharmacists. One thing I know about pharmacists is that they are willing to do a lot more. We are told that the doctors are overstretched and that there are no more doctors coming into rural places, but the pharmacists are willing to do a lot more work and they have not been given it. I do not know why. I could keep going for another hour but I will conclude.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome this legislation and the opportunity to speak on it. I thank the Library and Research Service for its detailed paper on the Bill and for the brief we got, which has been very helpful.

It has been said many times what the Bill involves. There are really six kernel points that have been set out for us. The Bill proposes to give effect to them. First, it makes amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. For the benefit of people who might not have grasped what this is about, I will explain. I am going to go around in a circle in a moment as to why this is necessary and I will mention the report following the Dr. Neary scandal. Then I will come to the dentists, who have identified serious gaps in the regulation. The Minister of State may be aware of this in the context of Oranmore, County Galway, and what has been brought to our attention. It is important to point out what is good. There are six points. The Bill seeks to ensure that social care workers applying for registration are required to meet the same standards as other professions registered with CORU. That is very basic. It seeks to provide that the Minister for Health may prescribe or vary by order the qualifications required by des-

ignated professionals. That is very practical and we need that. Then there are amendments to the Medical Practitioners Act 2007, which I understand arose directly from the Neary scandal, among other changes the Government was trying to bring in. In that regard, the Bill seeks to provide that persons operating under the functions of the Medical Council will have appropriate immunity, which is absolutely necessary. Then the Bill seeks to provide that holders of UK medical degrees can access intern training posts in Ireland. That is absolutely vital. The Bill seeks to provide for the continued provision of a route to registration on the general division of the Medical Council register for certain cohorts of internationally trained doctors. I am not sure if I will get a chance to come back to that, but it is something I will keep a close eye on in respect of certain doctors and certain countries. Finally, the Bill seeks to provide for amendments to support the performance of triage, investigation and adjudication of complaints under the principal Act. Again, that is very important and something that is clearly missing when we come to the Dental Council of Ireland and what it identifies in its submission, which we all have. I welcome that and, as I said, I am grateful for the work that has gone into this.

I am not sure why there has been such a delay. It is now 2022. There was a health strategy in 2000 and then an Act in 2005. CORU was set up in 2007 and we are still struggling to bring openness, accountability and monitoring and to ensure competence and ensure there is a proper complaints procedure that is able to deal with complaints quickly and to the satisfaction of those making the complaints, once they are bona fide complaints. It has taken this long to do it, and I am not sure why.

Let me deal with the inquiry and the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 to give context to this. I know that the Minister of State is multitasking again, and I say "well done" to her on doing so in so many roles. I have before me some of the report of the inquiry that was set up and signed by Judge Harding Clark at the time. I think that was in January 2006. The Medical Practitioners Act was enacted in 2007 and now we are seeking to amend that legislation to make the system better. Back in 1998 a very brave midwife broke ranks. Of course she was educated outside of the country, in Northern Ireland or England, and she drew attention to the high rates of Caesarean sections being performed in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. Finally, a non-statutory inquiry, with one member, was set up and we have the final report from Judge Harding Clark. I would advise every woman and man to read that report because it highlights how this happened and how it could happen again tomorrow if we do not learn from it, if our regulatory system is not fit for purpose - and we are trying to make it fit for purpose - and if there is not a duty to speak out. When I quote from the report, it will be clear why I say that. The process began in 1998 and continued up to the point at which the report was published on 25 January 2006. The inquiry was set up by order in 2004 and took less than two years to report.

Given that I have the time, which is unusual, I am going to read out what the inquiry established. Judge Harding Clark writes:

> It is a story set in a time of unquestioning submission to authority, whether religious or civil, when nurses and doctors were in abundant supply and permanent jobs were few and treasured.

The point being made is that precarious employment was a feature in the medical profession, so there was an extra burden on people not to speak out or they would lose their jobs. Indeed, one or two brave souls who did raise questions found that their contracts were not renewed. This happened not too long ago in Ireland. Judge Harding Clark, having described it as "a story ... of unquestioning submission to authority, whether religious or civil", continues:

> It is the story of a relatively small but very busy hospital which operated by a separate and unique set of rules, and was accountable to a religious community rather than to objective medical standards.

That is what we are trying to do here. I will come back to that in the context of the Dental Council. The inquiry found that establishing the rate of Caesareans carried out, which was unacceptably high, was difficult because "key registers were missing" but that the "numbers are truly shocking". I will not take up time reading out the numbers but Judge Harding Clark described them as "truly shocking". The report goes on to say that "No one made a formal complaint and no one questioned openly", except the brave midwife who went along with her friend to the solicitor for the then Eastern Health Board. I want to compliment the man in charge at the Eastern Health Board at the time who took the whistleblower's disclosure very seriously and followed up on it. It was the former Eastern Health Board, from what I understand, although I never met the man and do not know him.

The report goes on to talk about Dr. Neary's fall from grace but I am not going to go into any of that at the moment. The report also refers to inadequate supervision as follows:

> He came to work in a unit which lacked leadership, peer review, audit or critical capacity. It is the story of a doctor with a deep fault line, which was recognised early but never corrected. It is a story [in the Judge's view] of a committed doctor with a misplaced sense of confidence in his own ability. It is a story of deep misunderstanding and misapplication of clinical independence.

These are the actual findings and the consequences of same.

> There was very little turnover of staff during that period. Job insecurity may have influenced a climate of silence. Consultants could, and did cause nurses to be transferred. Many witnesses recounted to us that a junior paediatrician encountered Dr. Neary's displeasure causing her contract not to be renewed.

The report goes on to deal with statistics and so on, and finds that "No one seemed to know the actual numbers or suspect that anything was amiss or unusual". Of course, we had the usual internal review by three colleagues, who upheld everything that Dr. Neary did. They subsequently regretted that and Judge Harding Clark acknowledges that regret. However, they upheld everything he did and said there was nothing out of the ordinary. Through all of that, the person from the Eastern Health Board persisted, as did the whistleblower, even though it was very, very difficult.

I will finish with this point in the report: "Dr. Neary and Dr. O'Brien were reprimanded on a number of occasions for rudeness or abrupt manner". One of the recommendations was that they would learn how to say "hello" and shake hands with patients. That puts things in context. According to the judge, "Very few midwives volunteered to speak to us." She also found that notes had "mysteriously disappeared" which meant that a considerable number of former patients were "unable to have a review". I mention all of that, and there is more that I am not mentioning in the report, because it is really worth a read in the sense of explaining the blinding silence and the failure to recognise mistakes. The point is that no matter what legislation or regulations we bring in, they have to be matched by courage and more importantly, by the creation of an atmosphere that rewards people who come forward. That is the challenge for every institution and we are utterly failing.

In that context, I want to go to Galway, not to be parochial but because as the Minister of State knows, a serious problem has arisen there in relation to an orthodontist. This is currently the subject of an application to the High Court which I will not mention. In the meantime, the person is not able to practise, by their own admission. Over 200 families are affected, with people at various stages of orthodontic treatment left in the lurch. We have all been at meetings about this in Galway. My colleagues Deputy Grealish and Senator Kyne have both raised it in these Houses. Cross-party, we have listened to the concerns of the people on the ground who have been left without an orthodontist. Not alone is it terrible for the families who have paid money and lost it, and will now have to incur additional expense, but the difficulty is that the Dental Council has told us that the obligation is on that person, who clearly cannot practise. I am not commenting on a court case; it is accepted that the person cannot practise. How could the ethical obligation be on that person, be it a man or a woman, to sort out the problem when they are in trouble? There is a huge gap here. I will be using the word "gap" a lot in relation to dental services, which is not helpful and is a bad pun.

I will now turn to the Dental Council's submission regarding legislative change in dental regulation. We are being told that the legislation before us today is going to help with that. I see a reference to the 1985 Act for dentists but I see nothing since in relation to dentists. The executive summary of the submission points out that the council has an obligation to bring matters to the Minister's attention. The Dental Council is making this submission to the Minister under the relevant section of the Act. It is obliged to advise the Minister on all matters. The submission argues that there are two gaps in the 1985 Act that pose a significant risk to public safety. The first is the failure to oblige registrants to maintain their ongoing competence and the second is the failure to regulate dental practices. The submission holds that patient safety cannot be assured and patients have been harmed because of this failure to regulate. The council goes on to look in detail at how this happened. Indeed, it mentions Dr. Neary in the context of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007. Luckily and fortunately, we do not have the equivalent of a Dr. Neary in the dental profession, or at least not identified. However, I hope we do not need that to happen for us to take the appropriate action and update the 1985 Act, which we have utterly failed to deal with thus far.

While registrants, that is dentists going on the dental register, are ethically obliged to maintain an ongoing competence, this is not underpinned by legislation. The council goes on in its detailed report, which I have read, to highlight the fact that two thirds of dentists in Ireland are not Irish trained. That is not a fact to comment on, except it makes it more complex to recognise the training and whether people are competent. There is no legal obligation in the Bill to keep up with competency.

The smile agus sláinte dental strategy is 22 years old . It is a bizarre name. There are gaps in my memory regarding it. I am highlighting this today. How could this be allowed to happen? What has happened since this was presented to the Minister in October 2021? Was there any possibility in the Bill to make provision for this? I find it very difficult to have somebody from the Dental Council telling us that the obligation is on the dentist who is in trouble and clearly cannot perform, for whatever reason, to take the appropriate action. That is a major gap in the system. What is to be done about that? Perhaps someone could give us an update on that.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State and welcome the Bill. It is important that social care workers applying for registration are required to meet the same safe standard as all other CORU professions. I welcome that work is being done by the Social Care Workers Registration Board to ensure that the registration of social care workers will open

on 30 November 2023. I wish this had happened in 2022, as promised. I have concerns about the hundreds of social care students who do not know whether their degrees will be accredited. This is because new entrants to such courses of study must have an approved qualification to work in the sector from November 2023. The registration process will begin a two-year transition period for existing practitioners to apply to register with CORU, while grandparenting will apply.

I welcome that on 30 November 2025 the title "social care worker" will become legally protected in Ireland. As part of the work to open the register and set the title in law, it has become clear that the registration route provided for existing social care workers who do not hold the necessary qualifications differs from other professions and this is problematic and unsafe. I ask the House to support a Bill that fixes this problem.

I have been contacted by social care students who are studying in Carlow and were conducting their placements when the Covid-19 crisis began. Their placements were immediately suspended, yet CORU stated that students had to complete their placement hours to be recognised as qualified social care workers. The question was then asked as to how teachers, nurses and doctors can be awarded degrees while social care students are not. The Bill will fix this type of inequality, which is important.

The Bill will also help with our staffing challenges in the medical sector. We have long had a tradition of doctors moving between Ireland and the UK to train, especially when it can often be cheaper to study abroad. Due to the departure of the UK from the EU, holders of UK medical degrees are prevented from accessing medical intern training posts in Ireland. We have to make sure that medical degrees completed wholly or mainly in the UK meet the requirements for registration as qualified interns in Ireland. Such students need to be registered in the proper way. It is vital that holders of UK medical degrees can access intern training posts in Ireland. This urgent issue needs to be addressed.

A degree must meet the criteria set by the Medical Council for recognition, and it is important that those who study in the UK meet the requirements for recognition for intern qualifications. We must also maintain a route to registration on the general division of the Medical Council register for certain cohorts of internationally trained doctors, and the Bill will also address that.

I welcome this important Bill. Previous speakers have mentioned GPs. In Carlow, we are crying out for GPs, dentists and social care workers. Previous speakers spoke about home help. We need more home help. It is important that this happens as soon as possible.

Deputy Colm Burke: I welcome the Bill and thank the Minister of State and her Department for the work done in progressing it. It is important that regulation and legislation be kept up-to-date at all times. This is the third or fourth Bill we have dealt with regarding registration. The CORU figures for 2017 to 2021, which include social workers, medical scientists and physiotherapists, are interesting. The number registered has increased from 12,574 in 2017 to more than 22,866 in 2021. There has been a significant change in the number of physiotherapists registered. The figure for 2017 was 1,782 and it is now 5,323. It is welcome news that this rate of registration is taking place. It is about making sure that there are checks and balances in every area of the healthcare sector, whether that is social care workers, people working in the community, GPs, general doctors in hospitals or nursing staff. It is important that there are checks, balances and regulation in place.

One major change that has occurred over the past 25 years in Ireland is the reliance on overseas medical personnel across the board, including nursing staff, doctors and care assistants. We are running into problems in some areas such as nursing homes, which are finding it difficult to get nurses and care assistants. It is fine bringing people in, but it also need to be ensured they have the correct training and qualifications and expertise required.

The number of doctors registered in Ireland has increased from 18,000 in 2013 to in excess of 24,000 today, an increase of 33% in less than ten years. That is welcome, but it is important that we use them to best effect. We need to ask whether work is being done by general doctors that other professionals could do instead. That is one of the structures we need to examine in our hospitals. I worry in particular about whether doctors who are qualified for less than three years are doing jobs that could easily be done by experienced and trained nurses. We have a significant advantage in this country in that we have expertise in the nursing profession and we do not appear to have given nurses a greater role in the management of patients. Doctors could then do other work and this would make the system more efficient.

When people come in from overseas, it is important that we make it as easy as possible for them to register while, at the same time, making sure that they have reached a certain standard. I heard of a case where a junior doctor was taken on and had given the impression that they had worked in a hospital in the UK. After a week or two, people became concerned and found the doctor had only worked as an observer in a hospital in the UK. That can easily happen, but the issue did not arise in the interview process. That is why we need personnel to be monitored carefully. They are managing people's care and the wrong decision can make a huge difference to how that care is provided and managed. Another important issue has occurred with training. While we are very much tied into the UK system in respect of medical training and a number of countries are very much involved in medical training together, there is a different type of training throughout Europe, even in EU member states, and it is different again outside Europe. Doctors in many jurisdictions are not required to do basic stuff that doctors here are required to do and even though they are registered, these doctors may have difficulties in dealing with the challenges when they work in a hospital here. It is important that we make sure the regulation and registration is properly put in place and that there is supervision thereafter to make sure that, at all times, the best possible care is being given to our people in our hospitals.

I know the Minister of State is making a plan on the issue of Irish people who qualify here but we are losing quite a number of Irish people who are qualifying in various areas of nursing or as care assistants or doctors and we need to do much more to keep them here, rather than relying on getting people from abroad. When we bring people from abroad, especially from countries outside the EU, we are taking from their medical services. We need to do much more about keeping our trained staff here.

I have raised on a number of occasions at meetings of the Joint Committee on Health the need to do exit surveys. We are not doing enough exit surveys of our staff. Why are they leaving? What is the reason? Is it that the training they are getting is not what they want? Do they feel there is no opportunity for further promotion? How do we deal with that?

I was recently talking to a nurse who had left a hospital in Ireland to work in London. She started off at level 5 within the nursing profession in London and she can climb to level 7. There is a clear pathway for her to do so. The other issue she raised with me was the ratio of senior nurses to nurses qualified less than four years. No matter what day of the week one is working in the hospital, there is a set ratio of people who are qualified for quite a long time and

those who are recently qualified. She found that did not happen in Ireland. It varied from day to day. One might have one senior person to 15 or 16 juniors one day and five senior people to ten newly-qualified people the next.

That applies to doctors and consultants as well. Consultants have difficulty giving the time that trainees require in certain hospitals. I heard of one junior doctor who had a very good consultant working with her who made sure she had an opportunity to come to theatre and be involved in the whole process from the ward right through to theatre. The next hospital the junior doctor went on to, she found that she was told to go for this and that but got very little training. It is important that there should be a structure for training that is implemented and there are checks and balances.

However, I very much welcome this Bill. It is very important that the proper regulation should be in place but we also have to deal with the delay in registration because that is a complaint I get. Sometimes people get very frustrated with the time period to get the registration through from start to finish. We need to do something. It may be the case that the various bodies require additional staff. I heard of general doctors going to New Zealand and within two weeks, they were registered with the medical council there, whereas when they came back home they found it took 12 weeks. That is going back a few years ago. I am not sure what the up-to-date position is. We need to follow up on these issues and make sure there are no glitches in the system. I thank the Minister of State for bringing forward the legislation and I look forward to working with her on it.

Deputy Chris Andrews: While the Bill is largely technical in nature, it is very much welcome. Many students leave Ireland annually to go to Britain to study their chosen medical degree. It is only right and fitting that the Bill removes the road blocks before people who hold a British medical degree to availing of medical intern posts here. This is the right direction in which we need to move to attract more doctors into the HSE.

Our health service faces continuing pressure brought on by inadequate staffing. While the Bill is a step in the right direction, much stronger measures are needed. We are losing Irish doctors at an unbelievable rate. Some 402 of them obtained Australian visas in the first five months of this year alone. That is nearly doubt the figure for the whole of 2019.

While this may be a shocking statistic to many, it is hardly surprising to those working in healthcare. A recent survey of non-consultant hospital doctors carried out by the Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, clearly showed why so many are leaving. A staggering 96.8% of those doctors have experienced mental health conditions relating to or made worse by their work and working conditions. Some 80% had concerns for their own mental health and 78% were at risk of burning out.

While the Bill falls short in its failure to provide regulation of the home care sector, the sector is in desperate need of professional regulation. This call is not only being made by workers and unions, but by HIQA. One family I know has serious issues retaining home care staff. I raised this previously. The individual needs two carers at a time and uses a care company that appears to be very well run and fair to staff and pays well. Of course, the company is picking up the slack from the HSE and carrying out the work on its behalf. The HSE will call the company and ask whether it has a carer to go out to this family and the carer goes out to look after the individual. However, there is a difficulty for the family and the care company whom I met the week before last. The company said that while it was doing everything it can by paying staff

well, giving them all the necessary training and working with them through the various training required, it is losing them to HSE roles and nursing homes. The company has staff for six or seven months before they leave. One carer would not show up and another carer cannot do everything by himself or herself.

I know that people are saying it is the sector and staff are not being paid well enough. Maybe that is the case but there are companies that are paying well enough and they should not be penalised for being good employers. It has a considerable impact on them because they are getting dragged in by the people who are not paying the proper rates or being good employers.

I know it is complex but families should not be subjected to this. The alternative is State care, which is significantly more expensive. I know the Minister of State knows and realises this. She has not come down from some strange planet. She works with people in this area and has heard it more than I have. However, we very much need to ensure there is some level of fair play for care companies. Staff should get visas. People leave for the HSE to get visas. If that could be applied to home care, maybe it would make a difference.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Amending the regulation of health and social care professionals by the Medical Council and CORU is the subject of the measures in the Bill. The amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, Medical Practitioners Act 2007 and Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act 2020 are very welcome. The Bill will restore the ability of holders of British medical degrees to take up intern training posts in this State. This is essential for attracting sorely needed internationally-trained doctors into the HSE and protecting all-Ireland movement of students and professionals, especially in the health and social care sectors. A report published by the education committee on third-level student cross-Border enrolment in Ireland exposed the low levels that exist. It showed how partition continues to have a huge effect on where students go. Brexit posed, and continues to pose, a threat to the low level of students we see going North or coming South to study.

During my research for that report, the RCSI and others raised the issue of the effect Brexit had had on the mutual recognition of qualifications on this island and between Ireland and Britain. Prospective students must have full confidence that their qualifications will be recognised in the other jurisdictions. It is also essential for the functioning of a variety of sectors. It is incumbent on all stakeholders to work together to minimise the Border's ability to separate us and limit the education options for students and employment opportunities for graduates. This Bill is a step towards addressing those concerns but more needs to be done. Guarding against any hardening of the Border centred on maintaining an absence of physical infrastructure and frictionless trade and this justifiably became an important political issue at national and international level. However, the public discourse did not always show the degree to which the Border is present and exists as a very real barrier in many aspects of people's lives in its current form.

I echo the comments made by my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, on the regulation of home care workers. Home care workers continue to operate in an unregulated manner. Workers in the sector know that this has a negative effect on employment standards and pay. People in receipt of home care hours and their families also deserve to know that the sector is properly regulated. Many of these people are vulnerable and should have these standard safeguards. HIQA has repeatedly made these calls but they seem to be falling on deaf ears. The absence of formal recognition for home care is directly connected to the shortage of home care workers. I am constantly dealing with difficult cases where people are awarded home care hours but are forced to survive without the service because the workers simply are not there. The Minister

of State is well aware of that as many of those cases land on her desk. The Government's hands-off approach and the HSE's outsourcing of home care to private providers has failed. Do Deputies recall when we had a good home help and home care service across communities? Everybody was happy and people got an hour and knew they were worth an hour. Then the HSE started chopping it down to half an hour and less than that. It has been an absolute failure. Proper regulation as well as secure, well-paid employment conditions are long overdue.

Many Deputies, including the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, have talked about the difficulties relating to the GP shortage but that has not happened by accident. We have not had proper workforce planning or the number of places we need in the third-level sector to make it easier for people. I meet people all the time who desperately wanted to do medicine but could not. I meet nurses all the time who did a post-leaving certificate course but only 3% of them go on to do nursing because we do not have the places for them. Joined-up thinking is needed in this regard. Our not doing that is putting people in jeopardy and is a terrible indictment of us.

On a related matter, I raise with the Minister of State the care students from the Dublin Business School, DBS, who were left in abeyance because they could not get the CORU approval earlier this year. Many of those students are still in limbo. I have written to the Minister to ask him what the options are for them. I am aware there are options for a limited number of them but approximately 80 are impacted. They are all social care workers who need to be in the system. This block should not be put in their way. Schools such as DBS need to step up to the mark to ensure these courses are accredited before they sell them to students. After all, the schools make a lot of money from them. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could give us an update on that as well. I thank her for the Bill and welcome it.

Deputy Martin Browne: It is encouraging to see some movement on what appears to be the seemingly insurmountable problems inherent in our health system when it comes to the provision of doctors. This Bill seeks to remove the obstacles for people who hold a British medical degree from availing of medical intern posts here and to ensure a route to registration on the general division for international doctors. While it a positive avenue to go down, it does not take from the fact that Irish doctors are leaving this country at a rate of knots. This has become such a problem that our health system is increasingly difficult to access.

The rate at which doctors are leaving is summed up in figures that show 402 work visas were issued by Australia to Irish doctors in the first five months of 2022. Given that the figure was 272 three years ago, it is apparent that far from being addressed adequately, the Government is overseeing a rapidly worsening situation that is leaving communities and regions with a severe shortage of doctors. That is where the problem is being experienced and while the provisions of the Bill are welcome, they do not address the fundamental problem of our doctors are leaving. The Government, through various policy failures across the sectors, has created a situation that leaves talented graduates with little choice but to seek better conditions and opportunities abroad.

In my constituency of Tipperary, we have a minor injuries unit in Cashel where the availability of a doctor has been in the lap of the gods for much of this year. Earlier this year we had a situation where I would get word that the unit was to close temporarily. No information was given to local representatives and when I inquired about it, the issue stemmed from the inability to replace the doctor. Despite assurances the matter would be resolved and that Deputies would be regularly informed of any changes that might occur in the future, the unit's hours of operation continued to be *ad hoc* and dependent on the availability of the replacement doctor. This

kind of uncertainty is unacceptable, as is the lack of communication on the matter. However, it ultimately comes to down to the fact that under the Government and its predecessors, the health service is an unattractive prospect for the professionals we need, including doctors and nurses. Any measures that seek to boost the workforce are, therefore, welcome but the Government also needs to act to retain health professionals that have qualified here, and who would ideally stay here among family and friends, were they to be appreciated by the State and if the housing and services they needed were available and accessible.

A further example of where the Government needs to get its act together can be seen in what is not in this Bill. It does not provide for regulation of the home care sector. We have heard HIQA calling for regulation of home care services and that is something the unions and those working in the sector have called for as well. What about properly recognising the work home care workers do and the contribution they make to keeping people in their homes in their own communities? Surely if they were properly paid and given good conditions and pensions, which they are not currently, this would be seen as an attractive career and we could keep people out of hospital and long-term residential care. I appreciate getting the time to speak on this matter and hope the Government will take on board the points made by the Opposition.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Like my colleagues, I welcome this Bill from the point of view of its dealing with a particular problem we have with people who work in the health and social care sector and have certain British qualifications that should be recognised. However, as Deputy Browne said, we have issues with a large number of health workers from nurses and doctors through to people who work as physiotherapists, speech and language therapists in acute hospitals and emergency departments and right though to disability services. As was said earlier, the workforce planning might not have been done. We do not have the places there. We have huge gaps that are creating a great impact on families out there. This also affects us as Members as we must deal with people who sometimes find themselves in difficult circumstances. We have no choice but to deal with this situation because we cannot leave it to continue as is. We are foisting far too much difficulty and pain onto people. The Minister of State will be aware from the disability sector of the necessity for constant, consistent interventions that must happen as early as possible. There are particular issues with the children's disability network teams and so on. Significant work must be done to put in place a system that can deliver for our people.

4 o'clock

I join other speakers in mentioning that we have a major issue with home care provision. While accepting that funding has been in place for a long time, we just do not have the people in place to provide the care that people need. All of us in this Chamber are well aware of families who have come to us just to seek enough help to allow their loved ones to stay in their home which is something we should all be facilitating.

I have had many discussions with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, about the task force. I had understood that draft proposals were to go to Cabinet and should have been dealt with in the budget. Does the Minister of State think that this will provide us with some of the proposals? I know there were many things, including tax breaks, to facilitate certain people to work in the health sector and, in particular, to make themselves available for weekend work. We all know there were issues regarding expenses. There were multiple issues. There were issues with visas for people coming from abroad.

I agree with Deputy Martin Browne that we need to do absolutely everything we can to

keep those who have been trained to the highest level in the State. We should support them as much as we can to keep them working in the system. We know we have major issues with the number of doctors, etc. We have the ongoing issue of Navan hospital and the concern over closing an accident and emergency department which would put pressure on hospitals such as Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, which is already under serious pressure. It has led to many people with a medical background stating that this is just not a solution at this point in time.

We need to do the due diligence on all the positions we need filled in our health service. We then need to ensure we have the throughput to get people working in those settings. As much as we welcome this legislation, it is but a small step on a much longer journey. If we start to deal with individual gaps in the system, there are multiple gaps in the system we could all mention.

I ask the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, to update me on diabetic services, particularly in Louth County Hospital. There are issues with the required education programmes and ensuring that we have the facility to provide people with insulin pumps, etc., to allow them to live their lives fully and play their part. There are too many gaps at this time.

There is a wider issue which I have raised previously. It was raised with me by a locum working in pharmacies throughout the Louth area. I think it was in Drogheda where a lady who was on the drug payment scheme was late picking up something for a very serious illness she had. She had been taking her medication every second day to save money. She had previously been on a medical card but it had been refused. This locum made the point that he had seen a number of people who had lost their medical cards. In some cases, they had not realised they had lost their medical cards until they had gone into pharmacies. This lady did not have the €80 she needed to pay for her medication. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis we need to address this very specific problem. I understand the locum paid the cost himself because he felt he had not gone into the job to refuse to provide someone with medication.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is a very important issue but is not strictly relevant.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am well aware of that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the importance but for everybody, we are just----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I beg forgiveness.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome any Bill that will help to strengthen and make our health service better. I understand the need to regulate and ensure that the patient receives the best treatment at all times because we are all fine until we get sick. When people present with some problem, they need to be treated properly. In that vein I must mention the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in Kerry. The problem of teenagers and young adults being overmedicated appeared in south Kerry some months ago and now it is manifesting in north Kerry. My concern now is that this may be widespread throughout the country. Is it the policy of the HSE to just drug people up in order to calm them down or whatever? If that is so, I do not think it was right to do that. In south Kerry, a junior doctor was blamed, but now it is in north Kerry.

People have problems at the accident and emergency department in University Hospital Kerry in Tralee with the queues and all that is going on there. What has been allowed to happen

and allowed not to happen in that hospital is totally unsavoury. We in the hinterland of Kerry, all the way down into Cahersiveen and Valentia Island, and even people from parts of north-west Cork and west Limerick, depend on the hospital so much. People who become sick are waiting for hours or even days. Elderly people, some 90 years of age, have sometimes been on a trolley for a day, a day and a half or two days. Recently a 92-year-old woman spent two and a half days on a trolley.

Other speakers have mentioned this issue. It is the natural desire of elderly people to stay in their homes for as long as they can. They feel they are being sent to the departure lounge if they have to go into a nursing home for the end of their days. They are really worried that the end is near. If they had home help, they could stay in their homes much longer. The problem is that people get an allocation for the extra time they need, but then no one turns up.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This is a very important issue, but we are talking about the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Where is the regulation here?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Perhaps the Deputy can tell us, but that is what the Bill is about. The issue he has raised is very important, but it is not directly related to the Bill.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I know the man in front of you directed you to take me to task about it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Would you-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have been here for a while and everyone else mentioned it. It is as much a problem for me-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I picked up-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----as an elected Member-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I agree with the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----of this Chamber to raise something that is not happening and to raise an issue that has let people down. I have a proposal to make on it. I realise as much as anyone else that the staff are not there and the HSE cannot get them. Thousands of Ukrainian people have arrived on our shores. Could the English-speaking people from this country be trained up? I believe they have cars and everything. Could they be trained up to become part of the home help force even in Kerry? Just the English-speaking ones, I realise it would not work going into a house to elderly people if they did not understand the people.

We have a shortage of consultants. As a result, procedures are not happening and people are languishing and suffering adverse effects due to different consultants not being available. One man can only do so much, whatever his area is. Likewise we have a shortage of GPs in every aspect of Kerry, including south Kerry; every area of it. I am only wondering what we can do as elected Members here to ensure that we have an adequate number of GPs. God almighty, if some sick and elderly person at home rings a GP's office today, Wednesday, they will be very lucky to be seen next Monday. The Minister of State knows that hours and time are important to people when they are sick.

We are training as many nurses as any other country but they are not staying. Why? Are we not paying them properly? We hear they are going to Dubai and Australia. I happen on to an awful lot of what was long ago called an American wake, when someone was leaving our shores to go abroad for employment. I am happening across a lot of these now. They are going to Australia, Dubai and everywhere. Can we not do something to entice them or reward them sufficiently that they do not have to think about that again? For a long time we did have enough professionals. We are here today discussing regulating professionals but the sad fact is that we do not have enough in all the areas I mentioned.

Carers, those who are caring for family members, are not really being appreciated at home. They do not get sufficient time off or whatever. It is a tough struggle for some of them who find themselves minding a wife, a husband or some sick child, God help us, as a result of accidents and different things.

I have requested this before. It happens farmers a lot that they have an accident or get sick and find themselves in hospital. Then there is a panic that they do not have a medical card. They apply for a medical card but it takes a number of weeks to process, and we all recognise that. I am asking that from the day the person makes the application, if they qualify for the medical card later, that the medical card is dated to the day the application was sent in. Between that time and the date they get the medical card, there is a bill accruing that they cannot afford. It seems very logical to me. We can do it with other applications in social welfare and different things, so that the date the application goes in is the date the person becomes eligible. Why not with the medical card? I appreciate the Leas-Cheann Comhairle allowing me to raise these very important things.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Perhaps the mistake was made at the beginning, that all of us Deputies may refer to what is in the Bill or what could be put into it. That is the extent of the range. Maybe we will do it at the beginning in future.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): On behalf of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, I thank those who contributed to the Second Stage debate today and two weeks ago with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. The fundamental objective of this Bill is to improve patient safety. The overwhelming support of Deputies for the Bill's provisions reflects the importance of patient safety and reflects our shared goal of constantly working to improve our health and social care services. I understand that the issues which were raised with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, have already been brought to the attention of the officials of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. I will be happy to update the Minister on further issues speakers have raised with me today. The officials are taking notes of everything, even including Deputy Ó Murchú on the issue of the medical card which he raised before on the floor of the Dáil. Deputies raised a very wide range of important matters and I hope to address the majority of these in the time available to me before I make some concluding remarks.

I understand there was much discussion of the issue of regulation of the homecare sector. This is clearly a matter of concern to many Deputies. I am pleased to advise that the Department of Health is currently developing a regulatory framework for the licensing of homecare support providers to deliver services for adults aged 18 years and over. This will comprise primary legislation for the licensing of providers, secondary legislation consisting of regulations to set minimum requirements and the HIQA national standards. A public consultation on the draft regulation was concluded in early August and this will inform further development,

together with ongoing engagement with key stakeholders including HIQA, the HSE, private and voluntary providers and service users' representative groups. I can also report that my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has established a cross-departmental strategic workforce group to examine current challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of home support workers and front-line carers in nursing homes. Arising from the completion of an evidence-based review and targeted consultations, a report for the consideration of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is currently being prepared. This will set out key recommendations.

The regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists with CORU was also raised by several speakers. The work of the counsellors' and psychotherapists' registration board is significantly more challenging than for other CORU professions. This is due mainly to the many different educational pathways into the profession and the variety of specialties and titles used. The initial stages of regulating a profession can be very complex as there is an obligation to balance the right of existing practitioners to practice their profession while ensuring that those who are placed on the register are safe to practice. Much progress has been made by the board, including the verification and assessment of historical qualifications as well as international research into regulatory norms in other jurisdictions. The drafting of separate and distinct standards of proficiency for counsellors and psychotherapists has also begun. However, a substantial body of work remains to be undertaken before that register is opened. I want to assure the House that CORU fully appreciates the importance and urgency of this work.

Another CORU matter which I will respond to and which was raised by a number of speakers is the issue affecting students of social care work attending Dublin Business School. All Deputies will know the register for social care workers is to open in November 2023. The social care workers' registration board has engaged extensively with colleges over a number of years on the standards required for educational programmes to ensure that the graduates are trained to an appropriate level to deliver their service safely to the public. In July 2022, Dublin Business School withdrew its application for approval by CORU of its social care work programme. This effectively means that graduates of the Dublin Business School programmes will not be automatically eligible for registration with CORU. The Minister is aware that this is deeply distressing for the students affected. I want to assure Deputies that the concerns of students are very much understood. The issue is being carefully considered by officials from both the Department of Health and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science with significant support being provided by CORU.

Medical workforce planning is another area on which several speakers raised concerns. The Department of Health is currently developing a health and social care workforce planning strategy and workforce planning project model based on international best practice. A key outcome of this project, which is being technically supported by the European Commission, is to equip the Department with the necessary tools, processes and technical capacity to produce rolling action plans on workforce planning. These will help to implement targeted policy measures for health and social care workforce reform. Extensive work has been completed to date, with the project team currently focused on the document of the strategy and the action plans. It is expected that the project will be completed in 2023.

I will now respond to some specific workforce planning issues raised by various Deputies. On the issue of intern places for medical graduates, following an increase in intern places over several years, we no longer have a shortage of these places. An additional 120 permanent intern places have been created, which represents a 16% increase compared with pre-Covid levels. I

confirm that for the 2022-23 interim year, an additional 90 graduates were appointed to intern posts and a supplementary reserve list was created to fill the remaining posts. Resolving the historic shortfall in placements is a significant development and will help to support our efforts to retain doctors who have trained to remain in Ireland.

The issue of access to specialist training posts was also raised. Deputies will be interested to know that the Department has recently embarked on a broad programme of legislative reform, which includes addressing certain registration and access issues identified by the Medical Council. Included in this is the removal of a legislative barrier that prevented certain doctors who trained outside of the EEA from applying for specialist training in Ireland. This barrier was removed in November 2020. In addition, earlier this year, significant changes to working arrangements and immigration permission for most non-EEA doctors were announced. These changes reduced the administrative burden for effective doctors and make Ireland a more attractive place for these professions to relocate to.

It is important to recognise the strength of global competition for healthcare talent. The steps we have taken are welcome and positive developments that recognise that the Irish health service is supported by highly skilled and caring doctors from across the world. We will continue to work with doctors and other health professionals who wish to live and work in Ireland.

The final workforce issue I will address is non-consultant hospital doctors, NCHDs. As several Deputies highlighted, the NCHDs raised a very legitimate concern about their experiences working in Ireland and we know there is significant room for improvement. There is an urgent need to review the issues they have highlighted if we are to increase retention and continue to attract new doctors to join our medical workforce. The Minister for Health is fully committed to addressing the issues affecting the NCHDs. To this end, in the past few weeks, he established a national task force on the NCHD workforce. This task force will develop policy initiatives that will result in improved on-site facilities, structures and training supports for all NCHDs working in Irish hospitals.

I regret that I do not have time to directly address all of the issues raised by colleagues across the House. However, I hope Deputies will have found this information somewhat helpful.

Turning now to the specifics of the Bill, I will briefly recap its main provisions. First, it will amend the Medical Practitioners Act to ensure the holders of UK medical degrees can access intern training posts in Ireland. Citizens of both jurisdictions have long benefited from the freedom to work and study in each other's country – a freedom that is enshrined in the common travel area agreement. This amendment will ensure that, once again, holders of UK medical degrees can benefit from those rights and apply for intern placements here.

The next issue addressed by the Bill is the continued provision of a route to registration on the general division of the Medical Council's register for certain cohorts of internationally trained doctors. The amendments essentially correct a small number of errors in the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act 2020, which were detected prior to commencement.

The Bill makes a number of amendments to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act, the legislation under which CORU operates. First, it will allow the Minister to prescribe and vary by order transitional period qualifications listed in Schedule 3 of the Act. This Schedule was drafted in 2005 and needs to be amended to reflect passage-of-time changes.

The Bill also makes changes to the Act's transitional period registration route for social care workers to provide that applicants meet the same standards as other CORU professions. As Deputies will appreciate, social care workers are in contact with some of the most vulnerable members of society. It is vital that CORU is satisfied that these workers have the skills and experience to deliver safe and high-quality care.

Two amendments will deliver these changes. First, existing practitioners will be required to attain their work experience in the State. For social care workers, this can currently be in any jurisdiction. Second, applicants will be required to undergo an assessment of professional competence, rather than have their competence attested to by way of the employer reference, which is the current requirement. The existing provisions are considered to pose an unacceptable risk to patient safety and these amendments mitigate that risk and align the registration process for social care workers with other CORU professions.

The remaining significant provision in the Bill is related to the Medical Practitioners Act. The Bill proposes to make a number of amendments to support the Medical Council in its triage investigation and adjudication of complaints function. This will support changes introduced under the 2020 Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act and will lead to a more efficient examination of complaints.

Finally, the Bill will introduce immunity for certain persons operating under the provision of the Medical Practitioners Act. Deputies will appreciate that where a serious complaint is being investigated, experts and others appointed to assist must be free to participate without fear of litigation.

On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, I thank all the Deputies for their input in recent days.

I regret that the topics the Leas-Cheann Comhairle raised are not addressed in my response. However, my colleagues indicated they will convey them to the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Health pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(*a*) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Personal Injuries Resolution Board Bill 2022: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Tá áthas orm an Bille fán mBord um Réiteach Díobhálacha Pearsanta, 2022 a thabhairt os comhair an Tí. Is Bille tábhachtach é seo a sheachadann an gealltanas sa chlár don Rialtas an Bord Measúnaithe Díobhálacha Pearsanta, PIAB, a fheabhsú agus a athchóiriú.

I acknowledge and pay tribute to the significant work undertaken by my colleague, Deputy Robert Troy, in conceiving and developing this Bill. The former Minister of State's leadership in this area and his work with stakeholders in recent months has resulted in the Bill we are introducing today. I also thank the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment under its Chairman, Deputy Maurice Quinlivan, for its pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of the Bill and its recommendation for its swift passage. I hope to work with the committee on this in the coming days.

The Bill will complete action 19 in the Government's action plan for insurance reform. Good progress is being made in the action plan, with approximately 80% of the actions now being delivered. Significant actions already completed include the introduction of the new personal injuries guidelines, the enactment of legislation to strengthen laws on perjury and the establishment of an office to promote competition in the insurance market. The PIAB process is much more cost-effective and efficient than litigation. The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Personal Injuries Assessment Board Acts 2003 to 2019 to increase the number of personal injury claims resolved by the board without recourse to litigation. PIAB assesses claims for compensation arising from personal injuries sustained because of a motor, workplace or public liability incident. PIAB provides a fair and transparent assessment process in which personal injury claims are resolved in a straightforward and efficient way. The model is a positive one for society as it delivers compensation more quickly, with lower costs and predictable outcomes. The recent report of the Central Bank on employers' liability, public liability and commercial property insurance shows that from 2015 to 2020 the average settlement time for injury claims through PIAB was 1.8 years, compared with 4.5 years through litigation. The report also shows that for the same period the average legal costs for employers' liability claims of under €100,000 settled by way of PIAB was €562, compared with €18,290 for a litigated claim, despite the average compensation being similar. The benefits of the model are clear. However, I believe we can and must do more to resolve claims without recourse to litigation. The model can be strengthened to resolve a greater number of personal injury claims. This view is shared by a range of stakeholders.

The Bill will establish PIAB as a new and enhanced personal injuries resolution board. Central to this will be the introduction of mediation as a new service to resolve personal injury claims. Mediation offered by the board will follow the recognised principles of mediation, including being a fully voluntary process, ensuring confidentiality and impartiality and providing the opportunity for the parties to determine the issues that require resolving. Where the parties do not consent to mediation, the existing process in respect of assessment of a claim remains.

An advantage of mediation is the ability for parties to get speedy access to a process that may produce a satisfactory and agreed outcome for the parties in a short time. Mediation is already successfully used by bodies such as the Residential Tenancies Board, the Workplace Relations Commission and the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. It serves as a way to facilitate the resolution of issues between parties, and my proposals are modelled on existing legislation in respect of these bodies.

The Bill contains several amendments to enhance the role of the board with regard to promotion of its work, as well as data analysis and reporting, and it allows for the retention of more

complex cases, such as purely psychological ones, by the board. The Bill also provides for the issue of costs should a case proceed to litigation.

The Government is introducing a new provision to strengthen the process by making it an offence to provide false or misleading information to the board. This should increase confidence in and strengthen the process, which relies on accurate and truthful information for its just and proper operation. I thank Senator Mullen for his contribution to this part of the Bill.

It is important to note that the reforms listed in the Bill, including the introduction of mediation, will not prolong cases. The board will remain obliged under section 49 of the Act to assess claims within nine months of confirmation of the respondent's consent to the assessment process, notwithstanding exceptional circumstances provided for in the legislation.

I will now summarise the main provisions of the Bill. Section 2 provides for the name of the body to be changed to the personal injuries resolution board to reflect the new functions of the board.

Section 3 sets out the application process to allow claimants to make an application for mediation, assessment or both, and the mandatory elements, including the requirement to supply a personal public service number or alternative identification.

Sections 4 and 5 provide for the notification by the board of a claimant's application to the respondent and to ask whether the respondent consents to mediation, assessment or both, and provides for the procedures to be followed by the board afterwards.

Section 6 provides that where a respondent consents to mediation or assessment, or both, of a relevant claim or is deemed to consent to assessment, these are not considered to be an admission of liability with regard to the relevant claim. Section 7 expands the types of claims that will be considered by the board by removing the discretion for the board not to make an assessment for claims of a wholly psychological nature or where a long-term prognosis is not yet available. Section 8 extends the provisions relating to presumption of capacity of both the claimant and the respondent regarding the making of an assessment to also include mediation. Section 9 introduces a new chapter 1A into the principal Act. It contains six sections, namely, sections 18A to 18F, which introduce mediation as a new service to resolve claims under the board's process. The section details the mediation process and outlines how a mediation is completed. An unsuccessful mediation will move to assessment where a respondent has consented to same.

Section 10 updates the reference in section 19 of the principal Act to provide for mediation. Section 11 provides that the board, with the consent of the Minister, may make regulations to impose charges in respect of its services. The section provides that where a respondent has failed to pay the relevant fee to the board in the required timeframe, the board can apply an additional administrative charge.

Section 12 amends section 38 of the Act and sets out that where a monetary value has been agreed in mediation, the board will issue an order to pay. It also provides for an order to pay to include any outstanding charges payable to the board by the respondent. Section 13 sets out the procedure to be followed where a claimant withdraws consent previously given to the board to retain a claim past the statutory timeframes set out in section 49 of the Act.

Section 14 enables the board to retain claims where, based on a medical report, a long-term

prognosis will not be available under the nine-month statutory timeframe. It provides for a period of up to two years in addition to the nine months for a long-term prognosis to become available. Section 15 provides that the extended time allowed for a long-term prognosis to become available, as provided for under section 14, will be included for the purposes of pausing the Statute of Limitations. This will apply while claims are with the board and for a period of six months after the board issues an authorisation.

Section 16 is noteworthy. The purpose of the section is to encourage greater acceptance of awards by the board, particularly as both the board and the courts must now assess personal injury claims under the personal injury guidelines. It sets out procedures for a claim that has left the board following an assessment, been accepted by the respondent but rejected by the claimant, and proceeded to litigation. Where a claimant brings proceedings in such circumstances, no award of costs may be made in favour of the claimant where the award does not exceed the board's assessment. The section also provides that the assessment value will be deemed to be an offer of tender of payment made by the defendant as of the date the respondent accepted or was deemed to have accepted the assessment. This serves to limit, in certain circumstances, the level of costs that a respondent may have to pay from the point of the acceptance date.

Section 17 provides for four new functions to be accorded to the board. These are to facilitate the resolution of claims through mediation; to collect and publish information relating to personal injury claims, including awards made under the personal injuries guidelines; to conduct or commission research, analysis or studies on matters relating to the function of the board; and to promote awareness of its role and the benefits of resolving claims through the board.

Section 18 extends the requirement for certain persons to provide information to the board. Section 19 provides that the board may report suspected offences to An Garda Síochána. Section 20 provides that the board shall provide the Minister with information about the performance of the board's functions. Section 21 sets out that the provision of false or misleading information to the board by a claimant, respondent or a third party is an offence. Section 22 provides for the exclusion of the mediation process from the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014. This is required as mediation is a confidential process.

Finally, section 23 provides the Short Title of the Bill as well as the citation and makes provision for enactment by statutory instrument.

The Bill has been developed through extensive engagement with consumers, businesses, community groups and bodies such as the Alliance for Insurance Reform. The resounding message from all is the urgent need for reform. This Bill delivers reform while respecting the fundamental right of access to our courts.

We all know that the cost of claims is a driver of insurance premiums. This Bill will increase the number of claims settled through an enhanced resolution process and will reduce the cost of claims. This will impact positively on the cost of insurance, which is vital for so many groups across our country, as acknowledged by the joint committee. As I know from my recent meetings with stakeholders on this legislation, it is important that this Bill is now enacted.

Táim ag tnúth le díospóireacht na dTeachtaí le linn don Bhille a bheith ag dul ar aghaidh tríd an Oireachtas. I commend this Bill to the House.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I offer my thanks to all those who have worked and continue to work on it. I echo the sentiment

expressed by the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, in respect of the former Minister of State, Deputy Troy. I know that a very significant amount of engagement went into the production of this Bill. On behalf of my party, I offer our qualified support for the legislation, which will not surprise any of the Members sitting opposite me. We believe amendments must be forthcoming on Committee Stage to ensure the mediation process will achieve an actual reduction in costs, and not as some fear, an increase in costs once the entire cost of the mediation, and every other process, has been factored in. Some practitioners have raised concerns that the additional layer to the system by way of mediation could potentially create additional delays and consequent costs to the PIAB process. Any movement to reduce the cost of claims, speed up the process and therefore reduce insurance premiums, is to be welcomed. Anyone who has spent any time watching politics over the past ten years will know that this is an issue that my colleague an Teachta Doherty has championed on every single occasion. We are therefore very much in favour of that which will reduce the costs here.

The Personal Injuries Resolution Board Bill 2022 relates to the programme for Government commitment to enhance and reform PIAB and to the commitments in the Action Plan for Insurance Reform to provide for a change of name to the personal injuries resolution board. The Bill proposes to amend the Personal Injuries Assessment Board Acts 2003 to 2019 to increase the number of personal injury claims settled through PIAB and avoid the expense and time associated with litigation. The objective of the Bill is to amend the legislation to facilitate an increase in the number of personal injury claims that may be resolved through the board. Furthermore, the proposed Bill introduces the option of mediation which could be facilitated through a mediation officer. Under the new proposals, parties will be asked to consent to mediation and, if mutually agreeable, it is envisaged that PIAB will facilitate mediation via a mediation officer appointed by them. The appointment of those officers will be very important. They need to be the right people with good experience. Over time they will build up experience which will be vital. Again, the terms and conditions of these people will be very important because not only do we want them to start the work, but we also want them to continue the work because anyone who works in mediation will say that one builds up that knowledge over time, which is a shortcut in and of itself. The Bill further seeks to extend the powers of PIAB to assess more complex injuries to include psychological injuries and aims to increase the number of personal injury claims that can be resolved by including these types of claims not previously assessed by PIAB.

As I said, we offer our qualified support at this point and look forward to further scrutinising the Bill on Committee Stage. Sinn Féin wants to see the best outcome for consumers; we are not here to represent the interests of the insurance industry or indeed the legal sector. We have continually advocated for the strengthening of the powers of PIAB as a means of reducing the legal costs involved in claims settlement. One of the reasons PIAB was set up to was to avoid unnecessary litigation and to bring a fair and independent assessment to people early on to settle their claim without incurring additional costs. In this regard, can I be clear that this discussion today is not about the so-called claims culture? I believe we need to move away from using that language. As the head of PIAB stated earlier this year:

> ... people pay insurance for a reason. It's important to recognise there are genuine claims but, at the same time, all this additional cost is being entered into the system via litigation.

It is the additional cost of litigation that this Bill seeks to address, and we must keep that to the forefront of our minds in our discussions today and as the Bill makes its way through the Dáil and Seanad. PIAB has noted that in motor insurance, only about 2% of claims are litigated and just 4% of employer and public liability claims are actually heard in court, with the vast

majority being settled post PIAB on the court steps. It is in this space that mediation intends to insert itself.

The supposed benefit to ordinary people of strengthening these powers is that claimants would receive their compensation more quickly and unnecessary litigation would be avoided, thus saving on legal costs. This is the hypothetical benefit to the individual claimant if this Bill is passed; but any reduced legal costs emanating from this Bill must make their way into reduced premiums for all consumers. It is presupposed that this will lead to a more stable insurance market to the benefit of consumers, businesses and insurers alike. The reasons for this are the cost of insurance and the duration of litigation, both of which threaten consumers and businesses. In its motor report on the national claims information database, the Central Bank of Ireland reported that in 2020 the legal costs associated with settling personal injury claims through litigation were €16,064, compared with costs of €841 through PIAB. That is almost 20 times more. The Central Bank report also outlined that litigation has a very limited effect on the compensation of the claimant; that an average settlement through PIAB takes approximately 2.3 years and is often much quicker, compared with 4.2 years for a settlement through the courts and litigation; and that insurers have consistently said that consumers will benefit from quicker assessments and swifter payment of compensation through PIAB. Therefore, it is expected that extending the mandate of PIAB to enable it to resolve more claims should result in significantly reduced legal costs and, consequently, a reduction in the cost of claims. If all the above are achieved, it must result in reduced premiums. High insurance premiums are placing a severe burden on businesses, voluntary and community groups, sports and cultural organisations, and charities, to the point that many may struggle to continue to operate unless they are addressed.

The Alliance for Insurance Reform recently carried out a policyholder survey to mark the first anniversary of the implementation of the pivotal judicial guidelines for personal injury damages on 24 April 2021. This survey found that 42% of respondents believe that insurance costs are threatening the future of their organisation and this figure is not materially different from the response to the same question in research the alliance carried in 2018. It also found that 31% say insurance costs are preventing them from providing certain services, which is up from 26% in the 2018 survey. It must be noted, however, that PIAB reported that average awards for personal injuries claims made since the introduction of the personal injuries guidelines are down by 42% compared with 2020. This shows that strong action in the area of insurance can have a beneficial effect. Nevertheless, a lack of action will have the exact opposite effect because where claims are settled for significantly increased costs at the expense of a more economical and efficient alternative, this cost is passed on to policyholder's premiums. Therefore, we need to ensure that this Bill is fit for purpose and that the personal injuries resolution board is resourced so it can mediate to reduce the costs of claims. If this happens and savings are realised, they must be passed on to the consumer. If this is done, it will benefit businesses, voluntary and community groups, sports and cultural organisations, and charities by making insurance affordable. At a time when many charitable organisations are under pressure, I was talking to a woman from the Balbriggan senior citizens group recently. She told me that the cost of their energy bills is completely crucifying them. Any help that can be given to these groups will be very beneficial because we will not miss them until they are gone, and then we will really miss them.

I will finish on a very important point. It behoves politicians to promote the work of PIAB and inform the public of its benefits compared to costly litigation, which benefits the vested interests and not always the claimant or consumers. Currently, claimants are either not being

informed or, and I hope this is not the case but I have heard that it is in some instances, are being dissuaded from going to PIAB. Bypassing PIAB or advising against PIAB is, in my opinion, not in the best interests of the claimant. As stated previously, the legal costs associated with settling personal injuries claims through litigation is multiple times more than through PIAB, litigation is twice as long as going through PIAB and the average compensation is virtually the same. Therefore, I must reinforce the need for public representatives to espouse the benefits of PIAB to make sure that claimants and customers are put first and that we, as a House, work out a way to ensure PIAB is not being negatively briefed against.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am pleased to speak on the Bill. I thank everybody who has been involved in bringing it to where it is today, especially the former Minister of State, Deputy Troy, who presented it to the committee and championed the Bill. If implemented and resourced correctly, it has the potential to reduce the costs involved with insurance claims and pass on premium savings to customers.

The Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, which I chair, in its report on the Bill, which was launched in July, recommended a swift passage of the Bill and urged that the concentrated focus on the different insurance reforms should continue. The committee report also said it was encouraging to see a new system of quantum of damages bringing down the level of settlements. However, the rates of litigation are still too high and the proposed Bill should allow more to be settled by PIAB. The committee report also stated that efforts must continue to achieve greater transparency in the sector, greater competition for the benefit of consumers and greater consistency in claims handling to reduce unnecessary costs.

The critical thing with the Bill is resources. At a time when families and businesses across the State are facing immense pressures due to rising energy and fuel costs, it is welcome that we have the opportunity to debate a Bill that should and must help to alleviate a particular expensive cost that businesses, house owners and motorists face, namely, insurance. The personal injuries guidelines have over the last year significantly reduced the cost of claims for insurance companies but it is vital that these reduced costs are passed on to customers, many of whom have been fleeced and gouged by some companies over the years. Premiums must be reduced for customers. Reducing costs for consumers, businesses and local sports and community groups has to be an outworking of this Bill. Reducing premiums is one of the key reasons we in Sinn Féin have worked, campaigned and lobbied so hard for insurance reform for years.

We welcome the main tenets of the Bill, namely, to increase the number of claims settled through PIAB so as to reduce expense, time and stress in many cases; to introduce the option of mediation in insurance claims, with parties given the option of consenting to mediation facilitated by the personal injuries resolution board, PIRB; and to allow for the assessment of more complex injury cases, including those of a psychological nature. These are welcome objectives. Its performance has shown that PIAB is a successful independent State body in assessing personal injury compensation claims.

Concerns have been raised in some quarters about whether the mediation option will add bureaucracy and costs to the PIAB process. We appreciate that concern and anticipate examining this aspect of the Bill in more detail via scrutiny on Committee Stage. As Deputy O'Reilly said, we will probably put down amendments. Ultimately, assessing insurance claims through PIAB is a quicker and cheaper option through which to make insurance claims. In 2020, it was estimated that the cost of litigation was €16,064 but that, if done through PIAB, the average cost is €841, which is a massive difference. From a time perspective, the amount of time to

settle reduces on average from 4.2 years through litigation to 2.3 years through PIAB, which will greatly reduce the stress for people.

We in Sinn Féin have constantly advocated the strengthening of the powers of PIAB as a method of reducing the legal costs in claims settlement. This Bill is overall a positive step in the reform of the claims landscape following the adoption of the personal injuries guidelines in 2021. PIAB has shown itself to be successful in self-financing but it is important, if this Bill is enacted, that it continues to have the resources it needs to improve its performance and the volume of disputes it can assess, thereby avoiding costly litigation. Extending the authority of PIAB to resolve claims should result in further reductions in both time and cost of claims. When this is achieved, I repeat, these savings must result in reduced premiums.

I welcome the Bill. It will, of course, need further scrutiny on Committee Stage but it has the potential to introduce some positive changes, which is welcome. However, we still need action on premiums being charged by insurance companies as these are having a detrimental impact on many businesses and sporting and cultural organisations across the State. Any of us involved in local voluntary groups or community festivals will understand that many have been cancelled or reduced. I am involved in the St. Mary's festival, which had a regatta from the 1930s but, in the last couple of years, it has had to exclude children because the organisers could not get insurance at any cost. In conclusion, I commend the Alliance for Insurance Reform, my colleague, Deputy Doherty, who has championed insurance reform and others who have championed the need for insurance reform for many years. This is one step in that direction.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am happy to speak on this stage of the Bill and thank everybody who has worked on it so far. As the House will be aware, my party works all the time to support and strengthen the rights of citizens with regard to institutional, corporate or Government bodies where the balance of power and, therefore, the balance of financial and professional resources is automatically not in their favour. One of the reasons we have continually advocated for the powers of PIAB to be strengthened is that, in doing so, it will reduce the legal costs involved in claims settlements. When it comes to personal injuries actions, how many times do we hear in conversation that the lawyers are laughing all the way to the bank, and when they are not laughing, they are counting? While I am in favour of all work being paid well for a job well done, we are equally aware of the need to reduce legal fees where possible, particularly when there is a cost to the citizen and to the public finances, which is the result of the citizens' hard work. That is to be used for the people's need and good. Avoiding unnecessary litigation through PIAB intervening early to facilitate early and fair agreement on both sides, so additional costs can be minimised or avoided, is something worth protecting and strengthening.

My colleagues will address other aspects of the Bill but I would like to look at the proposed mediation element of it and, if there is time, to refer to the inclusion of psychological injury. In case those in IBEC are listening, I would love to know how they think victims of domestic violence can take out their psychological injuries and show them. Before I discuss mediation, I would like to mention that I have been meeting representatives of small businesses in my constituency of Kildare North over the last couple of years. They are dealing with huge insurance costs. While some of these claims can be thrown out at the end, in the meantime their insurance costs have rocketed and it is crippling them financially, and also slowing down real injury claims for honest people. Irish people have a great sense of fair play. I believe that mediation will go a long way to resolving some of those issues.

Mediation by mutual agreement, as allowed for in the Bill, is something to be welcomed,

albeit, as Deputy Louise O'Reilly said, on a qualified basis. Anyone who has had any dealings with the law, court cases or injuries claims knows how exhausting and stressful it is. I have lost count of how many times I have heard people, in particular when dealing with the State, say that all they really wanted was an apology. Institutionally, an apology can be seen as a liability and, too often, both sides feel they have to get lawyered up. Only at the end of a long, costly and destructive litigation does the State issue the apology anyway, along with the compensation which sometimes was not looked for in the first instance. If mediation allows for the State in particular to apologise as opposed to defending the indefensible in court, as it has done too often simply because it has limited public funds to do so, pushing the citizens to their limits, I am all for it once it is managed correctly. If there are any good, fair and humane mechanisms that we can use to get in early, get the two sides talking and, more importantly, get them listening to each other under an expert mediator who is trained in the law and in human need, expectation and behaviour, it is to be welcomed. It is a big "if", but if it is managed correctly, no greater costs should accrue.

The fact that, internationally, mediation is becoming a sought-after area of specialist legal study and practice is testament to its success for both sides and for legal representatives who are not out for all-out war on behalf of their clients. If we mediate well, we can manage human situations well.

I am glad to see that the Bill seeks to extend the powers of PIAB and PIRB to assess more complex injuries that would include psychological injury.

5 o'clock

There is less humanity in this approach, given that the worst and deepest injuries can sometimes be the ones we cannot see. IBEC should remember that. Litigation can be psychologically damaging and, therefore, any decent method of addressing injury through this process is to be welcomed.

As Deputies O'Reilly and Quinlivan have stated, our support is qualified and we will table amendments on Committee Stage. The mediation process must demonstrably reduce costs. Some fear that this additional layer could create extra delays and costs within the PIAB process once the mediation segment is factored in. Were that to happen, it would be the polar opposite of the Bill's purpose. The Bill's provisions have excellent potential if managed correctly, but we will examine the detail of the how and the how much.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I am glad its focus is on mediation, which reduces stress and cost and helps to manage a process better overall.

Many Deputies have spoken on the Bill, but I wish to speak on a related matter of litigation, that being, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, published last Friday, on the 2021 accounts of the public services and specifically chapter 20 on the management of the clinical indemnity scheme. I will first declare a personal interest in the scheme's management. This was a subject that was considered with the State Claims Agency by the Committee of Public Accounts many months ago, where Deputies challenged the agency on the funds it expended on litigation, the overall awards, the management of litigation on behalf of the State and the management of the ongoing risk to the State. It is a considerable liability. One of the challenges is to reduce risk even further in hospitals so that there are not only fewer cases for the

State but, more important, fewer incidents that affect people's lives. As I told the Leas-Cheann Comhairle when entering the Chamber, and the Chairman and clerk to the Committee of Public Accounts, I have experience in this regard. One of the key pieces of exposure to the State is that of catastrophic birth injuries as well as birth and maternity injuries more generally. I have an active case with the State, which I wish to declare. Obviously, it gives a better understanding of some of the challenges.

A key element of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report has to do with the national incident management system, NIMS. The most costly and devastating injuries that happen in hospitals are those that happen in maternity hospitals to women - Deputy Cronin referred to psychological injuries as well - and babies. The exposure to the State can be large. The committee's concern was that we kept seeing a pattern of cases, be they involving brain injuries or cerebral palsy, and we wanted to know what the State Claims Agency was doing to hold the hospitals to account. Where were the patterns and were certain hospitals more problematic than others? The House will recall that Dr. Peter Boylan published a good report in 2016 on maternal deaths and injuries in the State, focusing on Portlaoise and other hospitals. The committee wanted to know what was going on and how to ensure it did not happen again.

There are many cases of birth injuries and deaths. It is frustrating to be a parent who is part of that community and to see this issue arising time and again in the same hospitals. One wonders whether anything will ever change. Our challenge to the State Claims Agency was to ask how it was interrogating the NIMS. The Comptroller and Auditor General has issued a brilliant response on the issue. He analysed the NIMS and wrote:

> Overall, in the period 2017 to 2021, only 25% of claims received [by the State Claims Agency] had previously been reported by the DSAs as incidents on NIMS prior to claim notification.
>
> Of the 75% of claims not previously reported ... the SCA concluded that
>
> - in 22% of cases, there was insufficient information available to determine whether or not the incident should have been reported;
>
> - it was reasonable for the incident giving rise to the claim to have been recorded on NIMS in 21% of cases ...
>
> - in around one third of all cases (32%), the DSA would not have been aware of the incident ...

It is clear that at least one fifth of those cases that ultimately turned into litigation cases for the State should have been recorded. It is only when hospital management is put under pressure in its responses that we get the opportunity to change the culture.

We challenged the scale of the cerebral palsy injuries. According to the report, 60% of claims with the State Claims Agency arose from maternity cases. That is 60% of the State's liability arising just from maternity hospitals. As members of the Committee of Public Accounts, we hold the health service to account more broadly. From a personal perspective, though, every one of those cases is life altering for the babies and families concerned. Every Deputy in the Chamber knows a case of that kind. None of those families who have to litigate their claims want to be in that situation or to go through the process of having report after report done on their child just to try to reach a balance where they can fund the child's altered life as a conse-

quence of the injury.

The cerebral palsy cases represent €1.4 billion of the €3.4 billion liability, or 41% of the overall claims. At the end of 2021, there were 163 active cerebral palsy claims related to maternity services. It takes longer to finalise those cases, lasting up to approximately five years. That is five years' worth of stress, as the House can imagine. As such, the sooner the State Claims Agency moves *en masse* to the mediated system, which is a central part of this Bill, the better. Of course, claims must undergo appropriate due diligence, but mediation is always a better system.

In 2021, there were 335 active cases relating to catastrophic injury, with an estimated outstanding liability of €2.4 billion. The average liability per catastrophic injury claim is €7.2 million compared to €300,000 for other clinical negligence claims. It does not make for good reading, particularly when you know what is happening more intimately, but it is the basis from which we can start to hold the hospital boards more accountable for what happens within their hospitals. The Committee of Public Accounts was told by the State Claims Agency that there were approximately 26 cases of cerebral palsy every year and that this was in or around the average internationally. I know that the agency did not mean that heartlessly, but that is 26 families and 26 children. We know that it is not the case that some of them are unavoidable. We know that there are many cases in which mistake after mistake was made. More often than not, the women were simply not listened to in a maternity hospital of all places. The figure of 26 must be reduced, not just from the perspective of the State's liability, but from the perspective of each of the families and their children that will be affected.

Deputy Patricia Ryan: The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Personal Injuries Assessment Board Acts to facilitate an increase in the number of personal injury claims that may be resolved through the board's process and without recourse to litigation. It is to be welcomed that we will free up our courts to deal with more serious cases. Encouraging more claimants and respondents to avail of the board's model through mediation or assessment should lead to cost savings in the claims environment and contribute to reductions in insurance premiums. I say "should", but last year a Sinn Féin survey found that 58% of respondents who had received their renewals since the new personal injuries guidelines came into effect actually saw their premiums increase. As such, the House might forgive my scepticism. We heard previously from a Minister of State that the Government was engaging directly with insurers to hold them to account and to ensure that savings were passed on to customers following the introduction of the personal injury guidelines. The evidence shows that this approach has failed.

My colleague, Deputy Doherty, has introduced a Bill that would require insurance companies to show how they were passing savings on to their customers. The Bill would require the insurance industry to provide information to the Central Bank outlining how the cost of claims had reduced as a result of the new personal injuries guidelines and how insurers had passed those savings on to their customers euro for euro. Irish consumers have repeatedly been ripped off by insurance companies that have put their customers at the bottom of the pile. It is about time that we held the insurance industry to account. The Bill places an increased emphasis on the resolution of claims through an amended personal injuries framework that facilitates mediation and assessment as a means of resolving personal injury claims. The proof of the pudding, though, will be in the eating. The Government needs to monitor this carefully. Sinn Féin's legislation requires just this, namely, the publishing of a report on the effects of the previously introduced guidelines and that consideration be given to the report when framing future legislation.

Nobody has done more work to prevent insurance customers being ripped off than An Teachta Doherty. We all remember the joint committee meeting where claims of widespread fraud were made until An Teachta Doherty asked how many cases had been reported to the Garda. Insurance reform is badly needed and real action is needed to strike a fair balance in this regard. In government, Sinn Féin will deliver the necessary action.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is fair to say that the PIAB can be broadly viewed as a law reform success story. If we recall the situation that pertained prior to this reform being introduced, it is easy to measure the contrast. It is not perfect, however, and reforms are needed but it has gone a long way in reducing costs and waiting times for people seeking compensation for personal injuries. It has created an intermediary process between claimants and the courts, requiring people to first apply to PIAB for an assessment, and proceedings may only be taken if authorisation is granted. The PIAB does not make any findings of liability but it assesses claims made to it by an injured party. The parties involved can resolve personal injury claims by direct settlement, through an assessment by PIAB or through litigation.

I am sure this point has been made before, but a Central Bank report in June this year stated that legal costs for claims taken in PIAB are 16 times less than those that go to litigation. The average time from reporting to a settlement of a claim was 1.8 years for PIAB, compared with 4.5 years through litigation. By and large, therefore, this process is better and shorter and there is a less expensive outcome for all the parties involved who engage in the process. This approach also frees up the courts for other matters. There will always be a limited need for litigation in personal injury claims. Many personal injury claims, though, benefit from the PIAB process, where assessments are fair, independent and non-adversarial.

Despite the successes of the PIAB, rates of litigation are still high, as are the costs of public liability and commercial property insurance. Radical reform is needed to address the cost of insurance. The fundamental issue in this regard is cost. We must not forget that affordable insurance is fundamental to the long-term interests of the country. We have a high cost of living and that is a factor. High insurance premiums add significantly to the cost base of our economy. The higher they go, the higher they push up other prices. In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, we must deal with this issue. A survey undertaken by the Alliance for Insurance Reform, AIR, in April found that 42% of organisations believed that insurance premiums were threatening their future, while 90% said that the Government was not doing enough to address the issue.

Even the new guidelines used by the Judiciary to decide the quantum of awards for personal injuries have not had the desired effect. While they have undoubtedly had an impact on the cost of motor insurance, which has decreased by 12.1% in the year to the end of March, although we hear of great variations in this regard sometimes, the impact of the guidelines has been minimal in other areas. Homeowners are now having to pay up to 20% more to insure their properties as the cost of rebuilding homes has risen by more than €50,000 in the past year, while public liability premiums increased by a whopping 16% last year. If the Government wants to protect communities, charities, voluntary organisations and SMEs, it must address the threat caused by insurance companies exiting an already uncompetitive public liability insurance market.

Competition in this market is urgently needed and efforts to attract more market entrants need to be ramped up to drive down costs. Without competition, struggling businesses will fail, local services will cease operating and communities and voluntary groups will be unable to hold events. We all know the richness of community events, but now even the cost of the insurance required to run a bus to bring kids to a swimming class is prohibitive. Parents do not wish to

get involved in doing these kinds of things. Therefore, this issue is critical to the functioning of good communities. The Department stated that the Bill's intent is to introduce more predictability and remove volatility in respect of awards, and that this should then have a downstream impact on insurance premiums, the insurance sector and claimants.

We have yet to see much evidence of that. It is one-way traffic regarding the insurance companies. Since the new guidelines were introduced in April 2021, the average award in the PIAB has been reduced by 42%. This underpins the point I was making. Insurers did not pass on these savings to their public liability insurance policyholders. An awful lot more needs to be done. I understand that some claimants genuinely feel it is better to go to court, but much of the spike in cases moving to litigation is motivated by the profits legal professionals can garner from dragging claims through the courts. This is why enactment of the Bill is important. The new mediation process will meaningfully increase the number of personal injury claims processed by the board.

I agree with the recommendation from AIR that mediation should be available at any stage in the process, with the PIAB enabled to again propose mediation to both parties at a later stage in the process. Oftentimes, mediation will not be successful the first time around. People might, however, think about things and then decide to go back to the drawing board. This does not automatically mean that the only solution is litigation. If either party is willing to return to the negotiating table before a claim is moved to the courts, then that opportunity should be made available to them.

The initiative to place a responsibility on the PIAB to collect and publish data on personal injury claims is welcome. The board has vast experience, totalling more than 17 years, of processing virtually every personal injury claim made here. It now processes and assesses many more claims than the Judiciary, as few cases ever get into courtrooms. This is a valuable resource that should be used to the fullest. A suggestion was made during pre-legislative scrutiny that the Department should transfer Insurance Ireland's claims data-sharing platform, InsuranceLink, into the ownership of the PIAB, and it does seem like the natural home for the platform. It is likely there will be issues with data and GDPR, etc., but it may be possible to overcome them and this is a proposal worth pursuing.

The Bill gives the board the responsibility to collect, collate and publish data on the insurance industry. The Department has also indicated it will provide significant data handling training to all personnel. It is an ideal opportunity to establish independence for InsuranceLink and to have all our insurance data providers under the one roof, if this proves to be possible. If it proves not to be possible, then I would like to hear the reasons for it. Has the Minister considered this recommendation?

Going back to one of the main aims of this legislation, which is increasing the number of personal injury cases which can be settled in the PIAB, the Alliance for Insurance Reform raised the issue of developing the board into a quasi-judicial body, similar to the Workplace Relations Commission, Residential Tenancies Board or An Bord Pleanála. This change would empower the board to adjudicate on claims with no need to go to litigation for the vast majority of cases. Currently, too many of the claims processed move on to needless litigation, and while mediation will help with some of this, it certainly will not solve the issue. It has been apparent for years now that the only beneficiaries of litigation in personal injury claims are solicitors and barristers, as well as the insurance industry, or almost all of it. The costs associated with the courts are used as an excuse to disproportionately inflate premiums. I understand that this

measure was looked at in the regulatory impact assessment and was rejected on the basis that the constitutional rights of access to the courts would be impacted. I would be interested to hear more on that. Could the Minister of State outline why reforming the board into a quasi-judicial body is deemed to be unconstitutional? That circle does not square with me because it is being done in other areas.

It is vital that the Government sends a clear message to the insurance industry that premiums must come down. We cannot continue to reduce the awards people are entitled to and watch insurance premiums continue to rise.

I welcome the Bill. It will decrease costs and time for everyone involved in personal injury claims. However, it is not the radical reform we need in the insurance sector. As a country, we tend not to do radical reform. We are more evolution than revolution. This is why the insurance market remains dysfunctional, with high insurance costs by international standards.

We are complete outliers on this in Europe, as I am sure the Minister of State will know. When Mr. Peter Boland from AIR appeared before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, he stated that his members were "met with disbelief - and, in some cases, laughter" from European counterparts over the extent to which insurance remains such an issue in Ireland. There are other small countries, islands such as Malta or Cyprus. I have not looked at the comparison but we cannot be outliers.

I support the points that Deputy Carroll MacNeill made. Indeed, it is something that we have both pursued at the Committee on Public Accounts. It is best is to avoid accidents that occur at birth if that is possible, and we must double-down on that. Where they occur, however, it is clear, and one sees it routinely outside the courts, that families had settled and they make the same argument about what the child's life will never be - the points that Deputy Carroll MacNeill made well in her contribution.

It was quite interesting that when we talked to the State Claims Agency about this at one of the most recent meetings we had with its officials at the Committee of Public Accounts, it was obvious that the behaviour changed during Covid because the courts were not as available and there was a higher take-up or more advice coming from solicitors regarding mediation. That is something that cannot be lost. Once to the courts opened up again, they reverted to type. It was clear that the settlements were of a shorter duration. Clearly, if the length of time is reduced as well as the volume of litigation, cases come to a quicker solution. It was quite instructive to listen to the State Claims Agency on that. It can be done but it was clear that the change there was within the legal profession where its members were advising claimants to take this route. More of that needs to happen and there needs to be impediments for channelling cases through a process that will be longer in an already difficult situation for families. I would like the Minister of State to take that on board.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State for the Bill bringing forward.

While there has been a drop in the cost of insurance, I am wondering if the cost of insurance could have come down more in view of the fact that the average PIAB award has decreased by 42% to €13,525. We have not seen the same decrease in insurance costs. It is something that we need to get a far better response on from the insurance industry. In fairness, Departments over the past number of years have brought forward legislation to assist in making the process cheaper to access and the cost levels are not the same. It is important that we get an adequate

response from the insurance companies, and I am not satisfied that we are.

The issue the Bill does not cover is claims against the State and against local authorities. We do not appear to get an overall breakdown per annum. While we might get some information from the State Claims Agency and while individual local authorities give it out to councillors, we do not get an overall yearly report for all the local authorities regarding the level of claims that they have paid out. For instance, I understand that if, in the morning, the State Claims Agency settled every claim currently pending against the State, including against Departments but also in respect of hospitals' medical negligence claims and medical practices that come under the State, it would cost between €4 billion and €5 billion. That is something that needs to be looked at as regards how we can introduce a better process for dealing with those claims, whether we can introduce mediation to a much more significant degree, whether there is a need to look at the structure of compensation in that area, and whether it should be confined to the present system of lump sum. We need to look at it.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and I thank Deputy Colm Burke for sharing his time.

I wish to make a few points on this important legislation. I welcome it and welcome the fact that some progress has been made over the past few years through various reforms in the insurance sector, and I also welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, back from his brief hiatus into office.

Some progress has been made in different aspects relating to the insurance sector. Deputy Calleary's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, may be directly responsible.

I acknowledge that the office to promote competition in the insurance sector in Ireland has been established but one of the glaring issues in so many aspects of insurance is the lack of competition between providers. In some sectors of the economy, businesses, in particular, are unable to get quotes at certain times when certain underwriters have pulled out of the market. Those problems seemed to have eased somewhat.

The personal injury guidelines, which were mentioned by Deputy Catherine Murphy and others, have kicked in in the courts but we only have to look at decisions of the courts on a fairly regular basis still to see that decisions made and awards granted are still varying substantially. Each case is taken on its own merits but one would have expected maybe a degree of uniformity to have emerged once the guidelines were put into effect. That has not really been seen to emerge yet.

This legislation is good in the sense that it proposes a number of extra powers for the PIAB, which has been a welcome arrival. It is almost 20 years in existence. This legislation specifically allows for mediation, which is to be very much welcomed.

I disagree somewhat, maybe, with some of what Deputy Catherine Murphy said. Maybe I am picking her up wrong, but I think she spoke about punishing people who do not go down the route of the board. People still have a constitutional right to vindicate their rights in court. I do not think there should be any question of punishment. I am always more in favour of the carrot than the stick. If PIAB is working efficiently and its replacement now in the resolution board works efficiently and quickly and delivers an appropriate result, by its nature I think that would lead more people who would be potential litigants into taking that course of action. Generally, over the years, PIAB, in its previous incarnation, managed to achieve that. There were various

bumps along the road.

I often find with constituents who have individual queries that there is a lack of knowledge from time to time among the general public as to what PIAB is and what it does. I am sure all the public representatives in this Chamber and elsewhere have at various times pointed constituents in the right direction. I welcome the fact that the Bill contains specific provision for that and I welcome the legislation in general.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also generally welcome the Bill. Why are we dealing with all this legislation? What is the idea of it? What is the benefit of the personal injuries resolution board? The whole idea is that we are creating a framework and a set of structures that will eventually lead to reduced premiums and that we have an functioning insurance market, because we do not really have that at the moment. That is the major problem.

The personal injuries guidelines were obviously a necessary step in the right direction. PIAB has seen a 42% reduction in payouts for personal injuries. That was a move that needed to happen. Obviously, we would like to think that people would avail of mediation from the point of view that anything that can be kept out of the logjammed courts system we have in this State should be kept out of it. We all know we do not need to add legal cost upon legal cost in circumstances in which people find themselves needing compensation. If a person is injured in a particular set of circumstances, he or she should have insurance coverage. We all know there are people who have been horrifically injured, and there is a need to ensure we have insurance for them.

There is a problem, however. If we are talking just about public liability insurance, we know there are businesses that can only semi-operate some of the services they operated previously. Some cannot afford to do otherwise. We talk about the cost-of-living crisis and we know the issues we have with accommodation, whether personal or business. One of the major costs that have hampered everything from businesses to community organisations to community premises and all sorts of sporting groups and so on is the high price of public liability insurance. That is where offers can be made. Anyone who has been at a public event recently would be shocked to see full use of a bouncy castle. We know that is a particular issue.

The problem is that we do not have enough players in the market. We know there are particular issues in that regard. We know there are still legislative moves the Government needs to deal with. We know the whole area of duty of care needs to be done and dusted. We need to get to a place where I am not dealing with community centres being quoted €11,000 or €12,000 for insurance premiums. Generally, we find out that there may be a claim, but the claim probably relates to four different outfits. It relates to a company, building or community voluntary organisation and it will not even matter at the end of the day. They will all deal with increased premiums. It will not be down to the one person who would be seen to be accountable. That is without even getting into the rights and wrongs of particular cases.

The Minister of State has a lot of work to do to deal with the whole area of insurance.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the opportunity to share a few brief thoughts on this extremely important legislation, which I of course welcome. More importantly, not only do I welcome it, but I sincerely hope we see its passage through the Houses extremely swiftly because it is important that we see this come into place.

We think back to 2016 and the establishment of the cost of insurance working group and the

66 actions now being taken in this area. All those actions need to be undertaken and completed to address the very real and genuine concern across the entire insurance sector, driven not only by the Minister of State's Department but also the Department of Finance and the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming. I very much welcome and will reflect on the impact the personal injuries guidelines and the work of PIAB have had. I truly hope that, with the introduction of this legislation and, in due course, the personal injuries resolution board, we will see a greater move towards mediation and the level of payouts that will in turn see prices drop. That is why we are all speaking about this. The huge concern across all sectors is that insurance was so high and the choices so limited that it was putting businesses out of action and making it impossible for people to do very ordinary things. We have seen limited success so far, particularly when it comes to motor insurance and the 46% drop in premiums across the board. It does not end there, however, because there are still many areas that simply have not caught up.

With your discretion and indulgence, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I will speak to one specific area where the prohibitive cost of insurance and the lack of choice in the insurance market are preventing businesses from staying open in the sector and new businesses from entering the sector. I am speaking of the area of childcare, specifically in respect of the provision of crèches and Montessori schools. Across the State we see people limited to one provider or one broker, and when that broker was not issuing new policies, they found themselves reliant on a British provider. There were so many schools and services across the country, no doubt in the Minister of State's constituency, just like in mine, that faced the very real prospect of having to pull out of the market. I do not know how it is in other constituencies, but certainly in mine, Dublin Rathdown, finding a place with a childcare provider, be it early years or after school, is extremely difficult. The prices are exorbitant. Only 81% of childcare providers in my constituency have signed up to the new funding model, Together for Better. That is a real challenge, and while there are many factors creating that challenge, the cost and lack of availability of insurance are among the most concerning. When we look at the whole area of insurance and, more generally, financial services and the options being provided to businesses and individuals in this State, we genuinely have to ask why we have such limited choice when we are part of the world's largest economic bloc, the Single Market. I know this is probably more in the area of the Department of Finance than in the Minister of State's Department but, with respect, more needs to be done not only to encourage our own providers to stay open but to attract other providers.

Post Brexit, understandably, a lot of fuss was made about the fact that so many financial services sector jobs, particularly in large insurance firms, were moving to Dublin because these firms wanted to ensure they could still passport into the Single Market. However, we are not seeing that trickle down to the individual choice of consumers, be they businesses or individuals, across all sectors. It is that choice in the market that will drive down premiums alongside reducing the level of payouts because the sector has not caught up with the legislation yet. We are not seeing enough premiums follow downwards. All the good work of PIAB and the personal injuries guidelines are not enough to drive down premiums. I sincerely hope this legislation, passed swiftly, will play another part in driving them down because some of the premiums businesses and individuals are being asked to pay in this State are absolutely scandalous. They would not be acceptable in other member states of the European Union. The sooner we as a Dáil collectively get behind legislation like this and pass it in a swift manner, the better.

Deputy Martin Browne: Any progress that is made in enabling the quicker and cheaper settlement of claims without having to go to the courts has potentially positive benefits for individual private customers and for businesses across Tipperary and nationally who are facing

severe cost increases. It is Sinn Féin's desire that a properly designed Bill will assist in this by cutting down on litigation and getting the issue of compensation resolved quicker and at a lower cost. We have all seen too many instances of businesses closing or cutting back and community events being cancelled because of the high cost of insurance. The very fact that since the introduction of the personal injuries guidelines the average awards for personal injuries claims are down by 42% compared with 2020 shows the value of PIAB and a system for which Sinn Féin has long campaigned, where the deep pockets of insurance companies do not tip the scales in their favour. We need to ensure that this continues unabated in the expansion, through this Bill, of the work PIAB will do. If this is to be achieved, alongside a potential increase in the number of personal injury claims that can be resolved through PIAB via the introduction of assessment of injuries of a psychological nature, we have to ensure that this Bill is fit for purpose and is adequately resourced to allow PIAB to effectively do the work that is planned for it.

It was noted during the pre-legislative scrutiny process that more clarity is needed about how the dual purposes of assessment and mediation are addressed and dealt with within PIAB. The Minister of State noted that individuals would not work on an assessment and a mediation of the same case. Has the Department determined how many staff would be needed to facilitate this two-pronged approach to ensure PIAB is adequately staffed and does not become subject to a logjam? If what I have just mentioned results in mediation staff being outsourced, what steps are being taken to ensure they become as embedded in PIAB as possible to ensure that claimants have as much faith as possible in them being part and parcel of the PIAB and not subject to external influences?

It is also a fact that despite the positive work being carried out by the board, claimants still feel obliged to engage the services of a legal adviser in the mediation process. A full 29% of costs associated with settling injury claims between 2015 and 2020 were legal costs. Again, the Department indicated that consideration would be given to the issue of legal expenses still being incurred. Will the Minster of State expand on that and on what is proposed?

I support the strengthening of the role of PIAB. It allows for cheaper and quicker access to dispute resolution with the purpose of lowering insurance prices. However, we need to ensure this ethos is not forgotten in the course of refining and expanding its remit. For this reason, it is important that we place this Bill under as much scrutiny as possible. I appeal to the Minister of State to consider the contributions that all Members make to this Bill so that we can ensure that homes and businesses across Tipperary and nationally can benefit from the expansion in the role of PIAB, through their premiums and through the process of claim resolution.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: As has been said a number of times already, insurance costs as a result of personal injury awards have been a blight on the Irish business landscape for a number of years. It is not stretching it to any degree to say that a lot of businesses have been on the verge of self-insuring in recent years. In actual fact, I know of some that were trading without insurance for a period because they just could not sustain the cost. We are still seeing businesses failing to secure adequate liability insurance and that is a significant problem going forward. I hope it is an issue that the Department will look at.

On top of that, we have also seen insurance companies exit the market. It is fair to say there has been a very significant lack of transparency in the market in terms of what the claims situation was like. That must be addressed, particularly now as we try to deliver insurance reform, which has been a very long time coming. I remember a previous Fine Gael Minister of State, who has come and gone, championing insurance reform in this House but it is only now that we

are getting into the thrust of it.

My colleagues and I in the Regional Group have been active in this area. We have been working to try to improve the landscape and have liaised with businesses, particularly in the SME sector. We have pressed for the introduction of more significant perjury legislation. Perjury, unfortunately, has played a key part in a lot of compensation claims over the past number of years. We have seen CCTV evidence showing set-up traffic accidents, where people clearly were not in cars and yet they went into court and committed perjury by claiming they were passengers in vehicles. Hopefully that is coming to an end. Someone who has led on insurance reform in this country is Mr. Pat McDonagh of Supermacs. He was one of the first people to introduce video surveillance in hallways and close to toilets to show that people were actively trying to create slips and falls in order to avail of personal injury payouts. It has been a very significant problem and remains so.

I am sure the Minister of State is aware that there has been a reduction in motor premiums over the past 12 to 15 months, which has been put down to the ongoing work of insurance reform. What is amazing is that at the same time, insurance costs have risen for the business sector. That does not make sense. The claims environment does not reflect the premiums that a lot of businesses are paying. Some have never had a payout, yet they have seen their insurance premiums rise by 100%, 150% and 200% in the past year. There is still something fundamentally wrong with our insurance sector that needs to be tackled.

Everyone will agree that many low-level claims can be adequately dealt with outside of the courts system. With a working book of quantum, it should now be possible to apply transparency to many claims. We have seen that system operate across Europe and particularly in the UK. Our nearest neighbour has operated that system very well. However, it also remains the case that even after the recent judicial guidelines, the values in our book of quantum are still far in excess of those in the UK. That should be revisited in the coming years.

I welcome the Personal Injuries Resolution Board Bill which will, if properly supported, significantly reduce the cost of administering personal injuries awards and should, therefore, reduce the cost of liability insurance for individuals and businesses. However, my colleagues and I have a key concern which I raised at meetings of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, when we were looking at PIAB as part of the pre-legislative scrutiny process. A mechanism needs to be inserted in this legislation that will allow reforms to counter any unforeseen challenges to the operation of PIAB or PIRB into the future. Such a review mechanism is already built into the founding legislation of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority. There are three main components to which I draw the attention of the Minister of State. The aforementioned legislation allows that within 18 months, and not later than after each three-year period, a review of the operation of the Act is called for and that would be welcome in this case. It also provides that not later than 12 months after the review commences, a report is to be made to both Houses of the Oireachtas and findings, conclusions and any recommendations resulting are to be made to the Minister of the day. Again, this would be extremely beneficial to the operation of this legislation.

Beyond that, another provision is that recommendations under relevant subsections may include amendments to the Act, "including to part 7 of the Solicitors Acts 1954 to 2015 or any instrument made under those Acts" as the authority considers appropriate arising from such findings and conclusions. Finally the legislation provides that in conducting a review under this section, the authority shall consult with the Competition and Consumer Protection Com-

mission, CPCC, professional bodies and such other persons as it considers appropriate for such purposes. I would like to see amendments being tabled along those lines for this legislation and I will certainly be looking to do that because we need to have an ongoing review of this legislation. We cannot just enact it and then assume it will be fit for purpose into the future. There are plenty of challenges still coming down the road in terms of the instigation of this legislation and we need to be able to ensure that it is doing the very thing it is supposed to do, which is to reform the delinquent situation we have had in this country for years in terms of personal injuries compensation.

I am happy to point the Minister of State to the references I have just mentioned. Another thing we need to do is stop some of the scaremongering that is being carried out by some parties who would rather not see this legislation being enacted fully. I refer to recent media reports that awards for minor injuries will not cover medical costs due to inflation. That is completely erroneous. Medical costs and other out-of-pocket expenses are covered under the special damages provision and are not affected by any recent reforms. Some further public information needs to be put out there to show that this Bill has been worked on for quite a period of time - perhaps too long - but at least we now seem to be getting to something that is going to deliver reform.

Having considered the length of time we in this country have spent talking about insurance reform, we now have to be sure that what we are going to enact is fit for purpose and can be adapted in the future to deal with whatever difficulties may come down the tracks. As I have said, I welcome where we are going with this Bill. I will table some amendments, but I broadly welcome the Bill.

Deputy Seán Canney: I am delighted to see Deputy Calleary here in his brief as Minister of State. I wish him well and I am delighted he is present to deal with such an important Bill for the country. I look forward to working with him on it and wish him the best of luck in his role.

When I was in the private sector, I engaged a lot with insurance and the construction industry. I saw claims come in and go out, and dealt with claims in the courts. The one thing I learned was that the day you went to court with a claim was the day you were losing, because the legal profession is an industry in itself when it comes to dealing with claims. We went to court on the basis that the claim was not right and was being manufactured or whatever. On two occasions, I went to court because I felt determined enough that we, as a company, needed to defend our honour and insurance record. Not every small business will go to the extreme of going to court and challenging a claim. That is a problem because businesses do not have the resources to do it or would prefer to do a deal and get on with things. The problem is that when people go to court and defend in a case, they will still not get the benefit of cheaper insurance because they have saved the insurance company money. They will just be another statistic for them to look at.

The Bill is a basis for good legislation, with a few exceptions. What we need to do is stop the gravy train for the legal profession. We need to make sure that whatever money is being spent on paying out insurance claims is going to somebody who has a genuine reason to be compensated. We do not want an industry around this to develop.

When I was in construction, I always found it baffling that there were multiple insurances covering the same risk. A builder had to take out public and employers' liability on a building while work was taking place. At the same time, the building contractor had to take out public and employers' liability on the same building. Every subcontractor had to have the same li-

ability insurance in place, otherwise they would not be allowed into the site. A multitude of insurance premiums were being paid out to cover the same risk, which was a building and all of the activity within it.

At one stage, we tried to get umbrella insurance to cover everybody on a site for a client. The credit we received on our premium was so little that it was not worth changing the paperwork because the insurance company did not want a precedent to be set whereby fewer policies were needed to cover the risk. It is important that we realise that is going on and is costing our construction industry a fortune.

I am an active member of Belclare Community Council. Corofin Community Development Association and other community development associations across the country hold their breath when it is time to renew their insurance premiums because they do not know what it is going to be. A lot of small businesses are only trading because they have decided to do so for one more year. Given what businesses have been through with Covid, and what they are now going through with increased costs and all of that, it is important that when we put legislation place, it is effective and does something for people and not the insurance industry.

The Regional Group was cognisant of the fact that some people were putting in fraudulent claims. There were no consequences for those who were found to have said something fraudulent. That is being corrected, but the message needs to be driven home that we have to stop anybody who is even contemplating doing something like that in their tracks. We need a deterrent, rather than a penalty afterwards to stop people from doing such things.

There are two things that the Bill could improve. There is a fear on the part of business people, including Pat McDonagh of Supermacs, that by introducing mediation we will introduce further costs, delays and legal charges because legal people will want to sit at the table. If the Bill can make sure that does not happen, it is important that we do that. There is no point in having a process whereby there is mediation that is not binding. If there is mediation, it needs to be binding on the participants. That would be very important. It would mean that people go to mediation on the basis that they will have to accept the outcome. If they say they will not accept the outcome when they do not like it and can go some place else, we will then add another layer of costs to the process.

Another issue raised by AIR is the claims database. The claims database available at the moment is the property of Insurance Ireland, the umbrella organisation representing insurance companies in Ireland. We should consider having a claims database that is owned by the State and available to people in the industry who need it. Cases have been highlighted by AIR where insurance companies have been kept out of competition because there is somewhat of a closed shop. We have an opportunity and responsibility to make sure that whatever legislation is passed is effective. The Minister of State knows that the legislation we introduce to try to reduce the number of claims, make the claims process more efficient, ensure money gets to where it needs to go and reduce the high costs of claims does not always necessarily lead to reduced premiums. If we have an industry where people have a fair crack at competing, and know the rules of engagement and do not try to manipulate them for their own sake, we will have a more attractive market for other entrants to come in and offer insurance.

Certain cohorts in our society find it very difficult to get insurance. We also have to look at the idea of introducing national insurance, as we have for local authorities. It could cover people through State intervention to make sure they can do business and have insurance cover

that will help them in any claim that might arise. At the end of the day, we have a plethora of different sized businesses in this country. A small operator with one machine to dig roads or whatever has to have the same level of cover as a large civil engineering contractor, in terms of the limit of liability he or she has. The terms and conditions have to be the same. We have to make sure that if a guy is digging across a road or boreen in County Galway or Mayo, his insurance costs are not so high that it is not worth his while doing that work and larger contractors have to be found to do such work.

We need to spread the cost to ensure there is a more efficient industry and make sure that the premiums that companies are paying make it viable for them to remain in business. I will examine the Bill. As my colleague said, we may table amendments but we will discuss that with the Minister of State's officials

6 o'clock

Deputy Richard Bruton: It is often said that sunshine is the best disinfectant. One of the things the Government has done very successfully is change the debate about insurance, which used to be conducted entirely in the dark and there was a blame game with people pointing the finger at fraudsters, ambulance-chasing lawyers and insurance companies that did not care about what premium they set because they could always collect.

The data transparency we have seen in the past couple of years is a considerable step forward. It has a long way to go. The Minister should look the quality of the data and the information they give us to help shed light on what is actually happening because we are not seeing quite the level of transparency we need. If we had greater transparency, we would have less litigation and greater certainty that insurers were passing on the gains they were making from the significant reforms the Government has made over the past couple of years.

It is worth recording those changes and the quantum of damages that come in. PIAB has already been reformed. This is a further reform. Perjury and price walking have been reformed and a fraud co-ordination has been put in place within the Garda. The Competition Act has been greatly strengthened with far greater powers in the hands of the competition authority. We are beginning to see those results. Motor insurance is down 43% from its peak and came down by 10% last year.

However, there can be no room for complacency because the insurance bill that businesses and households have to come up with is close to €3 billion every year. We are used to talking in billions but that is approximately half of our energy bills. Thus, it is a significant element of what we are doing. While we have seen progress in motor insurance, the same cannot be said of employers and public liability. It is very important that this Bill seeks to expand the remit of PIAB, which is to become a resolution board, because it is undertaking mediation.

I welcome mediation and that PIAB will now be keeping, within its remit, claims that concern psychological injury only and long-term illness where it is hard at the initial point to know the final outcome. It is very important that we remove any obstacles to PIAB handling cases.

However, the truth is that the proportion of cases of employers and public liability going to litigation was still rising in 2020, which are the latest data we have, up to 63% and 60%, respectively. The reality is that, by value, that now means 85% of employers liability and public liability is going to litigation rather than being handled by PIAB.

We also see that premiums continue to rise. They rose by 2% in 2020 but by 27% between 2013 and 2020. They rose 27% in seven years. However, in sectors such as arts, entertainment and recreation, premiums rose by 103% in seven years. They rose by 86% in construction; 73% in transport; and 71% in manufacturing in the same period. We are seeing real difficulties in sectors that are very important to us in that employers liability and public liability continue to be a serious problem.

The figures the Central Bank publishes and the Department has made available speak for themselves. The legal costs of claims on employers and public liability, if they go to PIAB, are €1,600 per case. If they go to litigation, the costs are €25,000. Those figures speak for themselves. One is paying nearly €23,500 more in legal costs to lawyers and, of course, the evidence shows that litigation does not bring any extra money to the victim of the incident that occurred.

We very much need to get the message through to people that going the direction of litigation when there are quanta of damage in place, when the courts are using the same quanta of damages as the PIAB, is not a route to either a quicker or better settlement. It will take twice the time and achieve no greater settlement.

More could be done with regard to data mining to demonstrate to people that is the case because we see averages much of the time. People will say that their case is different and will get a gain. They say their cases are especially complex and will not be understood by PIAB and that they need to go to court. It can be demonstrated that is not the case and I wish to see more data doing so and showing the award that could have been got in PIAB, side by side, with the award won through litigation.

Perhaps we should go beyond that and recognise that if people fail to get more through litigation than they did by going to PIAB, their costs would be in jeopardy. That is the case in other cases where a claimant lodges money in the court. If they fail to exceed that, the costs issue is not automatically awarded to the claimant.

We need to recognise a few things Deputy Canney raised that I agree with. I do not think one can have binding mediation. That is a contradiction. Binding mediation would be arbitration but the fact that mediation was rejected can certainly be taken into account in subsequent cases.

One of the things that strikes me about litigation is that while 63% of employer liability goes to litigation, only 1% ends up in court. This is purely a game among lawyers. It is a form of mediation and jockeying that is costing an enormous amount but is not achieving anything. We need to ensure that mediation is not expensive. That is right, but we also have to recognise that mediation is an awful lot better than two and a half years of wrangling among lawyers with the clock ticking on all the time. Mediation is a great step forward. Are there any areas where PIAB will not have discretion to take on the case?

We need more timely data. We need to track the claims in order that we can prove that people are not getting any benefit by going elsewhere and we need to push on with the legislation on occupational liability and duty of care, which I know is the business of another Minister, but it is important that it gets done.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an ábhar seo tráthnóna inniu. We are all aware that the insurance market is not working for consumers. PIAB was established to facilitate compensation to people who suffered personal injuries in a way that was

fair, transparent and cost effective without the need for costly litigation.

PIAB has been effective in reducing costs and producing prompt outcomes for claimants. From 2015, right through to 2020, the average personal injury award for motor claims through PIAB was €22,000 compared to €23,000 through the courts. It is almost identical. That is a clear message that should go out to people. People do not get more money through the courts. It just delays them and the lawyers will make the big wins.

The big difference is in legal costs. The average legal costs going through PIAB were €665, compared to €15,000 through the courts. It is clear that PIAB is working for claimants but not for the legal industry, which can extract more for itself through litigation.

Given this is the case, it is a source of great frustration that only 15% of motor claimants settled through PIAB in 2019 and 2020, compared to 36% who settled through litigation. PIAB is working well but it is not doing enough work. We need more work to go through PIAB. This legislation seeks to enhance and reform it.

The Bill proposes to change the name of PIAB to the personal injuries resolution board and another provision relates to increasing the scope of injuries that the board can now assess.

In the past, PIAB was unable to assess claims consisting of psychological damage, given that they were not provided for in the book of quantum. The assessment of these injuries is now provided for in the personal injuries guidelines, with the Bill providing that the board will now be able to assess claims of this nature and that is welcome.

With regard to the new personal injury guidelines, I note that the average PIAB award has fallen by more than €12,000. It has almost halved since the new guidelines were adopted. I again urge the Government to support my judicial council (amendment) Bill which would put pressure on insurers to ensure transparency in order that the benefits of these reduced costs are passed on to consumers and not pocketed by the industry.

This Bill provides for a mediation process which the board will facilitate. Under mediation, parties will be able to avail of legal representation or independent legal advice. At present the Bill does not outline who will be responsible for costs if a mediation is unsuccessful and I ask for clarity on this issue. An important provision of the Bill relates to the claimant who rejects a PIAB award but fails to get a higher award in court. There is already legislation on the Statute Book about this but this removes the discretion and in this case such a claimant must pay his or her own and the defendant's costs in the litigation process to encourage greater acceptance of the PIAB process and fewer cases moving to the courts.

I welcome the policy objective of the Bill but there are issues that deserve further scrutiny and we will have an opportunity to do that on Committee Stage. It remains an open question whether this process will create additional delays or costs to the PIAB process or if it will have the impact we all desire where the number of resolutions is increased and the costs are ultimately reduced. What is clear is that the PIAB works well but we need more people to be using it as the only recourse, thereby reducing claims, costs and ultimately insurance for consumers.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Government has prioritised reform of the insurance sector to reduce the cost of litigation and ultimately premiums. The PIAB was set up in 2003 to deal with motor liability, employer liability and public liability. It has been successful in reducing both the costs associated with claims and the time taken to resolve claims at no cost to the

Exchequer. The PIAB process annually saves tens of millions of euro that would otherwise be paid in legal costs. It has resulted in a significant decline in personal injury claims. The impact over two years is an expected overall decrease of over 30% on 2019 levels. The Central Bank is responsible for publishing a report analysing the data. The report showed the pursuit of litigation contributed significantly to the overall statement cost and that the cost of claims settled by litigation had increased significantly since 2015. For those settled with a court award, legal costs totalled 49% of the cost. The hope is that through the Action Plan for Insurance Reform we can all enjoy reduced premiums, fewer court cases and less litigation and fraud.

I wish to bring something to the Minister of State's attention. The PIAB was set up to deal with motor liability, employer liability and public liability. I was and still am in construction and we had our insurance renewed recently. I was talking to different businesses across the board and this affects all of them. I would like the Minister of State's help with it. Your insurance liability is based on turnover and due to the escalating cost of materials and the running costs of any business, insurance premiums are being shoved up. At the end of the year you will have less profit but a higher turnover and will pay more for insurance because of the higher turnover. This needs to be addressed. Whether you are a coffee shop, a local shop, a hardware store - it does not matter what business you are in - your turnover is higher but your profit is either the same or less. Despite this, you are paying higher insurance premiums. That is not right. Those are inflation costs. We need the Government to deal with this. Businesses in all sectors are struggling due to inflation and are paying higher insurance costs and it is not being dealt with. It is the same with motor, public and employer liability across the board.

There is an area this Bill will help with. We have people who have made more than one claim. I am talking about people who might have had two claims per year for the last ten years, within a family unit, and this was not being picked up on. The data needs to be reflected back here about serial claimants within a family unit. That was actually happening. After that, you could go in on a county and see how many claims were being pursued. Then, when you, or your children or partner, went for motor insurance, you were all getting an insurance premium based on the amount of claims being made in each county. If you were in Cork, you could have a lower rate, a higher one in Limerick, a lower one in Tipperary, and so on. It was all based on the amount of claims within an area. Many of these claimants were people making a business of claiming. I hope the PIAB addresses people who are making a business of claiming and thereby distorting the figures. It is the normal person who must go out and pay for his or her insurance who is paying for this. I need the Government to look at the situation of insurance premiums rising for businesses due to a higher turnover caused by inflation, even though profits are lower. I would like the Minister of State's help with that. Any help he can give I will work with him on to ensure businesses get a fair premium cost and are not being targeted because of inflation costs.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I will be sharing my time with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I welcome this debate because this Bill is important given the work the PIAB has been doing over the years. As we are all aware, the courts and the Judiciary were overburdened with a massive amount of this type of work and there was need for a more streamlined and sensible solution to secure redress in these types of cases that was more cost-effective for the State, business and individuals. I therefore thank the people in the PIAB for the work they have been doing. We want to make it more user-friendly and attractive so a greater volume of work goes through it. We want the board to be more adequately resourced so it can take on more work and all that will entail.

This Bill will provide for a limited number of new consumer protection provisions for the sector, including a proposed alternative dispute resolution procedure, the publication of quality of service information and compensation for delays in the porting and switching process and missed installation appointments. These are mandatory provisions of the European electronic communications code, EECC. Two further obligations not provided for in the EECC are also proposed to be included, that is, the ability to set minimum quality of service standards that operators must meet and the establishment of a customer charter. The Bill will provide for the necessary amendments to the Communications Regulation Act 2002 to align that Act to the EECC and to ComReg's current functions and powers, including its investigations and the procedural powers. These amendments will include: a broadened information gathering power; the ability to use already gathered information; the ability to better assist the Minister with policy-making; and improvements to the notification, privilege and overcharging provisions.

One thing we cannot let go from this debate is the cost of insurance and what that means to business. As the Minster of State is well aware I already highlighted in this House that all businesses in Kerry recently received a renotification of their rates bill. This is putting pressure on businesses. There are a few things you must do when you are in business and they are that you must pay your bills, you must pay for the energy and the light to keep the door open, you must pay the staff and you must pay your insurance. You cannot operate any business and you cannot function without having proper, adequate insurance cover for yourself, your employees, your buildings, your property, your machinery and whatever else. These are the basic costs that must be handled and addressed.

Due to what I call blackguarding of the system, the cost of insurance had gone up enormously. We had a new event happening whereby insurance companies were settling many cases without even consulting the person who had the policy with them in the first instance. That has to be wrong. Where someone is paying an insurance company to insure their property, if there is a claim and if the insurance company is negotiating with the person who is making the claim, surely the customer has a right to be kept informed and consulted at all times.

I have no problem whatsoever if a person has injuries and they need compensation to put themselves back to where they should have been. We all know the purpose of insurance. It is to replace the loss, cover for the loss incurred and to put the person back to where they were before the accident or incident. However, we have had situations where people were either extremely unlucky in millions-to-one type of stuff or else there was blackguarding going in the system where members of the same family happened to come upon the same hole on a footpath or the same pothole in a road and happened to fall into it. Talk about hard luck; it was like the Bermuda Triangle. Those types of cases came before the courts and, unfortunately, they were settled by local authorities. All local authorities have been scourged by this type of activity.

That is not for one second to take from the genuine person who would have a genuine accident or incident where they are perfectly entitled to be compensated, but not ten people going out for the purpose of just seeking money. We have had cases of staged car accidents. All these different types of things have happened over the years. We have seen the videos of people inside in shops and miraculously falling down on the ground. It was only coincidence that they might have done the same thing a year or two before. It was like a sideline income. We need to try to protect businesses from that.

We need to give all support we can give to PIAB in the future for the good work that it does in reducing costs because as we all know the legal process is extremely expensive. Anything

we can do to keep down that cost at the end of the day is protecting the consumer because somebody has to pay for it. If small businesses cannot pay for the types of bills that I am talking about - electricity bills, rates and insurance - they will close their doors. That local community will then be robbed of that business. The local employment will be gone from the area and it is just bad. I would welcome anything we can do to stop that type of misuse of the insurance industry.

I again plead with the Minister of State to resource PIAB adequately to ensure it can take on more work to do good which is what it has been doing since it was brought into being. I welcome that at that time legislators saw fit to put PIAB in place in the first instance. It has basically done what it said on the tin, but we just need it to do more of it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very important matter. We all welcome anything that would help to reduce the cost of insurance and regulate the amount of claims and awards that are made. Some sizeable amounts have been given to people who were blackguarding the system, taking advantage and making false claims because we all know it has been increasing the cost of insurance. We all accept that insurance is there for a purpose. If someone has had a genuine accident - whether it is on the road, in the workplace or wherever, it is there to ensure that they are properly compensated and remunerated to the level they are entitled to.

We do not want to deny anyone the right to claim for what they are entitled to, but sadly we have seen cases of whiplash claims going back over the years and the savage awards that were given by judges to these people. We have even seen claims for whiplash with €77,000 being awarded here in this country and for the same type of claim £7,000 is awarded over in the UK. As I have said here previously, do those people here in Ireland have a brass neck or was it a gold neck they had to get such a sizeable amount? That was very unfair and was militating against the people who I feel are being discriminated against even today in attaining insurance at a reasonable cost.

The one group of people that have continually been vilified and have to pay more are the young fellows starting out on the road, being asked to pay anything from €2,000 to €4,000 when they are starting out on a learner permit with an accompanying driver. That is a savage sum. It is way more than some of them earn in a summer while they are home from college or whatever and trying to work and acquire a full licence to get on the road properly. They are being vilified before they do any harm at all. I believe that every young fellow, boy or girl, should get a chance to get reasonably priced insurance for a start. If they do harm, do wrong or whatever, they should be charged what has to be charged of them then.

We have many instances where people may have claimed for flood damage and they cannot get insurance for their homes anymore. We have had such cases in Glenflesk because some entity decided that there could be a once-in-100-years flood that could affect their homes and those people are being denied insurance for their homes. Many parishes, villages and communities try to run annual carnivals and festivals to retain their identity. Sadly, some of them failed to take place this year because they could not get insurance or the insurance premium being asked of them was too much. Even hunting clubs have serious problems in getting any insurance following some claim back a few years ago because there is not enough competition in the market and insurance companies can decide not to cater for that at all. I honestly think that since Quinn left the market there has been a huge void. There has been no real competition and it has been a long time since we heard the kind of competition that he was giving. Sadly,

the ordinary punter is suffering.

PIAB is changing name and it will now be called the personal injuries resolution board, PIRB. The process may be broadly summarised as follows. The claimant applies to PIAB for compensation. PIAB then informs the respondent giving them 90 days to agree to the PIAB assessment. If the respondent agrees, they must pay a fee otherwise PIAB will authorise the claimant to pursue the claim through the courts. Where PIAB makes an assessment, the claimant has 28 days to decide whether to accept the award. The respondent has 21 days to decide whether to accept the assessment. If the claimant or respondent rejects the assessment, PIAB issues an authorisation for the claimant to pursue the matter through the courts. It would be much better for everyone. Not everyone can agree to PIAB's assessment and unfortunately they will have to pursue the legal option. It is only right that option remains for them. We all wish and hope they would go through the PIRB option now and give it a chance. If they do not accept it, at least they are after trying. It excludes legal costs, the savage legal costs that mount up. We see that in large claims the legal costs nearly equal what the claimant gets. It is an important and valuable option for people who have a claim to go through this system, which is less expensive and will be less expensive for insurance premiums going forward, especially for youngsters who are trying to get insurance.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is now nearly 20 years since the legislation that established the Personal Injuries Assessment Board was enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas. If we look back to 2002 and 2003, we can see there were three reasons the Houses of the Oireachtas decided we wanted to establish a new statutory body to assess personal injuries. At that time, there was a great desire to have insurance reform. There was very significant concern about the high cost of premiums, particularly in respect of road traffic insurance. The Government and Oireachtas at the time wanted to ensure the cost of those insurance premiums would come down. It was believed that by establishing a more efficient assessment process, this would occur. Also at that time there was significant concern, as has been highlighted by the Deputies Healy-Rae, in respect of fraudulent claims and people who had played the system. One of the first objectives was to reform the insurance system that operated. The second objective of the Oireachtas in establishing PIAB was to ensure the system would operate faster. Many people who would bring a claim had to wait years before their claim would be assessed and determined. By having an assessment board, individuals who had claims would be able to go before the board and have their claim assessed quickly. The third purpose of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board was to cut down on legal costs. There was too much money being spent on legal costs and there was a desire on the part of the Oireachtas to ensure the claimant would get the money, as opposed to the claimant being involved in a lengthy process that would involve lawyers getting a disproportionate part of an award or a percentage on top of that.

When we look back at the three objectives, there has been significant achievement on the second and third. We have seen the system speed up significantly. One now can bring a claim before PIAB, have it assessed quite quickly, and if one wants to accept that recommendation and the defendant is prepared to accept it, there can be a very prompt resolution of the claim. There has also been a significant reduction in legal costs, not just in terms of the cost of cases that go to the courts but also in costs of claimants who bring their claim exclusively through PIAB. However, there has not been enough success in respect of the whole issue of the first objective of insurance reform. That was to ensure that as a result of bringing in these measures for efficiency, the cost of insurance premiums would come down. We established PIAB. We have established the Judicial Council. We now have judicial guidelines. We really need to see

insurance premiums coming down. Insurance companies need to play their part in ensuring the requirement of the public to be able to get premiums at cheap prices are available. When we look at the reforms, it is surprising we have not seen reductions in the premiums, which I know the Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, and the Government want to see.

As Deputy Danny Healy-Rae emphasised very clearly, it is important to point out that PIAB is not taking over the function of the courts. PIAB is not a body that administers justice under Article 37 of the Constitution. It is not a court as provided for under Article 34 of the Constitution. The reason PIAB has succeeded is that it has not gone down that route, or rather the Oireachtas has not permitted it to go down the route of trying to become a form of the administration of justice. The reason it is not the administration of justice, of course, is that individuals who go before PIAB and get their assessment do not have to accept it. That applies for the defendant in any claim as well. They have an entitlement to go to the courts. As long as that exists, it will not be regarded as being the administration of justice.

We saw last year what can happen where a statutory body goes too close to administering justice. The Minister of State will be aware of the case of Zalewski which was heard by the Supreme Court and concerned the Workplace Relations Commission. That just managed to obtain a finding from the Supreme Court that it was just on the right side of administering justice. We have to be very careful, if we are going to delegate responsibilities from the courts to statutory bodies, to ensure that if those bodies are going to administer justice as is permitted by Article 37, they have to comply with fair procedures. We saw in the Zalewski case that the Supreme Court indicated there were a number of procedures being operated in the WRC which were not fair and did not provide persons who claimed they were unfairly dismissed fair procedures.

The other interesting part of the legislation the Minister of State is bringing before the Oireachtas today is that it is not only changing the name of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board to the Personal Injuries Resolution Board but also that there is a real purpose behind that. We are going to have a new section in the legislation which deals with mediation. A person will come before what will be called the resolution board. They can be given an assessment and will also be informed of their entitlement to have their claim mediated. Again, there is no mandatory requirement on a person to go down the mediation route, but I note from the legislation that the Personal Injuries Resolution Board will provide mediators.

One thing I am not aware of from reading the legislation, which the Minister of State might want to think about on Committee Stage, is the extent to which those mediators will come from within the resolution board or whether they will be hired from outside the resolution board. I welcome the fact there is going to be a mediation process available. It is preferable in any dispute in any walk of life that people should be able to try to resolve their differences without the necessity of having to go to court. The advantage of a mediator is that he or she will come in, does not have the ability to impose a settlement on the parties to a dispute but can give a recommendation to those parties as to what the mediator thinks should occur.

The only thing I would say, however, and I think the Minister of State should take this into account, is that there is some requirement to ensure a mediator who is working for the Personal Injuries Resolution Board has a legal knowledge and awareness of how that case will be dealt with if the claimant decides not to go down the route of accepting the recommendation but rather to go to court. To be an effective mediator, one has to be able to tell the parties to the dispute the likelihood of their claim succeeding or failing if they go to court and the nature of the damages they are likely to be awarded should they go to court.

There has been a massive campaign in recent years criticising people for bringing fraudulent claims. That is absolutely correct. Anyone who brings a fraudulent claim should be punished. However, the vast majority of people who bring claims are legitimate claimants.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ba mhaith liom comghairdeas a ghabháil don Aire Stáit. Tá fáilte roimhe ar ais san áit seo. I welcome the Minister of State back. He was always a very engaging Minister and always did his best to meet with Deputies from the Opposition and everywhere else. I wish him luck. I advise him to avoid the golf classics. I only say that in jest. I know he was there for a perfectly good reason, to pay tribute to his late colleague and his late father's good colleague, the late Mark Killilea.

I welcome the legislation. We need insurance reform. We are changing the name of PIAB to the Personal Injuries Resolutions Board. Resolution of all conflicts is very important. As a businessman myself and as somebody involved in so many community projects, I know the ravaging that insurance is doing. If we end up now, which we probably will, with more companies leaving the market, as with the banking situation, we will be in more trouble because there will be monopolies. I hope the changes here help. I know the number of people who have used the previous board is quite high. It has been a way of getting resolution outside of the court system. The last place anyone wants to go to resolve anything is trasna na h-abhainn, or across the river, and end up with the wigged gentlemen - I nearly said the hooded gentlemen - who are one of the other arms of the State. It can be a costly and a disquieting experience. I have been there a few times. It is a place where every word costs a lot of money and sometimes you get nowhere. However, you have a fine bill at the end of the experience.

I refer to insurance reform. I am dealing with the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, on the thatched houses. We are trying to preserve our heritage. I know I am straying a small bit, but with the Acting Chair's permission, I will talk about heritage houses that are protected. There is one particular one in the village of Bhaile Uí Lúbaigh in Cathair Dún Iascaigh in Tipperary. J. Keating's pub is a lovely pub but it is now dúnta. It cannot get insurance to insure it as a dwelling. It was always a combined dwelling and pub. It was before the petitions committee last week, but I was unable to attend. This needs to be sorted out. It is a beautiful, protected and thatched structure. It is in the middle of the road opposite the church. It is a lovely setting. The people cannot get insurance for it but they are living in it. That should not be happening in any functioning society.

There are countless community events that are not happening this year. Many of them have succumbed to not being able to get insurance or not being able to afford it if they got it. Is mór an trua é sin. That is terrible. Communities that want to give their time voluntarily and run events safely with health safety standards in place cannot get insurance. Even if they can get it, they cannot afford it. That is simply not a satisfactory situation.

There is also the cost of insurance to employers and business people – employers liability, public liability, you name it, and motor insurance. We are talking about reforms. In this case, this is a welcome reform. However, will it have teeth? That is the problem here. We have new a board and a new name, as Gaeilge freisin. However, will it have teeth? Many of these boards love to have the head office, the plaque on the wall, the fancy furniture and seats, the CEOs and everything else. However, a lot does not happen. Perhaps I am too critical of PIAB because it has done something. However, resolution is important. It is important that we have mediation and resolution.

Regarding bogus claims, in An Caisleán Nua, my own village, we put up a playground. I was actually chair of the committee. It fell into disrepair and was closed. My daughter, Councillor Máirín McGrath, got involved in a new committee. Thosaigh sé arís. They started it up great guns. Next thing there were two claims, with adults falling out of basket swings. There was a case in Dublin but there was alcohol involved. However, this was during the day and there were signs up stating they were for children under 12. They then got solicitors and barristers to take the cases. In fairness, the cases were laughed out of court but lo and behold, the cases are now being heard in the Court of Appeal. We are waiting on a judgment. Everyone knows what it costs to go to the Court of Appeal. I do not know who these people are. Are they sugar daddies or is it no foal, no fee? However, it is despicable. It is despicable that community groups who want to put facilities in place for the children of the parish and surrounding parishes cannot do so. They provide great joy and engagement but then you will have people who want to make hay from it.

The main part of the defence in the appeal was that when the former Prime Minister, now imithe, Boris Johnson, was mayor of London, he was actually in one of these swings and was pushing a member of the royal family. I do not know which of the princes it was. It was for the Special Olympics in London back deich mbliana ó shin - ten years ago or more. The case was made that if it was fit for the prince and Boris Johnson, then it was suitable for adults in the village of Caisleán Nua na Siúire in Tiobrad Árann theas under the shadow of the Knockmealdown Mountains. However, it was for an ad for the Special Olympics.

The solicitors and barristers who took that case should be ashamed of themselves, as far as I am concerned. I know you have a right to the court and to justice, but this is farcical in the extreme. We want to encourage communities. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Mol na daoine sin agus tiocfaidh. That is what we need in our communities. However, we have these kind of false, fake and fraudulent claims. They just cause this quiet unease. If this case is lost, it will probably be the council which picks up the tab. That is taxpayers' money. The playground will probably be closed forever if we do not get the right decision from the Court of Appeal, if you do not mind. It is a pretty new court in Dublin.

With those few words, I rest my case. I thank the Acting Chair for allowing me in the first round because I was to be in the second round.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Dara Calleary): I would like to begin by thanking all of the Deputies. Gabhaim buíochas le gach Teachta as a bheith páirteach sa díospóireacht inniu. I welcome all of the positive remarks about the Bill and the work of PIAB, and I want to acknowledge the work of everybody at PIAB since its inception. It is clear the positivity about its work to date is a tribute to it as well as to the overall record. I also want to thank my officials in my Department who have worked incredibly hard to bring this Bill to fruition, along with all of the people and all of groups, many of whom were mentioned this evening, who made a contribution to this process.

I agree that this will not resolve all of our insurance problems. It will not resolve the availability or the selection issue. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, is doing considerable work in that space and we, as a Government, have taken a range of actions to do that. This is an important reform. I welcome the commitment in most parts to mediation. Mediation offers speed and simplicity. It will not add time. An intervention that reduces litigation will reduce costs. Certainly, we will seek to work through the process. I am certainly happy to engage with any Deputy bilaterally ahead of Committee Stage to give people assurances in relation to that.

The personal injury guidelines are some of the most significant reforms in the insurance space in decades. We are beginning to see the reductions that are taking place due to the PIAB work and the PIAB process. I would hope that we will see future impacts in Central Bank reports. On that, Deputy Bruton raised an important point. We can see motor insurance prices have fallen in recent years. They are 40% below the 2016 peak. The national claims database is a unique and independent source of data. However, we need to see similar falls in employer liability and public liability, similar to the motor insurance costs. It does not strike me that the benefits of that and of recent years are solely related to the motor insurance industry. Other insurance companies need to take note. I will absolutely be bringing that point home to the Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, from this debate.

There were a lot of comments and proposals around expanding the role of the new body into a quasi-judicial kind of format. I agree with Deputy Phelan's remarks that there are fundamental constitutional rights at play here. I know the former Minister, Deputy Troy, had much engagement with the Attorney General on this. PIAB is good at what it does; it assesses claims efficiently and thoroughly. Now, by adding mediation, we are giving it a new part to its armoury. This further enhancement will allow it to expand its role even further.

Competition is crucial. Much of the feedback in relation to business, community groups, festivals, services that are being withdrawn and playgrounds comes down to the lack of competition in the market. The Minister of State, Deputy Fleming, has been working incredibly hard to increase the availability of insurance and address the competition issue by seeking new entrants. He has worked with the Industrial Development Authority, IDA, on that. We will continue that work within my Department, putting forward this new, enhanced role for the personal injuries resolution board, PIRB, as part of the attraction. Many Deputies expressed concerns in respect of resources. We will be working closely with PIAB. I met with its CEO and chairperson in the past week, ahead of the introduction of the Bill, to ensure they will be ready for it. My officials are working closely to ensure that as soon as the legislation is passed, the new PIRB will be in a position to do that. I agree with Deputies with regard to it being essential that the Bill is not just an ornament but, rather, that it works, the reforms outlined are embraced and mediation is used effectively and efficiently, but also with respect. In addition, it is critical that we move forward quickly, and I am glad to have the endorsement of Deputy O'Reilly, as well as Deputy Quinlivan, as Cathaoirleach of an Coiste um Fhiontar, Trádáil agus Fostaíocht, in that regard. We cannot, and I will not, let the best be the enemy of the good. We need to move this critical legislation quickly and I look forward to working with Deputies on it.

I was struck by the contribution of Deputy Carroll MacNeill, supported by Deputy Catherine Murphy, in respect of the State Claims Agency. The Deputy obviously sees this from her perspective as a legislator and member of the Committee of Public Accounts but also as one who is involved in the claims process, as she clearly outlined. I will highlight the issues relating to the State Claims Agency to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath. Some of the points made by Deputy Carroll MacNeill are important and worth pursuing. We are here promoting mediation as a vehicle but it is not being used by other State agencies. It is something that needs to be brought froward across all the relevant agencies.

Gabhaim buíochas arís le gach duine as an díospóireacht agus beimid ag dul ar aghaidh go dtí Céim an Choiste. Beidh mé ag iarraidh ansin obair a dhéanamh le gach Teachta agus Seanadóir a bhfuil tuairim aige nó aici ar an ábhar seo. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Question put and agreed to.

Personal Injuries Resolution Board Bill 2022: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment pursuant to Standing Orders 95(3)(*a*) and 181(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Communications Regulation Bill 2022: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

That a lot has changed since 2002 will not be a controversial contention. This proposition is arguably more accurate for the electronic communications sector than for any other. In 2002, there were fewer than 3 million mobile subscriptions in the State but, by 2021, that number had ballooned by over 4 million, bringing the total number of mobile subscriptions to over 7.3 million. What mobile phones are capable of has drastically changed. In 2002, commercial deployment of 3G was still a year away. Today, we have commercial deployment of 5G in increasing areas across the State, providing speeds of which consumers in 2002 could only dream.

The change in fixed connectivity has been stark. Commercial deployment of broadband commenced in Ireland in 2003. Today, there are more than 1.8 million broadband subscriptions in the State, a growing number of which are fibre-to-the-premises connections. The number of broadband subscriptions is expected to continue to grow, through increased commercial deployment by operators and the continued roll-out of the national broadband plan. The forthcoming digital connectivity strategy for Ireland will set out the scale of the ambition for connectivity through the next decade.

This growth in connectivity has also revolutionised the way we live our lives. In 2002, social media meant little to most people and although it was not uncommon to spend hours browsing the aisles of a local video shop, it was much less common to purchase anything online. Today, we can connect with friends and family around the world, choose which new box set to watch and do our weekly food shop, all at the tap of a screen.

However, while it is clear that there have been considerable changes in electronic communications and wider society in the past 20 years, the powers afforded to ComReg to regulate the sector have not kept up to date with these changes. The first aim of the Bill is to address this issue. The Bill represents the biggest update to the regulation of the electronic communication sector since the establishment of ComReg in 2002.

The legislation will provide ComReg with the tools it needs to effectively regulate the sector today and will bring its powers further in line with comparable regulators in the State and elsewhere in Europe. ComReg will be empowered to find non-compliance, impose sanctions of

up to €5 million or 10% of annual turnover, require operators to pay refunds and compensation, and withdraw general authorisation and rights of use for spectrum and numbering resources. These penalties will ensure that the sanctions available to ComReg are effective, proportionate and dissuasive in a sector of the scale of electronic communications, which is worth €3.5 billion every year to the economy. A range of new settlement options will also be available, including a new section 44 resolution agreement, the acceptance of binding commitments and the entering into of a settlement agreement. A new urgent interim measure procedure will also be provided to ensure that tools are available, in advance of the conclusion of any adjudication, to address instances of non-compliance that risk public safety, public security, public health or the creation of economic or operational problems for other providers or users.

In order to ensure that this new regime complies with constitutional requirements in light of the Supreme Court judgment in the Zalewski case, comprehensive procedural safeguards have been included in the Bill and are similar to those provided for in the Competition (Amendment) Act 2022. These were developed in close co-operation with the Office of the Attorney General.

Adjudications on suspected breaches will be carried out by adjudicators, who can be internal ComReg staff or external experts nominated by ComReg and appointed by the Minister. These adjudicators will be independent in the performance of their functions and I will be publishing regulations to give further effect to this requirement in the coming months. Decisions of adjudicators will be subject to confirmation by the High Court and subject to appeals to that body. The Bill also provides for the carrying out of oral hearings, rules for admission of evidence and the taking of oaths and affirmations.

The need for a review of the regulatory framework for the electronic communications sector in light of the speed of change in the past decade was recognised by the EU in the European electronic communications code. Providing for the enforcement of this directive and designating ComReg as the body responsible for its enforcement is the second aim of the Bill. The European electronic communications code consolidated much of the previous regulatory framework and made it fit for the digital age. Transposition of the directive will be given effect to in Ireland through the Bill and the European Union (Electronic Communications Code) Regulations 2022 that were signed on 6 September but will not commence until the enactment of the Bill.

Although it is not possible to discuss the entirety of the code regulations, I wish to highlight a particular aspect of them, namely, the introduction of a universal services obligation for broadband. This is an instrument that could be used in future to ensure that as gigabit broadband services continue to be deployed by commercial operators, small numbers of premises within these commercial areas are not left behind. The expectation is, however, that as commercial operators upgrade their existing infrastructure or build new gigabit broadband infrastructure, they will design their deployments to avoid leaving small pockets of households and businesses stranded where end users cannot connect to that network. Any future universal services obligation will not seek to compensate inefficient network designs which may be driven by a very short-term commercial focus to the detriment of end users in that area and potentially further widening the digital divide.

All of the obligations created by the regulations will be civilly enforceable under the new civil enforcement regime. Particular obligations will also be subject to criminal enforcement, with a further select few subject to a maximum criminal penalty of €10 million if prosecuted on indictment. The Bill specifically provides for this higher level of maximum criminal penalty

for these particular offences.

The roll-out of new technologies and networks is not without risk. When criminals attacked our health service we saw the devastation that can be caused when those who wish to do us harm attack critical infrastructure. Disruption to our electronic communications infrastructure could be equally damaging, with the potential to have cascading effects throughout the rest of critical infrastructure, making the protection of these networks of paramount importance to the Government.

7 o'clock

Under this Bill, our next generation networks will be built upon a solid foundation that is resilient to future threats by ensuring operators manage the risks posed to their networks and services as well as reporting significant security incidents.

The Government held a consultation on a detailed set of electronic communications security measures based upon leading standards, and this Bill provides a mechanism to put these measures on a statutory basis. These measures, together with additional supervisory and enforcement powers for the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg, will put Ireland's electronic communications infrastructure on a secure foundation to make Ireland an attractive place to live and do business.

While there has been such a dramatic improvement in the prevalence and speed of electronic communications services in the past 20 years, some issues continue to affect the sector negatively. Of primary concern among these is consumer dissatisfaction with the customer service they receive from their providers. Whether this stems from unacceptable call answering times, overcharging, issues with switching providers and porting numbers, or a myriad of other frequently reported issues, this issue is one which has been discussed numerous times both in this House and has been covered across the media. Complaints to ComReg were down in the second quarter of 2022. However, they are coming down from a high base over the course of 2021. Reports of consumer dissatisfaction with companies across all sectors show that electronic communications providers repeatedly and consistently do not perform well when compared with service or goods providers in other sectors. Addressing this issue is the fourth aim of this Bill. The Bill will provide consumers with a suite of new protections when they are interacting with this sector. These provisions have been drafted in close consultation with ComReg and address the number of consumer service complaints that have arisen in recent years.

The Bill will provide for an enhanced alternative dispute resolution process for consumers, managed by ComReg, which retains the requirement for operators to have a code of practice for complaint handling. ComReg will be empowered to require operators to publish information on the quality of service they provide to their customers and to publish a customer charter that will clearly set out the standards consumers can expect their services to provide. If the service provided to customers is not adequate, ComReg will be permitted to set minimum quality of service standards that operators must guarantee to their consumers in a range of areas, including in respect of call answering times, notification of outages, time taken to review billing queries and time taken for initial connection to the network. Failure to comply with these standards will constitute a breach for the purpose of the Bill but will also be capable of giving rise to the payment of compensation to a consumer, pursuant to the new end user compensation regime also to be established by the Bill.

The fifth and final aim of the Bill is the updating of the Communications Regulation Act 2002 to align that Act with the European electronic communications code and make necessary amendments to ComReg's current functions and powers to improve their functionality and complement the new proposed enforcement regime. These will include, *inter alia*, a broadened information-gathering power, ability to reuse already gathered information, ability to better assist with policymaking, and improvements to the notification, privilege and overcharging provisions.

I would like to take this opportunity to inform my colleagues here today that it is my intention to bring a small number of amendments to this Bill on Committee Stage. In the first instance, I propose to bring forward an amendment to section 43 of the Communications Regulation Act 2002 to clarify beyond doubt ComReg's ability to prosecute summarily all offences capable of summary prosecution, including offences that can also be prosecuted on indictment, sometimes referred to as "each way" offences.

Second, I will be bringing forth an amendment to provide for an assessment of the risk profile of providers of electronic communications and to make orders banning or restricting high-risk vendors from critical or sensitive parts of the networks. There have been extensive cross-government discussions on this issue and the amendment will provide transparency for the process under which vendors will be assessed. Ireland's proposed approach is aligned with that being taken throughout the EU as well as by the UK.

Third, I will be bringing forth two amendments to the Digital Hub Development Act 2003. The purpose of the two amendments is, first, to confer a function on the board to dispose of its land and property assets on foot of a directive by the Minister pursuant to the 2003 Act and, second, to reduce the membership of the agency from 14 to eight and the number required for a quorum from six to four. The sale of the Digital Hub Development Agency, DHDA, land is one of the most significant transactions required to dissolve the agency and is a step that must be completed before the dissolution can be completed. This amendment will enable progress to be made in terms of dissolving the DHDA and ultimately facilitating the redevelopment of the site for affordable housing and mixed uses. The second amendment allows for a continued functioning board throughout the dissolution process and mitigates against the risk of the board becoming inquorate during the wind-down and dissolution period.

There may also be the possibility that the Government will bring forward a short amendment to the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983 to provide for payments to be made to or via An Post, particularly in the context of the support to postmasters. This amendment is the subject of ongoing engagement with the Attorney General's office.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications for their engagement during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill and their report. I also thank ComReg, which engaged extensively with my officials through all stages of the development of this Bill.

I now turn to the main provisions of the Bill. This Bill contains eight Parts. Part 1 contains standard provisions dealing with the Title, collective citation and commencement of the Bill. It also provides for definitions of terms used in the Bill.

Part 2 transposes the security provisions of the code, articles 40 and 41. It places general obligations on providers of electronic communications networks and services to take appro-

priate and proportionate security measures to manage the risks posed to their networks and services. There are also obligations on providers to report significant security incidents to ComReg. The Bill provides a mechanism by which regulations can be made specifying the types of security measures that providers shall take, thus providing a statutory basis for the electronic communications security measures, which are a detailed set of technical security measures produced by the National Cyber Security Centre in consultation with ComReg and industry to secure the State's electronic communications infrastructure. The security provisions provide additional supervisory and enforcement powers to ComReg to ensure compliance with the security provisions.

Part 3 provides for measures to assist consumers and other end users. This part permits ComReg to specify minimum quality-of-service standards to be met by service providers. Once minimum standards have been set, failure to meet these minimum standards will constitute a regulatory breach but will also be capable of giving rise to the payment of compensation to a consumer through a new end user compensation scheme. ComReg may also require providers to publish information on the quality of service they provide and to publish a customer charter. The aim of this customer charter is to provide consumers with one easily accessible and comparable place to get information as to the quality of service provided by an operator.

Part 4 sets out procedures for the resolution of complaints and disputes. It provides for an enhanced alternative dispute resolution procedure. It also carries forward the existing complaints handling codes of practice from the European Communities (Electronic Communications Networks and Services) (Universal Service and Users' Rights) Regulations 2011, Sl 337.

Part 5 provides that ComReg may take urgent interim measures to remedy a situation where it has evidence of a breach of the conditions of the general authorisation, rights of use or of the specific obligations "which represents an immediate and serious threat to public safety, public security or public health or risks creating serious economic or operational problems for other providers or users of electronic communications networks or services or other users of radio spectrum".

Part 6 sets out a new civil sanctioning regime for ComReg that will include the ability to find non-compliance and impose a range of penalties, including administrative financial sanctions up to a maximum of €5 million or 10% of annual turnover as well as compensation, refunds and the suspension and withdrawal of authorisations or rights of use, subject to court confirmation, as appropriate. ComReg will also be permitted to enter into a new section 44 resolution agreement, to accept binding commitments and to enter into settlement agreements.

Part 7 amends the European Union (Electronic Communications Code) Regulations 2022 to provide for a higher penalty for the commission of an indictable offence which is stated to be an offence to which a statutory penalty applies. The higher level of penalty will be a fine not exceeding €10 million.

Part 8 sets out the amendments made by this Bill to the Communications Regulation Act of 2002 that are required to ensure legislative coherence and to ensure ComReg is equipped to carry out all its new functions under the code.

This Bill will provide ComReg with an enhanced and updated enforcement regime, ensuring Ireland's regulatory landscape for electronic communications is robust and dynamic enough to meet the needs of the electronic communications sector over the coming years. It will ensure

Ireland meets its legal obligations regarding the transposition of the European electronic communications code.

It will enhance the security of the electronic communications services at a vital time geopolitically, it will greatly enhance consumer protections in the sector and it will ensure that the Communications Regulation Act 2002 contributes to the meeting of these objectives. I look forward to hearing the contributions from Members in the debate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): We have two minutes before we adjourn. I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The Communications Regulation Bill is a technical piece of legislation but one with important implications for telecommunications providers and their customers. The primary aim of the Bill is to transpose the European electronic communications code and the EU-wide regulatory framework for the telecommunications sector. This Bill aims to provide ComReg with stronger regulatory and consumer protection powers, which is very welcome. ComReg's most recent annual report highlights that it received approximately 79,000 contacts from customers over a 12-month period, highlighting the demand placed on the regulator from consumers and the need for robust powers to ensure high standards are met in the telecoms sector.

The following comments are not unique to Eir but, some time ago, the communications committee called Eir in front of it to address the high level of complaints about its standard of customer service. ComReg told us at that time that 65% of all complaints made to the regulator were from Eir customers. This chimed with the incredible amount of correspondence we received as Deputies and local councillors from people who had a dreadful customer service experience with that company. The level of anger and frustration from people who dealt with Eir and who got in touch at the time of the hearing was off the scale - it was really quite remarkable, from old to young and in all parts of the country. Eir apologised at the committee and committed to improving its service but the entire saga highlighted how weak the regulator was. In truth, ComReg has been operating with one hand tied behind its back, which has allowed poor standards and customer service problems to go unaddressed.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I ask the Deputy to conclude. His time will be carried over to the next day.

Debate adjourned.

Higher Education Authority Bill 2022: From the Seanad

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): I understand the Minister wishes to seek a Clerk's correction in accordance with Standing Order 196.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): For all the changes and amendments we have made to this Bill, this is just a simple spelling mistake. I request that the Chair would direct the Clerk in accordance with Standing Order 196 to make the following minor correction to the text of the Bill on page 80, line 25: to replace the word "reprsentatives", which is misspelt, with the appropriate spelling of

the word "representatives".

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): Is that agreed? Agreed.

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 73: In page 66, line 35, to delete "student members" and substitute "student union representatives".

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): Seanad amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Higher Education Authority Bill 2022, as Members will know, was published in January of this year. I genuinely want to thank all the Deputies involved for very intensively engaging on this Bill. We have had a lot of engagement and I believe we have made a lot of improvements together. The Bill completed its Final Stage in the Dáil in June with a total of 179 amendments made. We then took the legislation to the Seanad and I accepted, and we made, a further three amendments there. Today, we are back, if not to reopen the Dáil debate, then to seek the approval of Dáil Éireann for those three amendments.

I consider that the 179 amendments made in the Dáil and the three amendments made in the Seanad have strengthened the Bill. They have addressed a lot of issues that were raised in the Oireachtas and, equally important, that were raised by stakeholders more widely as we went through the consultation process. As I said, I welcome the positive engagement of colleagues on this legislation. While we all debated the minutiae of the legislation, as we should, I note that this legislation passed Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann without a division, which I think was a general welcome for the broad thrust of the reforms we are all trying to progress.

The three amendments made in the Seanad amend the provision regarding the student membership of the governing bodies of universities, technological universities and institutes of technology. For the avoidance of doubt, the amendments simply replace the reference to "three student members" on the governing body, which is what is stated in the legislation as drafted, with the reference to "three student union representatives". I acknowledge that these were amendments in the names of Senators Ruane, Higgins and Flynn and their group in the Seanad, but I know they were very much speaking, as Deputies would have been on all sides of this House, on behalf of the student unions which sought this amendment.

These are amendments that we are putting in place for the avoidance of doubt. The provisions in the Higher Education Authority Bill in regard to the governing bodies of universities, technological universities and institutes of technology include provisions that a governing authority, with the approval of the Minister, will make appropriate regulations regarding the selection, election, nomination or appointment of members to the governing body. It was expected that these procedures would provide for student members to be elected to the governing body in accordance with current practice. It is certainly not the policy or legal intention to appoint students to the governing body who have not been elected by the student body. As Minister, I certainly would not approve any procedure which did not provide for an election for student members to the governing body. However, for the avoidance of doubt, I did accept these amendments proposed in the Seanad to ensure that it is three student union representatives who are appointed to governing bodies. These appointments will still be governed by the

regulations made by the governing body. There will be 19 members on the governing bodies of universities, technological universities and institutes of technology.

In addition, we made a lot of amendments in this House around the Irish language, which was important. We had a good bipartisan approach and Deputy Ó Snodaigh did a lot of work on that, which I acknowledge. We had good engagement between myself and Deputy Ó Cathasaigh around the whole issue of climate, environmental sustainability and transparency in regard to how this legislation will relate. In the Seanad, it made sense to further strengthen the student union voice. When this Bill was published, we were talking about having two student union representatives and we have increased that to three. We are now clarifying that they are absolutely student union representatives and I will formally move the three amendments in that regard.

I commend the Bill to the House in its entirety. It will have a real, lasting and positive impact on some of our most important educational institutions. I want to have a final word on the legislation in the context of academic autonomy. Our researchers, academics and intellectuals are key drivers of sustainable progress, equality and our country's future prosperity. It is important to put on the record of this House that academic freedom of higher education institutions and staff continues to be explicitly enshrined in Irish law and legislation. This is a co-regulation model. It is only correct that the taxpayer has confidence that public funds which go into our institutions are managed appropriately. Anything less would be falling short of our responsibilities. The overall aim of this legislation is to provide a high-quality, student focused system with appropriate oversight and accountability to underpin public confidence.

As a last word, I thank the officials who have worked so hard on the legislation. I thank Tanya Kenny, Ide Mulcahy and Stuart Morris, who join me here today, and Keith Moynes in the Department. They have worked on this legislation for a very long period of time. I thank everyone who engaged with this legislation, in particular the Irish Universities Association, IUA, the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, the student unions, including the Union of Students in Ireland, all of the various universities, the chairs of governing authorities, the presidents and the Government and Opposition Deputies, in particular Deputy Conway-Walsh. We have a fine piece of legislation that will modernise the structure. I thank everyone for engaging on it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Minister. I would like to speak to amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive. I commend the work of the Seanadóirí and the student unions on the work on these amendments and in getting them accepted. It is important there is no ambiguity in regard to the fact it should be student union representatives on the governing board or authority of every higher education institution. I particularly want to thank the student unions for all of the work they have done throughout this Bill with, as the Minister said, the IUA, THEA and many others. There has been a huge effort to try to get this legislation as right as possible, recognising that we did not get our own way on everything, but we got some of it. There was a collective approach to it.

Of course, it is only when the legislation starts to be implemented that we will see if there are any unintended consequences. It is a shame that the trade union representative has not been given a place on the governing authority in the same manner, although I recognise that some progress on including trade union representation in the Bill has been made. We see the need all of the time to have student voices central to the management of colleges. Right now, in Maynooth, we have seen the construction of a student centre fall through due to what I am sure is

genuine construction cost inflation. Vital to resolving the issue is ensuring that students have decision-making power over the full amount of funding. Thankfully, Maynooth University has confirmed that no funding from the student levy will go towards any development cost in the abandoned project, but we need to ensure that trust and partnership are at the heart of the relationship between students and the institutes. When trust breaks down, restoring it can be difficult. These amendments strengthen that relationship and codify the role of students and students' unions.

When the Minister first introduced the Bill in the Dáil, I stated that governance was not the main issue facing the sector and that legislative reform would be of limited value unless it was accommodated by a sustainable funding model. The past ten years have seen piecemeal privatisation and deep commercialisation of public third level education. As a result of what the IUA labelled State divestment from third level education, the ethos and focus of these centres of education and research have been shifted towards commercial considerations and large amounts of time and energy are being spent on operating on a commercial basis, energy that would be better spent on developing education and research. When the Minister released the future funding document this summer, there seemed to be hope that we would see progress, and rightly so. The €307 million funding gap was identified and the Minister committed to addressing it over three years. I will take this opportunity to ask the Minister to commit to the funding that is needed to fill the gap so that we are not falling further behind in higher education.

This Bill will go some way towards preparing us for the present and the future. I commend everyone involved, including Ms Tanya Kenny and others among the Minister's staff. I hope that it brings about the structures and governance that are needed if we are to fund the sector properly so that we can secure third level education as a public good.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on this Bill during its last lap through the Houses. It is once-in-a-generation legislation, as evidenced by the fact that the legislation it is replacing is some 50 years old. When one thinks of the sea change that has happened in third level provision since 1972, imagining ourselves 50 years into the future is difficult.

These amendments are in keeping with how the Bill has been approached during its journey through the Houses. There has been good cross-party engagement. There has also been good engagement from the education committee under the chairmanship of Deputy Kehoe. We have worked collaboratively across the House. Sinn Féin has been constructive in its input, as has the Labour Party. I shared some amendments with Deputy Ó Ríordáin because they were similar in nature. This process has been an example of good practice in terms of how legislation can be built across the various stages through constructive input.

Here we have what are small but impactful amendments. They clarify the Bill's provisions and remove any doubt, and they put the voice of students front and centre in the governing authorities. The amendments show that the likes of students' unions have a role in influencing legislation, in that they can speak to their legislators, who then bring their concerns to the fore during the legislative process, with those concerns making it into the final piece of work. That is important and much to the good. We saw this happening throughout the legislation's passage. The Minister referenced how the Irish language community had an opportunity to influence the Bill. Important and impactful amendments were made in order to legislate for the Irish language within this Bill. Similarly, I tabled amendments on the sustainable development principles and they were incorporated into the Bill. I would have liked to have seen our climate

obligations and the Paris Agreement explicitly mentioned in the Bill but, as Deputy Conway-Walsh said, we do not always get everything for which we ask.

The Minister mentioned that public funds needed to be managed appropriately. During the Bill's passage, I referred to how there were not only public funds within our third level sector, but also private funds. Deputy Conway-Walsh spoke about privatisation and commercialisation in the sector. That is certainly the case. Along with public moneys, we have an obligation to ensure increased transparency of the private moneys that are being put to work in our third level institutions, including the issue of where they come from. There will be other opportunities to approach this question. Recently, I spoke on Second Stage of the Screening of Third Country Transactions Bill 2022. The charities regulation Bill also has facets to do with third level education and is at pre-legislative scrutiny stage. In light of these Bills, there may be other ways to approach this issue.

These amendments are a good example of the process in general. Since this is once-in-a-generation legislation, there was a good cross-party approach to it and constructive engagement with stakeholders throughout the sector, be that students' unions, the IUA or Conradh na Gaeilge. I could name many others. By engaging in this process in the way we have, we now have stronger legislation.

I wish to comment on the work done by every one in the Department. A Trojan amount of work was put into this significant legislation. I am glad of this opportunity to speak as the Bill makes its final lap through the Houses.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is enough argy-bargy, ruaille buaille and points of disagreement in the House from time to time, so it is nice to be here - let us keep this between ourselves - when we are all getting along well on this legislation. It has been a good example of teasing through legislation, working across party lines and trying to arrive at the best outcome. As the Deputies mentioned, there will be some points that we would all put greater emphasise on and some that we would put less emphasis on, but the broad thrust of what we are trying to do is to overhaul outdated legislation that comes from a different time, a different Ireland and a different higher education system.

Implementation was mentioned. I am pleased it was because, although there has been much debate on this legislation, and rightly so, its enabling provisions are in many ways the key to its success. Section 143, which we discussed a great deal during the legislation's passage, allows for codes, guidelines and practices to be developed and co-designed with the sector. This provision will be exciting for the sector. Regarding many issues that the House has discussed, for example, climate, all-island co-operation and taking a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, there are now opportunities to work collaboratively across the sector with the Higher Education Authority, HEA, to develop codes and guidelines to modernise our sector and ensure that it delivers for society and the economy.

I agree on the question of funding. Our budget and Sinn Féin's budget submission allocated similar amounts. Obviously, this was a cost-of-living budget and we all had a responsibility to ensure that, aside from increasing core funding, people could keep warm this winter and we could reduce the cost of education for families and students. We took some measures - significant measures, I would argue - in that respect.

I thank the Oireachtas education committee. Deputy Ó Cathasaigh rightly acknowledged

it. He and Deputy Conway-Walsh are both members of it. I thank the Chair of the committee, Deputy Kehoe, and its clerk for the many hours that they gave us. I also acknowledge Conradh na Gaeilge for the constructive and effective way in which it engaged with this legislation. Speaking as a Minister, it was a good example of how an organisation could lobby, make representations and effectively change legislation in a constructive sense. I thank Conradh na Gaeilge.

I appreciate that the Deputies acknowledged and thanked the officials in my Department, who have done Trojan work. They have rightly made themselves accessible to all Members of the Houses. I want to put on the record that we have been fortunate to have such a dedicated team of public servants working on this Bill. I thank Ms Tanya Kenny, Ms Íde Mulcahy, Mr. Stuart Morris and Mr. Keith Moynes in the Department for all of their work on the legislation.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I forgot to thank Conradh na Gaeilge and my colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, for their work. It was excellent and I am indebted to them for that.

Deputy Simon Harris: Hear, hear.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 90: In page 80, line 25, to delete "student members" and substitute "student union representatives".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

Section 109: In page 96, line 11, to delete "student members" and substitute "student union representatives".

Acting Chairman (Deputy Kathleen Funchion): A message will be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it that Dáil Éireann has agreed to amendments Nos. 1 to 3, inclusive, made by Seanad Éireann to the Higher Education Authority Bill 2022.

Garda Síochána (Compensation) Bill 2021 [Seanad]: Report and Final Stages

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are related and may be discussed together.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I move amendment No 1:

In page 13, to delete lines 6 to 11 and substitute the following:

"Form and content of application for initial assessment

11. The Garda Commissioner may, from time to time, specify in writing the following with regard to applications for initial assessment:

(a) the form of the applications;

(b) the information to be contained in the applications;

(c) the documents to accompany the applications,

and he or she shall cause any such specifications to be published in electronic form.".

This is a technical amendment to remove the requirement for the form of the application for initial assessment to be prescribed by way of regulation. The application form sent to the Garda Commissioner and the application form sent to the Personal Injuries Assessment Board will have to align. If the application form sent to the Personal Injuries Assessment Board changes slightly, then the application form sent to the Garda Commissioner will have to be amended. It is more straightforward to set out that the Garda Commissioner will determine the form of the application and this will be in line with the removal of the administration of the scheme from the Minister for Justice and its transfer to the Garda Commissioner.

Regarding amendment No. 2, it is related to revisions concerning a previous amendment to section 11 and will remove the word "prescribed" from the end of section 16(2)(c). This allows the Garda Commissioner to determine the form of an application for review and ensures that the form of the application for review is published electronically. As referred to in respect of section 11, such a change would be in line with the removal of the administration of the scheme from the Minister and its transfer to the Garda Commissioner.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy James Browne: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 18, line 30, to delete "prescribed" and substitute the following:

"specified in writing from time to time by the Garda Commissioner, and he or she shall cause any such specifications to be published in electronic form".

Amendment agreed to.

Bill, as amended, received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I thank my colleagues on the other side of the House, as well as Deputy James Lawless, Chair of the Joint Committee on Justice, and all the members of that committee for their work.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Bill, which is considered to be a Dáil Bill under Article 20.2.2° of the Constitution, will be sent to the Seanad.

Defective Concrete Products Levy: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Eoin Ó Broin on Tuesday, 4 October 2022:

That Dáil Éireann:

believes that:

— the Defective Concrete Products Levy being proposed by the Government is badly designed and unacceptable; and

— it means that the people in homes with defects, and first-time buyers, will foot the bill through increased house prices, as has been recognised by the Economic and Social Research Institute;

notes the assertion by the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland that this will add €4,000 to the price of a house; and

calls on the Government to:

— hold those most responsible for defects to account; and

— introduce a defects levy focused on the banks, profits of big developers and those who were responsible for the defects.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 2:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Government continues to place the highest priority on improving Ireland's housing system and delivering more homes for all types of people with different housing needs through the Housing for All: Our Shared Future plan;

— the households affected by the use of defective concrete products in the construction of their homes deserve the necessary support to address the issues they face;

— a Government decision in November 2021, enhanced the comprehensive Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme to support affected households, and also agreed to put in place a levy to contribute to the costs associated with the scheme; and

— details of the design and how the construction industry and developers will contribute to the levy will be outlined in the forthcoming Finance Bill 2022."

- (Minister for Finance)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division related to amendment No. 2 in the name of the Minister for Finance to the Sinn Féin motion on the defective concrete products levy. Yesterday, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 80(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 60; Staon, 0.

Tá	Níl	Staon
Brophy, Colm.	Andrews, Chris.	
Browne, James.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Bruton, Richard.	Barry, Mick.	
Burke, Colm.	Berry, Cathal.	
Burke, Peter.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Brady, John.	
Cahill, Jackie.	Browne, Martin.	
Calleary, Dara.	Buckley, Pat.	
Cannon, Ciarán.	Cairns, Holly.	
Carey, Joe.	Canney, Seán.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Carthy, Matt.	
Chambers, Jack.	Collins, Joan.	
Collins, Niall.	Collins, Michael.	
Costello, Patrick.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Cowen, Barry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Creed, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Cullinane, David.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Daly, Pa.	
Dillon, Alan.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Durkan, Bernard J.	Ellis, Dessie.	
English, Damien.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Farrell, Alan.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Fitzpatrick, Peter.	
Flaherty, Joe.	Funchion, Kathleen.	
Flanagan, Charles.	Gould, Thomas.	
Fleming, Sean.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Foley, Norma.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Griffin, Brendan.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Harris, Simon.	Kelly, Alan.	
Haughey, Seán.	Kenny, Gino.	
Heydon, Martin.	Kenny, Martin.	
Higgins, Emer.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Humphreys, Heather.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Kehoe, Paul.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Lahart, John.	McNamara, Michael.	
Lawless, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Leddin, Brian.	Munster, Imelda.	
Madigan, Josepha.	Murphy, Catherine.	
Martin, Catherine.	Murphy, Paul.	
Matthews, Steven.	Mythen, Johnny.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Nash, Ged.	

McConalogue, Charlie.	***O'Callaghan, Cian.***	
McGrath, Michael.	***O'Donoghue, Richard.***	
McHugh, Joe.	***O'Reilly, Louise.***	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	***O'Rourke, Darren.***	
Moynihan, Michael.	***Ó Broin, Eoin.***	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.***	
Noonan, Malcolm.	***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.***	
O'Brien, Darragh.	***Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.***	
O'Brien, Joe.	***Pringle, Thomas.***	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	***Quinlivan, Maurice.***	
O'Connor, James.	***Ryan, Patricia.***	
O'Dea, Willie.	***Shortall, Róisín.***	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	***Stanley, Brian.***	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	***Tóibín, Peadar.***	
O'Dowd, Fergus.	***Tully, Pauline.***	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	***Ward, Mark.***	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	***Whitmore, Jennifer.***	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	***Wynne, Violet-Anne.***	
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		
Varadkar, Leo.		

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

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 59; Staon, 0.

Tá	Níl	Staon
Brophy, Colm.	Andrews, Chris.	
Browne, James.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Bruton, Richard.	Barry, Mick.	
Burke, Colm.	Berry, Cathal.	
Burke, Peter.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Brady, John.	
Cahill, Jackie.	Browne, Martin.	
Calleary, Dara.	Buckley, Pat.	
Cannon, Ciarán.	Cairns, Holly.	
Carey, Joe.	Canney, Seán.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Carthy, Matt.	
Chambers, Jack.	Collins, Joan.	
Collins, Niall.	Collins, Michael.	
Costello, Patrick.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Cowen, Barry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Creed, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Cullinane, David.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Daly, Pa.	
Dillon, Alan.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Duffy, Francis Noel.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Durkan, Bernard J.	Ellis, Dessie.	
English, Damien.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Farrell, Alan.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Fitzpatrick, Peter.	
Flaherty, Joe.	Funchion, Kathleen.	
Flanagan, Charles.	Gould, Thomas.	
Fleming, Sean.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Foley, Norma.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Griffin, Brendan.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Harris, Simon.	Kelly, Alan.	
Haughey, Seán.	Kenny, Gino.	
Heydon, Martin.	Kenny, Martin.	
Higgins, Emer.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Humphreys, Heather.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Kehoe, Paul.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Lahart, John.	McNamara, Michael.	
Lawless, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Leddin, Brian.	Munster, Imelda.	
Madigan, Josepha.	Murphy, Catherine.	
Martin, Catherine.	Murphy, Paul.	
Matthews, Steven.	Mythen, Johnny.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Nash, Ged.	

McConalogue, Charlie.	***O'Callaghan, Cian.***	
McGrath, Michael.	***O'Donoghue, Richard.***	
McHugh, Joe.	***O'Reilly, Louise.***	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	***O'Rourke, Darren.***	
Moynihan, Michael.	***Ó Broin, Eoin.***	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	***Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.***	
Noonan, Malcolm.	***Ó Murchú, Ruairí.***	
O'Brien, Darragh.	***Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.***	
O'Brien, Joe.	***Pringle, Thomas.***	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	***Quinlivan, Maurice.***	
O'Connor, James.	***Ryan, Patricia.***	
O'Dea, Willie.	***Shortall, Róisín.***	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	***Stanley, Brian.***	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	***Tóibín, Peadar.***	
O'Dowd, Fergus.	***Tully, Pauline.***	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	***Ward, Mark.***	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	***Whitmore, Jennifer.***	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cathasaigh, Marc.		
Ó Cuív, Éamon.		
Phelan, John Paul.		
Rabbitte, Anne.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Ring, Michael.		
Ryan, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Ossian.		
Stanton, David.		
Troy, Robert.		
Varadkar, Leo.		

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

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.59 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Déardaoin, an 6 Deireadh Fómhair 2022.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.59 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 6 October 2022.